



Joint area review

**Better
education
and care**

Dudley Children's Services Authority Area

Review of services for children and young people

Adult Learning Inspectorate
Audit Commission
Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI)
Healthcare Commission
HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate
HM Inspectorate of Constabulary
HM Inspectorate of Court Administration
HM Inspectorate of Prisons
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Introduction

1. This joint area review was conducted using the arrangements required under Section 20 of the Children Act 2004. It was carried out by a multi-disciplinary team of seven inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), the Healthcare Commission (CHAI), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Audit Commission. The review was undertaken according to the requirements of the *Framework for the Inspection of Children's Services*.

2. The review was linked to the contemporaneous corporate assessment of the local council by the Audit Commission and its findings are represented in the relevant part of the corporate assessment report. In addition inspections of the youth service and the Youth Offending Service (YOS) contributed to the findings of this review.

3. This review describes the outcomes achieved by children and young people growing up in the Dudley area and evaluates the way local services, taken together, contribute to their well-being. Joint area reviews focus on the extent to which children and young people are healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and are well prepared to secure economic well-being.

4. The review evaluates the collective contribution made to each outcome for children and young people by relevant services in the area. It also judges the contributions made by the council's services overall and, specifically, its education and children's social care services. Particular attention is given to joint action by local services on behalf of those groups of children and young people who are vulnerable to poor outcomes. Two such groups are covered in detail: children and young people who are looked after by the council; and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

5. The review took place in two stages consisting in total of three weeks over a six-week period. The first stage reviewed all existing evidence including:

- a self-assessment undertaken by local public service providers
- a survey of children and young people
- performance data
- the findings of the contemporaneous inspection of the youth service
- planning documents
- information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day-care provision; and
- briefings from staff within inspectorates, commissions and other public bodies in contact with local providers.

6. The second stage included inspection fieldwork. This included studies of how far local services have improved outcomes for a small sample of children and young people, some of whom have the most complex needs, and a study

of provision in the Castle and Priory ward. It also included gathering evidence on six key judgements, selected because of their critical importance to improving outcomes for children and young people in the local area. This included discussions with elected members of the local authority and their equivalents in other public agencies, officers from these agencies, service users and community representatives. A review of case files for children and young people receiving support from a number of local agencies was also included.

Context

7. Dudley is a large metropolitan urban area on the southwest edge of the West Midlands and forms the western part of the Black Country industrial region. It consists of five distinct townships, each with its own character and identity. The proportion of residents from minority ethnic groups is below average. Asylum seekers come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The overall levels of unemployment and deprivation are below the national average. However, the socioeconomic profile varies within the borough. The south and west fringes are relatively affluent, but a few of Dudley's 24 wards, particularly those located close to Dudley town centre, are among the most deprived nationally. The Netherton, Woodside and Brierley Hill areas, which were once centres for the metal manufacturing industry, contain some very disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Castle and Priory ward, which was a focus for attention in this review of children's services, is one such disadvantaged neighbourhood.

8. In May 2004, after many years of Labour political leadership and a short period of no overall majority, the Conservative party took control of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council.

9. Dudley appointed a Director of Children's Services in July 2005 and the Directorate of Children's Services came into being on 1 October 2005. Children and young people are a key theme within Dudley's Community Strategy. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) is responsible for meeting the requirements of the Every Child Matters agenda and the Children Act 2004. Its establishment in November 2004 marked the beginning of the strengthening of arrangements to improve the outcomes for the children and young people in Dudley. The partnership includes the borough council, two primary care trusts (PCTs), a hospital trust, the Black Country Consortium, the Black Country Connexions Partnership, the West Midlands Police Force, and a range of voluntary and community bodies. The new executive board includes the Chief Executive of the Council as chair, the Director of Children's Services, the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services, the Chief Executives of the two PCTs and representatives of other key agencies including the police, probation service, the voluntary sector and Connexions.

10. Alongside the development of the CYPSP, Dudley launched its Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) in April 2005. The aim of the board is to extend and coordinate the work of the previous Area Child Protection

Committee and the work that takes place across the partnership to safeguard and protect children and young people and to promote their well-being.

11. Health services in Dudley are delivered by an acute trust, Dudley Group of Hospitals, and two PCTs, Dudley South PCT and Dudley Beacon and Castle PCT. The PCTs also commission health services from the acute Trust. The Birmingham and Black Country Strategic Health Authority manages the performance of Dudley health services. A regional ambulance trust provides emergency ambulance services to the Dudley population. There is a proposal, as part of a national initiative by the Department of Health, to merge the two PCTs. It is expected that the new PCT will come into being in October 2006.

12. The borough council has corporate parenting responsibility for 467 children and young people. There are 82 maintained primary schools, seven maintained special schools, four pupil referral units and one nursery school. The birth rate has been falling rapidly and the number of children of primary school age is in sharp decline. Consequently, a review of primary schools is currently being undertaken to reduce the number of surplus places. Of the 22 maintained secondary schools, 18 have specialist school status and there is one Roman Catholic secondary school and one state boarding school which also takes day pupils.

13. The Black Country Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is in a partnership with the borough council, colleges, schools and training providers to address the 14-19 strategy. Post-16 education and training takes place mostly in three tertiary colleges and one 6th form college. Only three secondary schools have sixth forms. Work-based learning is the responsibility of the three tertiary colleges, a large number of local training providers and eight national providers. The St Thomas' Community network, co-funded through the European Social Fund, manages provision for young people who enter employment. Adult and community learning, including family learning, is provided through the tertiary colleges, local community venues and schools.

Summary Report

Outcomes for children and young people

14. **Outcomes for most children and young people in Dudley are good.** Health outcomes are better than average and health prevention activities are having a positive impact. Children and young people appear safe and effective action is taken to protect those most at risk. Educational standards are rising. For young people aged 16, and sixth formers taking GCE or VCE AS and A level, attainment is in line with the national average. Attendance in schools is satisfactory and exclusions are decreasing. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well. Young people looked after by the council who attend school regularly make satisfactory progress; however, some have poor attendance and consequently their engagement in

education or training is too low. The attainment of children from the borough's minority ethnic groups is improving, although not rapidly enough for children from Black Caribbean heritage. The proportion of students staying on in full-time education after the age of 16 shows improvement and is getting close to the national average but young people on work-based learning courses do not achieve well enough. Most young people contribute well to their school and the community in which they live. Children looked after by the council and children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities play an active role in shaping and improving the quality of the services that they need.

The impact of local services

Being healthy

15. The combined work of all services in securing the health of children and young people is good.

16. Support for families, parents and carers is good. The health staff work well with other agencies to provide a wide range of initiatives and give good advice to parents to improve the health of their children. Schools contribute effectively to health promotion activities especially through the Health Promoting Schools initiative and the Sure Start programmes. A strategy is in place to address issues of obesity; however, the impact of initiatives has not been evaluated sufficiently. The agencies work well together to provide good health support services for children who are looked after by the council and those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

17. The number of pregnant women who smoke is below average and reducing. Despite a number of initiatives, the proportion of mothers who breastfeed their babies remains low compared with the England average. Immunisation rates are improving and there is good uptake of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccinations. The deaths of babies within seven days of birth broadly match the national average: the deaths of infants in their first year of life and of children under the age of 15 have reduced and are now below the England average. The hospital's accident and emergency services for children and young people are very good. However, the number of children admitted with gastroenteritis, an indicator of deprivation, is higher than average and the PCTs are aware of the need to make preventative action more effective. Over the last three years, targeted initiatives have reduced the number of children admitted with asthma and the rate is lower than the England average.

18. The quality of children and young people's mental health services (CAMHS) is good. Users value highly the services and support that they receive. There are good clinical links between the CAMHS and the paediatric unit staff. However, access to CAMHS is unsatisfactory because procedures are unclear and the waiting time, although reducing, is still far too long.

Staying safe

19. **The combined work of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is good.**

20. Children assessed as most at risk of harm or abuse are protected effectively by multi-agency collaboration. Child protection is resourced effectively and understood well by staff across the council, health and voluntary organisations. The Dudley LSCB is supported by strong representation from statutory and voluntary partners and a clear commitment to improving safeguards for children. As a result of effective action, the number of children on the child protection register is lower than the national average and all children on the register are allocated to a qualified social worker. The quality of practice is good and case records are maintained well. Children receive help at the earliest sign of difficulty and joint working across agencies is effective in engaging children, young people and their families in school and in social activities. This good practice, however, is not yet uniformly available across Dudley. Arrangements for sharing information between agencies are being strengthened and understanding of the thresholds is developing.

21. There is a good range of targeted family support services to prevent the need for children to be looked after by the council and, as a result, numbers are reducing. Children who are looked after by the council or who are leaving care report that they feel safe and receive good-quality care in their placements. The range of placements is increasing through effective recruitment and retention of foster carers, including an innovative Flipside fostering scheme for children with complex needs. Long-term security for looked after children is improving and increasing numbers of children are being adopted.

22. Children and young people with severe physical disabilities and their families are positive about the support they receive. However, some children, particularly those with autism and Asperger's syndrome, experience some delays in accessing adult services and moving to living independently. Children, young people and carers are routinely involved in planning improvements to the services they receive. They are provided with a good range of information and advice about staying safe in the community. However, children and young people do not feel safe in some locations and identify bullying as a significant concern. Both of these issues are being addressed successfully.

Enjoying and achieving

23. **The work of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is good.**

24. Children's centres, family centres and schools, through their extended support services, ensure that children are prepared for school and achieve well. Attendance is satisfactory and targeted action has been effective in reducing

exclusions. The authority provides good support to schools to improve standards through the national strategies, but not all primary schools use the outcomes achieved by children on entry to school sufficiently well. As a result, although attainment is improving, it remains below average overall at age seven and in mathematics at age 11. At age 16, standards are in line with the national average. The provision of alternative education, including for pupils excluded from school, is satisfactory but too many excluded young people are not reintegrated quickly enough into education. The Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) works effectively with schools, children, young people and the community to raise the attainment of minority ethnic groups. Children who are looked after by the council attain well, although agencies do not always ensure the completion of personal education plans. Children and young people with special educational needs are supported well in the school environment. The Me2 project supports children and young people with disabilities so that they can be included in mainstream activities in summer play schemes. This project, set up through MENCAP, is a good example of the promotion of inclusive practice.

Making a positive contribution

25. The overall contribution of local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.

26. Children and young people are well supported in their social and emotional development. A wide range of activities is available to promote children and young people's personal development through family centres, schools, the youth service and arts activities. Support to help children manage changes and respond to challenges is good. Effective mechanisms exist for enabling children and young people to air their views such as young people serving as associate governors, participation in the youth council and through kidsmag.net, a website where young people can register their opinions on a wide variety of relevant topics. There are some very good examples of children and young people influencing service provision and development, although involvement in decision-making is not embedded fully and many young people still feel that they do not have a say on local issues. Action by partners to reduce anti-social behaviour, offending and re-offending is satisfactory. Fewer young people re-offend and the number of young people who offend for the first time is reducing. Those who are looked after by the council are very well supported in making a positive contribution. They are involved fully in their reviews and play an active role in shaping and improving the services that they need. Support for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good and they are able to make their views known to decision-makers and effectively influence the quality of the services they require.

Achieving economic well-being

27. The work of all local services in helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is adequate.

28. The local authority and local LSC have established a clear improvement plan for developing 14–19 education and training, using effectively the findings of analytical independent reports. The authority has correctly identified that outcomes in the borough are currently no better than satisfactory, but improvements are being made. The approach for gifted and talented pupils is good and Aim Higher programmes are well developed. These initiatives are beginning to show a positive impact; employment skills are improving and the number of young people entering higher education, although still low, is rising. Provision at level 3, of A-level and AS-level courses or equivalent, is strong, although there are some gaps in provision at level 2, particularly in work-based learning. Provision of programmes to help young people prepare for employment, at level 1 and below, is insufficient. Agencies collaborate well to ensure that vulnerable groups of young people benefit from actions that promote social inclusion. However, outcomes are still too low and the provision of education and training for some learners with disabilities is insufficient. Transition arrangements for young people with severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities are satisfactory, but not for those with moderate difficulties. The quality of social housing is improving and most young people live in decent affordable homes.

Service management

29. The management of services for children and young people is good.

30. Dudley borough council has placed children and young people at the centre of its ambitions and, as a result, services for children, especially education, have been consistently prioritised by the council. The council offers clear leadership to the CYPSP and services are well led. The commitment of most partners to the aims of the CYPSP is high. However, it is inconsistent among schools and as key stakeholders responsible for significant areas of delivery, this is a weakness. The high profile afforded to education and training in regeneration plans, and the partnership with the local LSC that this represents, is encouraging. There has been a recent, much needed increased focus on vulnerable children and young people.

31. Some key projects, such as the primary re-organisation programme and the special educational needs strategy, have not gone smoothly, although the council remains determined to see them through. Services are staffed by committed people with relevant skills and the voluntary and charitable sectors enhance capacity where they are able to. Performance management arrangements are good. There are many examples of children, young people and parents playing a role in shaping improvements. Local partners were

involved in the self-assessment process for this review and they recognise the issues facing the partnership. The capacity of the partners to improve further is good. Protocols for sharing information and for multi-agency working are being developed but some are not used consistently. Spending on children's services is comparatively low and outcomes are generally at least satisfactory, but unfilled school places, significant school balances and overspends in placements of looked-after children restrict value for money to adequate.

Grades

Grades awarded:

4: outstanding; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate

	Local services overall	Council services	Health services
Being healthy	3		
Staying safe	3		
Enjoying and achieving	3		
Making a positive contribution	3		
Achieving economic well-being	2		
Service management	3		
Capacity to improve	3	3	
Children's services		3	
The education service		3	
The social care services for children		3	
The health service for children			3

Recommendations

For immediate action

- Improve the range of services to support children and young people with moderate disabilities, autism and Asperger's syndrome and the arrangements for their transition to adult services.

For action over the next six months

- Improve access to CAMHS and reduce the waiting time.
- Implement the obesity strategy consistently and evaluate its impact to improve the physical health of children and young people.
- Use children's outcomes at the end of the foundation stage to improve standards further in primary schools.
- Improve outcomes, progression and participation rates post-16, including for young people who are looked after by the council and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Implement protocols for information sharing and joint working between agencies consistently.
- Implement the agreed special educational needs strategy to reduce the uncertainty of parents about access and choice of schools for their children.

For action in the longer term

- Better manage the range and extent of provision to ensure a consistent, good quality of 14-19 education and training and increase the provision of programmes to prepare young people for employment.

Main Report

Outcomes for children and young people

32. **Children and young people are generally healthy.** Health staff work well with other agencies to provide good support for families, parents and carers and to promote healthy lifestyles. Schools contribute effectively to health promotion activities. Children who are looked after by the council and those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive good health

support. The number of pregnant women who smoke is below average and reducing, although the proportion of mothers who breastfeed their babies remains low. There is good uptake of the MMR vaccinations. The deaths of babies within seven days of birth broadly match the national average. The deaths of infants and children under the age of 15 have reduced and are now below the England average. The hospital's accident and emergency services for children and young people are very good. The number of children admitted with asthma is lower than the England average. Users of the CAMHS service value highly the services and support they receive. However, the process to access CAMHS is not clear and the waiting time is far too long despite the work being done to reduce the waiting list.

33. Children and young people appear safe. Most children and young people feel safe in school and in their own area. Numbers on the child protection register are below the national average. Appropriate multi-agency action is taken to protect children and young people when necessary with an increasing number of support services available to keep them at home where appropriate. The number of looked after children is reducing. Children and young people who are placed within and outside the borough are safe. The stability of placements is improving. Support for young people who have left care is good. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have access to a good range of services. However, some vulnerable children and young people, and in particular those with autism and Asperger's syndrome, do not have consistent access to services to enable them to participate fully in social activities and make smooth transition to adult services.

34. Children and young people achieve well. Parenting classes encourage families to access a wide variety of activities to promote learning and enjoyment. Early years' providers are supported effectively to raise the quality of their settings, but outcomes from the foundation stage are not used enough to raise standards in primary schools. Standards, although improving, remain below average at age 7 and in mathematics at age 11. Educational standards achieved at age 16 match the national average. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups achieve well, although for Black Caribbean pupils the gap in standards is not closing. Attendance is in line with the national average and exclusions show a downward trend. Children who are looked after by the council and attend school regularly make good progress. However, some young people attend erratically and too many do not have an effective personal education plan. Consequently, too many are not engaged in education or training. The provision for alternative education is satisfactory and children missing from education are now being tracked through the Education Management System. Provision in schools for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is satisfactory, although tracking and monitoring of individual pupils' progress need developing.

35. Children and young people are provided with a good range of opportunities to make decisions and take personal responsibility. Many make a good contribution to their communities. Children and

young people are supported well in their social and emotional development. A good range of activities promotes children and young people's personal development through family centres, schools, the youth service and through arts activities. Children receive good support to manage change in their lives and respond to the challenges they might have to face. Support for young carers is established but too few are able to access the services because demand is high. Good mechanisms exist to enable children and young people to air their views such as young people serving as associate governors, participation in the youth council and through the web. There are some very good examples of children and young people influencing service provision and development. Action taken by the authority and its partners to reduce anti-social behaviour, offending and re-offending is satisfactory. Relevant activities to prevent offending have had a positive impact. The number of young people who offend for the first time is reducing and fewer young people re-offend. Children and young people who are looked after by the council play an active role in shaping service delivery and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make their views known to decision-makers to influence service development.

36. Most young people are prepared adequately for working life.

Young people are beginning to benefit from a range of regeneration programmes to achieve economic well-being. The quality of social housing is improving and most young people live in decent affordable homes. However, the authority has correctly identified that outcomes in the borough are currently no better than satisfactory. Although improving, the number of young people progressing into education and training remains too low and the quality of provision is inconsistent across the borough. Levels of achievement are broadly in line with national averages on GCSE and GCE AS-level and A-level courses, but are low in work-based learning. The approach for gifted and talented pupils is good, and Aim Higher programmes raise aspirations and develop personal and employment skills. The local authority and local LSC have established a clear improvement plan for developing 14–19 education. Multi-agency collaboration supports vulnerable young people. However, the proportion of young people looked after by the council engaged in education and training is too low and provision for some young people with disabilities is insufficient. Transition arrangements for young people with severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities are satisfactory, but not for those with moderate difficulties. Level 3 provision of A-level and AS-level courses or equivalent is strong. There are some gaps in work-based learning provision and preparation for employment programmes, at level 1 and below, are insufficient.

The impact of local services

Being healthy

37. The combined work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is good.

38. Parents and carers are provided with good-quality advice and support to help them keep their children healthy. Most children understand health-related issues and consider themselves to be quite healthy. Health, social care, education, the youth service and the voluntary organisations have worked well together on a range of projects to implement healthy lifestyle programmes for children and young people. The parenting classes led by the health staff rightly focus on improving key health issues, for example advice and information on healthy eating, on reducing alcohol consumption, on personal and sexual health, and the prevention of accidents. Initiatives to support and advise mothers on breastfeeding have not been successful to date and the number of mothers who breastfeed their babies remains low. Attendance at the daily smoking cessation classes is good and an anti-smoking project has been linked effectively to physical activity, for example football.

39. Action is taken to promote children and young people's physical health. A number of projects have increased opportunities for physical activities, for example, the Brierley Hill Young Parents Group receives support and advice from health staff about physical education. Dudley's obesity plan contains relevant actions; however, the obesity strategy is not yet implemented across agencies and its impact therefore remains to be demonstrated.

40. Initiatives aimed at improving home safety, for example the Safety Town and the Home Safety Project, are good. The exhibition of health and emergency services, organised by the Health Promoting Schools project, is well attended by school children. The police, fire services, environmental health and the ambulance services are among the exhibitors that have shared their expertise with the children and young people. The findings from the twice-yearly lifestyle survey have been used well to improve children and young people's health, for example in reducing cases of asthma and accidents in the home.

41. Health visitors and the weekly visits of nurses to schools provide a good-quality universal service. Schools have regular access to health professionals who provide relevant information and assist their staff in dealing with children's health needs.

42. Children with complex needs and those who are admitted to hospital are prioritised and seen quickly. CAMHS staff work well with paediatric clinicians, schools, social services, the youth service and the voluntary sector. However, agencies are often unclear about the procedures for referral to CAMHS and, although reducing, waiting time is still far too long.

43. The hospital's accident and emergency services for children and young people are good; most children are seen within the hour and almost all are seen within four hours. There is a higher than national percentage of accident and emergency nurses who are registered children's nurses. The admission rate for children with gastroenteritis is higher than the national average and the public health department of the PCTs is leading a project to address this issue.

44. The health of looked after children is managed well by a dedicated team of health professionals who work closely with carers and staff in partner agencies. Health assessments are thorough and are undertaken within required timescales. Looked after children have direct access to CAMHS through a dedicated psychologist, but waiting times vary for children and young people in foster placements. Good-quality advice and information about access to services is available to all looked after children and their carers through a wide range of publications, training and consultation events.

45. Arrangements for addressing the health needs of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. Services for children in need are integrated through the children with disabilities team, comprising social workers and community nurses. Needs are identified early and there is effective communication and joint working between agencies. A good range of support programmes, provided in partnership with the voluntary sector, is highly valued by children, young people, parents and carers across the borough. Transition arrangements are good for young people moving from children's to adult health services.

Staying safe

46. The work of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is good.

47. A good range of information and initiatives for children, young people and their families promote safety on roads, in the home and in the community; these are having a positive impact on reducing accidents. Good practice is demonstrable in the nationally recognised development of training and the registration of sports coaches.

48. Staff across agencies routinely undertake risk assessments. Children and young people have contributed to the design and content of good-quality information relating to bullying, domestic violence, substance misuse and racial discrimination. However, children and young people still identify bullying as a concern. There are good initiatives to combat bullying in schools and children's homes but a borough-wide bullying strategy is yet to be fully implemented. A multi-agency strategy for domestic violence is improving the responsiveness of agencies to incidents where children and young people are at risk.

49. Joint working across services is well established to protect children and young people who are most at risk of abuse and for those who need care. Action is taken in a timely and coordinated way. The proportion of children on the child protection register is lower than the national average and all are allocated to a qualified social worker. Children are taken off the register when safe to do so. Initial referrals to children's social care duty desks are suitably screened before allocation and offices are very well managed and properly staffed. The quality of assessments is good. The council is acting effectively to

improve the consistency across the borough in compliance with timescales for initial and specialist assessments. The system to manage workload is effective in ensuring that resources meet the demand and that cases can be transferred smoothly across service teams.

50. Arrangements across agencies for ensuring that staff do not pose a risk to children and young people are robust. The multi-agency public protection arrangements work well and the number of special panels has recently been extended to address issues such as domestic violence and substance abuse which have been raised by different groups of young people who offend. Complaint systems and advocacy availability are well known and used by young people.

51. Thresholds for intervention are agreed by the CYPSP and are consistently applied by social care staff. However, understanding of the thresholds is inconsistent across agencies and some schools in particular. The out-of-hours service has limited capacity to support children and young people and prevent family breakdown in emergency situations because, currently, the emergency duty systems only has one worker for children and adults. This is scheduled for review in the light of Directorate changes and service developments.

52. The Dudley LSCB is now established with strong interagency commitment among statutory and voluntary organisations. Training is well organised and delivered to considerable numbers of staff, but it is not underpinned by a clear audit of needs across agencies. Monitoring of action plans of serious case reviews and inspections is good and supports improvement of service. A good innovation has been the piloting of an interagency file audit tool kit.

53. The needs and profile of the children and young people looked after by the authority are clearly understood. Their number is reducing but remains higher than in comparable councils. Short-term placement stability is good, as is compliance with requirements for care planning, recording and review. Children and young people are effectively supported to participate in conferences and reviews. There are good processes for recruitment, retention and support for foster carers. Foster carers and staff in children's homes are highly committed and demonstrate high levels of skill and knowledge about the children in their care. The range of placements is expanding and includes Flipside, an innovative treatment placement scheme for children with complex needs. Processes for securing long-term placements and increasing adoption have resulted in improved levels of performance. However, there are too many placements outside the borough. The number of children placed at home but still subject to care orders has been safely reduced to national levels through focused intervention.

54. There is a good range of information, support services and respite care provided for severely disabled children in partnership with health services and the voluntary sector. In particular, the Orchard Partnership provides a wide range of guidance, leisure activities and opportunities for networking for

parents and carers. Safeguarding arrangements are robust. However, views of children and young people and their parents and carers are mixed. The quality of service is perceived as good but some parents have difficulties in understanding how to access services and experience delays in the provision of services. Parents and carers are particularly concerned about the scale of provision for supporting children with autism and Asperger's syndrome.

Enjoying and achieving

55. The work of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is good.

56. Good-quality services provide targeted support for parents and carers to help their children enjoy play, achieve educationally and make productive use of their leisure time. Some parenting classes are particularly good at promoting the inclusion of all children and ensuring that the needs of those who have specific disabilities are met.

57. Early years education and childcare provision are good. Providers are effectively monitored, challenged and supported to improve the quality of their settings, with good access to a wide variety of training. However, outcomes of the foundation stage are not used consistently across all settings. Staff working in early years are now forging stronger relationships with primary schools to ensure that children's progress is recorded correctly and used consistently when transferring to primary school. There is effective early identification and assessment of needs for those children who require additional support. The development of children's centres is on track and progress is being made to ensure that there is an integrated strategy for children under the age of five covering health, childcare and education.

58. Clear guidance, through leaflets and the council's website, is available for parents and carers on admission procedures for schools. Priority is given to all vulnerable groups, particularly to children who are looked after by the council. There are sufficient secondary school places and the issue of surplus places in primary and special schools is being addressed.

59. Overall, standards are rising and broadly match the national average at age 16. The number of pupils achieving at least one GCSE is higher than the national figure and the average for similar authorities. Standards in primary schools are improving, and attainment has been recognised by the authority as an area for further development and highlighted as a priority for action. Results at ages seven and 11 are inconsistent across schools and below average at age seven and in mathematics at age 11. Schools are supported very well through the school improvement service and intervention is proportionate to needs. There are good initiatives to help schools raise the quality of their provision through the intensive support and leadership programmes. Rigorous

procedures are in place for identifying and supporting schools causing concern. The authority provides effective support to implement the national strategies for raising attainment. Schools value highly the support and challenge provided by the development advisers.

60. The EMAS provides good support to schools, children, young people and the community and the service is valued by users. Causes of low attainment among minority ethnic groups have been analysed and effective steps taken to tackle them. As a result, the progress of ethnic groups is improving, although Black Caribbean pupils underachieve.

61. Overall, looked after children achieve well and all schools have a designated teacher. However, despite recent improvement, too many do not have a personal education plan and are not engaged in any education, training or employment pathways.

62. School attendance is in line with the national average. The authority monitors attendance and targets work effectively where poor attendance is affecting attainment. The education welfare service has been restructured and support for behaviour in schools is provided proportionate to need. There is now an increasing focus on building schools' capacity to deliver their own behaviour support. This change to service provision is now beginning to have an impact in some schools, although, as yet, not all schools have signed up to this model of delivery. Current data for the 2005-06 academic year demonstrate that there have been no exclusions from primary schools and a steady decrease of exclusions from secondary schools.

63. Alternative education provision is satisfactory. The outreach work done by staff of the referral unit for pupils of primary school age is successful in preventing exclusions. There are plans to make the secondary pupil referral units more flexible and provide outreach support to meet the needs of pupils in secondary schools. The policy regarding children missing from education is in draft and has yet to have an impact, although relevant data have now been placed on the Education Management System and tracking is beginning to take place. However, recording of this information is in its early stages and, as yet, there are no effective links from a multi-agency perspective. There is a reliable system in place to monitor children educated at home and parents, children and young people are visited at least yearly. The destinations of students moving into further education are known.

64. Provision in schools for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities helps them achieve and ensures that they receive their entitlement to education. Schools are very positive about the learning support service that they can purchase and they use the service creatively to support individual pupils and train staff. The individual tracking of pupils' achievement requires further development. The use of Inclusive Support Centres in some mainstream schools has promoted inclusion. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are encouraged to participate in

recreational and enrichment activities and the Me2 project is a good example of how services are being encouraged to be inclusive, particularly through the use of summer play schemes and peer assessment programmes. However, the range of integrated leisure facilities for older children is limited. Good support is provided for children with special educational needs during transition periods. The parent partnership service is well established and provides effective support for parents and schools, particularly through training courses for parents and mediation. The percentage of statements of special educational needs completed within timescales is lower than the national average, although improvements are being made following the introduction of the EMS where closer monitoring and tracking of timescales now take place. The special educational needs strategy has been slow to develop; it has left some schools unclear about its implementation and some parents concerned about whether they would find a school to meet their child's needs.

65. Most children and young people in Dudley find life enjoyable, most feel that they are doing well at school, and are safe and happy. There is a wide range of voluntary learning and recreational activities for children and young people and opportunities are available to access sports, music and the arts. However, most young people spoken to in the Castle and Priory area expressed the view that they would like more opportunities for recreational and leisure activities, including more activities suitable for children with disabilities.

Making a positive contribution

66. The work of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.

67. Children and young people are well supported in their personal, social and emotional development. The What Centre offers effective information, advice and counselling. At the Coseley family centre, children are very well supported through a good variety of generic and specialist services including pre-school provision, family support and sports activities. The schools' counselling service provides tailored interventions for those who need them. School-based opportunities for mentoring support are good and the Education Business Partnership has implemented a successful mentoring scheme for those at risk of underachieving. However, mentoring opportunities in the community are more limited. Provision for young carers is of good quality and includes one-to-one support, school holiday activities and a homework club, but not all young carers can access provision because demand is high.

68. Support for children to manage changes in their lives and respond to challenges is good. The Connexions partnership provides successful programmes to help young people at key transition points and the proportion of young people entering employment, education and training is increasing for all target groups. Young parents gain mutual support and develop parenting skills, for example through the Brierley Hill young parents' group.

69. The commitment by the council and its partners to involve children and young people in the development of services and in decision-making is strong. The council has demonstrated this by adopting national standards such as Hear by Right and adapting its constitution so that the views and involvement of children and young people are considered as a matter of course. A good range of mechanisms exists for enabling children and young people to air their views such as young people serving as associate governors, participation in the youth council and through the Web. There are some very good examples of children and young people influencing service provision and development, for example children are actively involved in the development of the Children's Fund; they take part in staff appointments and commissioning processes and they evaluate services. However not all children and young people feel that they can influence local issues and their involvement in decision-making is not yet embedded.

70. Action to reduce anti-social behaviour is satisfactory overall. The council and its partners have very good information on crime hotspots and levels of anti-social behaviour. The YOS delivers individualised interventions and resources are well targeted to areas that most need them most. An appropriate range of activities is undertaken to reduce anti-social behaviour and prevent offending. These include the Positive Activities for Young People Programme, the Youth Inclusion Support and Supervision Programme, mobile provision, anti-social behaviour orders and dispersal orders. Consequently, the number of young people offending for the first time and the proportion who re-offend are reducing. Young people on custodial orders are well supported at all stages. Their learning and training needs are met well up to the age of 16, although too few continue their education or training post-16. A shortage of placements and the reluctance of some organisations to accept these young people contribute to this. The work of police community support officers is viewed positively by partners including schools and appropriate measures to evaluate the impact of their work in this area are being developed.

71. Children and young people who are looked after by the council are very well supported in making a positive contribution and they play a central role in influencing service development and improvement. Most value highly the support that they receive and feel listened to by social workers and their carers. They receive good information on admission to care and have helped design and shape information for others when entering local authority care. For example the 'Just Say It' group designed a leaflet explaining about annual health assessments. In children's homes, they are regularly encouraged to express their views and have been assisted by the library service in purchasing books for themselves and others. They participate in interviewing staff and have influenced changes in the pocket money allowance. Children and young people are well supported in undertaking community activities and receive discounts at local leisure centres. The proportion of those in the youth justice system is consistently lower than in other comparable areas. Councillors regularly meet with children and young people in care and there is very good recognition and celebration of their achievement. The Black Country Children's Rights Service provides good advocacy support and a good number of children

know the complaints procedure. There is a proactive approach to maintaining contact with families and good support is delivered by the post-16 team. Children and young people's religious and cultural needs are met. There are some inconsistencies in the rigour and monitoring of statutory reviews. The council has acknowledged this and has produced an action plan that was informed by views of young people.

72. Support for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good. Very positive work is undertaken by the Orchard Partnership including weekend and after-school activities, support groups and the provision of information for parents and carers. Through the youth council children and young people are able to raise specific issues with decision- and policy-makers and have influenced developments, for example in the learning disability strategy. The ME2 group evaluates services and presents awards to those who successfully meet their criteria. The group has also influenced the development of integrated play schemes for younger children. There is a good level of respite provision for children and families. Although activities are available for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, parents report that access to mainstream facilities is sometimes problematic and often takes too long. At key transition stages, teenagers receive good support from the Connexions partnership and increasing numbers of young people are successfully entering education, employment and training. There are some inconsistencies in supporting transition arrangements of those who need support to live independently or who need full-time care.

Achieving economic well-being

73. The work of all local services in helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is adequate.

74. A good range of family learning activities is available to raise the literacy and numeracy skills of parents. Programmes encouraging fathers to participate in these initiatives are meeting with some success. However, there is little opportunity for disaffected young people to improve their skills in assertiveness and confidence building. The authority and its partners provide a satisfactory level of support to help families achieve economic well-being and support is targeted to the more deprived areas of the community. Information about childcare, education, training and employment is easily accessible. The number of schools offering extended hours is increasing and more parents are successfully encouraged to become involved in their children's education.

75. The local authority is using the findings of external reports effectively to establish a clear plan for improvement. There is a well-established Aim Higher programme and a wide range of activities to promote educational progression. The authority has also extended the role of the Dudley Enterprise Adviser Service into all schools. The authority recognises that some schools are not providing enough vocational qualifications, and the effectiveness of work experience opportunities to enhance the level of choice and help young people

make informed decisions about their career options is being reviewed. Connexions personal advisors provide objective advice and guidance and target their interventions effectively. There are examples of effective partnership working between Connexions and other services such as the youth service, the Youth Offending Team and the pupil referral units to target support to the most needy groups. Connexions analyse young people's destinations at ages 16, 17 and 18 well. There has been a considerable reduction in the number of young people not in education, employment or training. Following the decline of traditional areas of employment, aspirations of young people are low. Approximately 16% of the workforce has no qualifications and one quarter of adults have basic literacy or numeracy needs. Wages across the borough are generally low. The Aim Higher programmes are beginning to have an impact on raising the aspirations of young people, improving their achievement and life chances.

76. Dudley local authority and the LSC work well together. A collaborative approach has been taken to develop the 14–19 action plan, involving a number of strategic groups. A new team structure has been set up improving relationships with schools and other partners. Much work has been done to establish cluster groups, incorporating wishes of individual schools and existing arrangements, which continue to be developed. However, some schools continue to set their curriculum in isolation and do not always work in partnership. All colleges run programmes that promote collaboration between them and ensure good provision of courses at AS and A-level or equivalent. Participation in post-16 education has increased from a low base, but remains below the national average.

77. Attainment post-16 varies across the three tertiary colleges, the sixth form college and the three schools' sixth forms, with some performing highly and others lower than the national average. Achievement in work-based learning remains too low, although it is improving. The active Black Country Training Group represents training providers well. However, there remains a shortage of level 1 provision and of programmes to help young people prepare for employment. Only one provider, based in the north of the borough, offers this programme, which is co-financed by the European Social Fund. The approach to gifted and talented learners is good. Most schools have a gifted and talented coordinator, written policies and maintain a gifted and talented register. The wide range of activities includes debating forums, summer schools and links with Oxford University. Further collaboration with employers is needed to identify the skills and knowledge required of young people.

78. The authority has a responsive approach to regeneration. A regeneration board set up in the Castle and Priory ward tackles a range of issues including youth and community, leisure and recreation, social enterprise, early years development and community safety. Young people view access to leisure and sporting facilities as satisfactory, although transport is an issue for those living outside town centres. Although college students benefit from reduced fares, 16 year olds in their final year at secondary school do not. The authority seeks the

views of young people in the planning of regeneration projects, although not in the evaluation of them.

79. The authority has made good progress over the last twelve months towards meeting the government's decent homes standard; however, still only 61% of households in the private sector currently meet the standard. The majority of young people have access to decent, affordable housing. Families are supported through a tenancy agreement scheme where the authority agrees to underwrite the costs of deposit for damage, for families or young people moving into privately rented accommodation who cannot afford the deposit. The length of stay for families in temporary accommodation is in line with the national average.

80. The education support service has worked well to raise the achievement of looked after children and has established an effective mentoring programme to provide additional support. Although there has been an increase in the number of looked after children entering employment, education and training, this figure remains significantly below the national average. Care leavers have access to reduced-rent tenancies in Dudley and to a wide range of accommodation across the Black Country. However, arrangements for young people who require supported living or residential accommodation are inconsistent. The take-up of direct payments for young people with disabilities and their parents is rapidly increasing, from a slow start, and is now at a satisfactory level.

Service management

81. **The management of services for children and young people is good.** There are strengths across the spectrum of provision, but there are also weaknesses in implementing some key strategies. However, the direction of travel over recent years is positive.

82. The ambition for children's services in Dudley is good. Dudley borough council has put children and young people at the centre of its ambitions for the future, and this is reflected by the fact that the council's chief executive offers clear leadership by chairing the CYPSP. Political leadership is improving and is now strong. The cabinet member is relatively new in post but his determination, enthusiasm and a commitment to children and young people is having a positive impact. He has developed a good working relationship with the director of children's services to whom he offers a suitable degree of challenge.

83. There is good alignment between the council's action plan, the community strategy and the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP). The high profile of education and training in regeneration plans, in partnership with the local LSC is innovative. A comprehensive range of consultation events and processes has ensured that partners have been involved effectively in developing the CYPP. There has been some involvement by children and young people in shaping the plan, which is liberally seeded with remarks and quotations from children

gathered during this process. The involvement of some difficult-to-reach groups, such as Travellers, has had less impact. The plan is built on a sound needs analysis. The commitment to the plan by most partners is high. However, it is inconsistent among schools and, as key stakeholders responsible for significant areas of delivery, this is a weakness. Some protocols for information sharing are either underdeveloped or applied inconsistently, for example to support young people's transition to adult services.

84. Outcomes for children are clearly stated in the CYPP. However, these are in general terms only and this represents a missed opportunity for the CYPSP to make a bold statement outlining what life will be like for children in the borough over the coming years. More specific outcomes, which involve appropriate levels of challenge, are usually discernible from associated plans, such as the education development plan and the business plans of various relevant services. Detailed actions are often seen in service plans, but a consistent approach to the inclusion of timelines, targets and secure links to medium-term financial plans are underdeveloped. The implementation date of the CYPP in June 2006 is planned to be later than the government's expected date. This is consistent with the council's cautious approach to change, preferring to build incrementally without potentially compromising current success. Annual review arrangements are sensibly built into the implementation plan.

85. Prioritisation processes are adequate overall. Services for children, especially education, have been consistently prioritised by the council. Spending has been above government guidelines over several years and recent innovative changes to the constitution ensure that all cabinet decisions must have regard to the implications for children and young people. The education service has been transformed from a failing service in 2000, to a two-star service in 2005. Similarly, targeted activities to improve children's social care resulted in an improved assessment during 2005. Priorities in the major plans are clear and the council's action plan usefully identifies which partners are responsible for helping to deliver outcomes. There has been a recent, much needed increased profile for vulnerable children and young people, particularly in education services. However, previous performance in aspects such as exclusions in secondary schools and poor outcomes for looked after children means there is significant ground to make up.

86. Although there is a discernible sense of urgency to move things on, there are weaknesses in the implementation of some plans particularly when these involve complex or controversial measures. Some high-profile projects, such as the primary reorganisation programme and the special educational needs strategy, have not gone smoothly, with analysis and management of risk not featuring strongly enough in implementation plans. This, and the scale of changes in education personnel and policy over recent years, have damaged relationships with some schools and this was reflected in an overall negative view of the council in the school survey which was completed by just over half of the schools. This is limiting progress in some areas, although there are some welcome signs of improvement, with a significant number of headteachers

interviewed speaking enthusiastically about their involvement in policy and implementation plans.

87. Capacity overall is good. Council and partner services are well led, and the political dimension in policy development and scrutiny is strengthening. Processes and relationships within the CYPSP are robust, and there is steady progress towards developing a children's trust. Decision-making is generally clear, but insufficient emphasis on managing communications during some complex changes weakens the council's position. Services are staffed by committed people with relevant skills, and training and development processes are good. The leadership of officers is good and improvements to services are supported very effectively by accurate external and internal reviews and self-assessments. Dudley was rated as a beacon council in 2004/05 for its approach to transforming the school workforce. The voluntary and charitable sectors enhance capacity where they are able to. Budget pooling is modest, joint commissioning is developing, but securing grant income is good.

88. There are some weaknesses in matching capacity to need. For example, staffing capacity in some areas is stretched, such as in the emergency duty team, whereas in others such as the music service, staffing is more generous than similar authorities. Furthermore, there are some very costly out-of-borough placements for children with special needs and significant spare capacity in local special schools.

89. Budget processes are generally sound, but have traditionally been geared towards achieving a balanced year-end budget rather than linking planned spend to priorities. The overall financial position of the directorate is adequate and stable, but there are vulnerabilities on demand-led budgets such as out-of-borough placements for looked after children. School balances remain too high. Both situations are recognised by the council and robust actions are being developed to deal both with this and to target finances more sharply to priorities. However, to date these actions are largely untested and have had little impact. The use of benchmarking to compare costs, such as is done for care placements, is increasing and is beginning to have an effect on decision-making. Spending on children's services is comparatively low, and outcomes are generally at least satisfactory, but spare capacity, significant school balances and overspends in placements of looked after children restrict value for money to adequate.

90. Performance management arrangements are developing well and are currently good. The Quality Performance framework is fit for purpose and is being phased in to provide a uniform system across children's services. Currently, it is relatively untested and therefore not embedded in all services. However, the existing systems are working well, and there are encouraging signs of emerging links between the systems used by council services and those of the partners. Performance monitoring reports are clear and comprehensive, but financial reports, although produced at the same time, are not tightly linked to performance. Scrutiny is sound although the level of challenge is

underdeveloped. However, there are increasing examples of the impact of scrutiny on improving services, for example in the re-alignment of education welfare staff and consequent improvements in school attendance. There are many examples of children, young people and parents playing a role in shaping improvements. The self-assessment was generally accurate, if rather too positive in places. There is an emerging systematic approach to building compliments, complaints and learning from projects into service improvement.

Annex: The children and young people's section of the corporate assessment report

1. Overall the council and its partners achieve good outcomes for children and young people in Dudley. Children and young people are safe and those most at risk are protected effectively. High importance is placed on ensuring that children and young people achieve and educational outcomes are rising.

2. Improving the achievement and life chances for children and young people and supporting their families are identified as key priorities in the 2006-09 children and young people's plan and the community strategy for Dudley. There are clear ambitions and a shared commitment to putting children and young people first. A sound audit of need has identified key areas to be improved and the commitment to improve services for all children and young people is high. Relationships with schools are improving, but recent policy changes have left some schools confused about the council's direction. However, the council and most of its partners are working steadily towards the establishment of a children's trust and, despite a slight delay, are on track to deliver a single integrated plan for children and young people by June 2006.

3. Services are good overall and most have a beneficial effect on improving outcomes for children and young people. Service managers are usually aware of strengths and weaknesses in service delivery and evaluation of implementation plans in social care and education is used effectively to improve delivery further. Most services are good and none are inadequate. Good provision is made for looked after children and for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The youth service is adequate. Priorities and actions are clearly indicated in service plans although financial implications and targets to measure success are not always clear enough. The education, training and well-being of children and young people have a high profile in corporate plans, but some protocols for joint working and information sharing are either underdeveloped or too recent to have had an impact.

4. Children most at risk from abuse are well protected. Referral systems are thorough and well managed with good interagency collaboration. The council and its partners make good arrangements to provide children and young people with safe environments. Prompt action is taken to complete social care assessments when referrals are received. All children on the child protection register are allocated a qualified social worker and case records are maintained to a high standard. Children and young people are generally healthy and health prevention activities are having a positive impact.

5. The council provides good support to schools, parents and carers. The educational standards achieved at school by most children and young people are satisfactory and improving. School attendance is in line with the national average. Permanent exclusions are decreasing and while fixed-term exclusions have been rising, the most recent figures show a downward trend. The

provision for alternative education is satisfactory. Provision in special schools and mainstream schools for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is managed well, although individual tracking of pupils' progress needs developing.

6. There is effective support to help children and young people to develop socially and emotionally. A good range of activities is available through family centres, schools, the youth service and through arts activities. Support to help children manage changes and respond to challenges is good. A wide range of mechanisms exists for enabling children and young people to air their views and there are some very good examples of where children and young people have influenced service provision and development. However, too many children and young people still feel that they do not have a say in local issues and their involvement in decision-making is not yet fully embedded in practice. Those who are in the care of the council and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are very well supported in making a positive contribution and play an active role in shaping service delivery.

7. Opportunities to prepare for working life are adequate. The authority has correctly identified that outcomes for young people aged 16 to 19 are currently no better than satisfactory. Improvements are being made although the number of young people progressing into education and training post-16 remains too low. Vocational options have increased for 15 and 16 year olds and a start has been made in addressing skill shortage areas. By age 19, the same proportion of young people as the national average achieves qualifications equivalent to five or more good GCSE and GCE/AS A-level passes, but results are low in work-based learning. Young people who are looked after by the council and those with special educational needs are supported well in entering post-16 education, employment or training. However, provision for some learners, particularly those with moderate disabilities, is insufficient. Support for families is effective in enabling parents and carers to work or study. The quality of social housing is improving and most young people live in decent, affordable housing.