

Self-evaluation in the context of social work services

What is self-evaluation in the context of the work of social work services?

Self-evaluation is about asking ourselves questions such as ***How are we doing? How do we know? What are we going to do now?***

These questions should be asked at all levels so we know how well we and our partners are working together to deliver integrated children's services to those who need them, how the social work department is performing overall and how well our service teams are performing. The Performance Improvement Framework (PIF) for children and families social work and other client groups should be a focus for your self-evaluation of your delivery of high quality services.

You can listen to Sandy Cameron, Chair of the group on performance improvement talking about the importance of the framework and how you use it in practice in the self evaluation section of the Care Scotland Website (www.carescotland.org.uk) . You can also listen to Neil McKechnie, Director of the Services for Children Unit talking about the importance of rigorous self-evaluation.

Evidence shows that there is a strong link between effective leadership and management, effective self-evaluation, and development of the capacity for further improvement. To be effective, self-evaluation requires to:

- be embedded in the culture of the organisation
- be rigorous, comprehensive, systematic and transparent
- be focused on identifying strengths and weaknesses or areas for improvement
- be based on a wide range of evidence
- involve a wide range of stakeholders
- lead to targeted action and improvement
- be recorded and reported
- be a continuous, systematic process as opposed to an event

Self evaluation has been used as a means of improving performance in schools and education departments for nearly ten years. Colin MacLean, the head of Auchinleck Academy, who was also a member of the 21st Century Review Group, has some advice to his social work colleagues who are just starting off this process.

You can listen to Colin talking about this on the Care Scotland Website

It is also important that the culture of self-evaluation is embedded into the work of all social work services staff and to the performance appraisal system. A member of Colin MacLean's staff explains how they translate the high level aims set out in the School Development Plan to the work of individual departments and individual staff members within them. Continuous improvement seems easier to achieve when every individual sees their contribution to the improvement and sets him/herself realistic and stretching targets within a performance appraisal system

You can listen to Gillian Wilson talking about this process on the Care Scotland Website

What are the links between our self-evaluation and evaluation by external inspection agencies?

We all need to have an external measure of how we are performing. Evaluation by external inspection agencies such as SWIA and the joint inspection teams will cover the same ground as your self-evaluation, using indicators and language shared with managers, frontline staff and service users, parents and carers. The inspection assessment, when it becomes available, will be based on evaluation of provision across a large number of social work services and will allow for the important process of moderation. This moderation will assure you that your judgements are accurate and that your expectations are appropriate and sufficiently challenging. External moderation will also give you confidence in your own judgement. As your on-going evaluation will involve evidence gathering, the process of preparing for inspection and submitting evidence on performance should become less time consuming.

You may, of course, be gathering evidence for other external quality assurance systems such as Charter Mark and Investors in People that can also be used here.

What evidence should we be gathering?

There are, essentially, four main sources of **evidence**, from which evaluations can ultimately be made. These are:

- performance data
- relevant documentation
- stakeholders' views and feedback
- direct observation of practice

These sources of evidence are complementary. No single source can meaningfully provide enough evidence on its own to enable a reliable or robust evaluation to be made. The principle of *triangulation* has been tried and tested over many years by Inspectorates, by other independent external evaluators and by authorities themselves. In essence, triangulation involves the scrutiny of one source of evidence, backed up by another and corroborated by a third line of enquiry. A good example would be an evaluation based on the examination of a key policy document, the implementation of which was then discussed with senior authority staff and corroborated in further discussion with relevant stakeholders such as frontline staff, children and young people and their parents and carers. Through this process of triangulation, it should then be possible to observe the outcome of putting policy into practice and, through this, to evaluate the impact of policy in meeting the needs of key stakeholders.

Where this is fully effective and reliable, the process involves all key stakeholders in full and meaningful discussion of the issues. These stakeholders might typically include:

- children and young people
- parents, guardians, carers and families
- community groups, including voluntary organisations
- frontline social workers and their support staff
- staff in other council departments and services
- staff from external partner agencies
- staff in voluntary organisations providing services on behalf of the authority
- elected members
- the council's corporate management team or equivalent
- trade unions and professional associations

Through its policy and framework governing consultation and communication, each authority aims to develop a clear picture of its main stakeholders and a protocol for engaging them in ongoing, focused discussion regarding its performance in key areas. A number of authorities already do this very effectively. A range of forums, procedures and techniques can be used or accessed to gather stakeholders' views. These often include:

- council and committee meetings

- focus groups
- questionnaires and surveys to gauge satisfaction and to elicit suggestions for improving effectiveness
- one-to-one discussions
- consultations on *single issues*, for example, policy development
- cross-sectoral working groups
- targeted consultation groups
- young people's forums
- joint partnership groups
- suggestion boxes or equivalent
- inter-agency training forums
- corporate council complaints procedures
- staff complaints procedures

In any event, the process of self-evaluation should, as a matter of course, generate key management information which results in an evaluation of overall quality and improvement. This evaluation can then be used to create a set of agreed, targeted action points which, in turn, drive further improvement.

Answering the key question: *How are we doing?*

In answering this question, you are being asked to reflect on the quality¹ of social work services you deliver to children and families.

Your plans for delivering high quality services to children and families will be set out in your integrated Children Services Plan. The purpose of this self-evaluation guide is to suggest how you can identify strengths and areas for improvement in your delivery of high quality services, how to report on progress and how to update your plans for action. You should structure your self-evaluation around the 10 key areas set out in the children and families performance improvement framework. The areas are:

- key outcomes
- impact on service users
- impact on staff
- impact on the community
- delivery of key processes
- policy development and planning
- management and support of staff
- resources and capacity building
- leadership and direction
- capacity for improvement

The inputs and processes outlined in Key Areas 5-9 contribute to the outcomes and impact identified in Key Areas 1-4.

¹ In delivering high quality services, social work should be: carrying out rigorous assessment of the needs of children, young people and families and the community; taking into account the views of parents, carers, children and young people and the community at large on the quality of social works services available; taking advice from local and national bodies; and reflecting on research evidence on the delivery of high quality services to ensure the best outcomes for children.

Key Area 10 provides guidance which can be used to evaluate evidence that the council has the capacity to continue to improve. The evaluation will take into account the evaluations of other key areas, its track record in improvements to date and significant aspects of its internal and external contexts.

Within each key area, the qualitative indicators should be used to self-evaluate your progress against the framework and the plans and this in turn will enable you to:

- identify areas for action across social work services or within service teams;
- identify factors contributing to the delivery of high quality services
- take a broad view of overall performance as part of the planning process
- take a closer look at a specific area within a regular cycle of self-evaluation
- follow up issues arising from evidence gathered from getting the views of children and young people and their parents and carers
- monitor progress on, and evaluate implementation of priorities within the integrated Children's Services plan
- evaluate quality in relation to an issue which may be specific to a particular social work service or relate to a national or local priority.

How do we use qualitative indicators in self-evaluation?

There are six levels of performance which are an integral part of each quality indicator. The six, which will be used by you and external inspection agencies are:

Level

Level 6 *excellent* - excellent

Level 5 *very good* - major strengths

Level 4 *good* - important strengths with areas for improvement

Level 3 *adequate* - strengths just outweigh weaknesses

Level 2 *weak* - important weaknesses

Level 1 *unsatisfactory* - major weaknesses

An evaluation of **excellent** will apply to performance which is a model of its type. The outcomes for children, young people and their families along with their experience of services will be of a very high quality. An evaluation of *excellent* will represent an outstanding standard of performance, which will exemplify very best practice and is worth disseminating beyond the service or area. It will imply these very high levels of performance are sustainable and will be maintained.

An evaluation of **very good** will apply to performance characterised by major strengths. There will be very few areas for improvement and any that do exist will not significantly diminish the experience of children, young people and their families. While an evaluation of *very good* will represent a high standard of performance, it is a standard that should be achievable by all. It will imply that it is fully appropriate to continue the delivery of service without significant adjustment. However, there will be an expectation that professionals will take opportunities to improve and strive to raise performance to excellent.

An evaluation of **good** will apply to performance characterised by important strengths, which taken together clearly outweigh any areas for improvement. An evaluation of *good* will represent a standard of performance in which the strengths have a significant positive impact. However, the quality of outcomes and experiences of children, young peoples and their families will be diminished in some way by aspects where improvement is required. It will imply that the services should seek to improve further the areas of important strength, but take action to address the areas for improvement.

An evaluation of **adequate** will apply to performance characterised by strengths, which just outweigh weaknesses. An evaluation of *adequate* will indicate that children, young people and their families have access to a basic level of service. It represents a standard where the strengths have a positive impact on the experiences of children, young people and their families. However, while the weaknesses will not be important enough to have a substantially adverse impact, they will constrain the overall quality of outcomes and experiences. It will imply that professionals should take action to address areas of weakness while building on its strengths.

An evaluation of **weak** will apply to performance, which has some strength, but where there will be important weaknesses. In general, an evaluation of *weak* may be arrived at in a number of circumstances. While there may be some strengths, the important weaknesses, either individually or collectively, are sufficient to diminish the experiences of children young people and their families in substantial ways. It may imply that some children and young people may be left at risk or their needs not met unless action is taken. It will imply the need for structured and planned action on the part of the agencies involved.

An evaluation of **unsatisfactory** will apply when there are major weaknesses in performance in critical aspects requiring immediate remedial action. The outcomes and experiences of children, young people and their families will be at risk in significant respects. In almost all cases, professionals responsible for provision evaluated as unsatisfactory will require support from senior managers in planning and carrying out the necessary actions to effect improvement. This may involve working alongside other staff or agencies. Urgent action will be required to ensure the children and young people are protected and their needs met

How are we doing? – Getting started

There are two main types of self-evaluation which complement each other. The first is taking **a broad view** of performance across the **10 Key Areas** in the PIF. For example, you might scan across all the key areas in the PIF each year, assigning one of the six levels to each indicator on the basis of professional judgement. This process of shared reflection could be carried out within social work services as a whole and in individual services or teams. It should be based on readily available evidence and will give immediate feedback on areas of major strengths or concern.

The second is **taking a closer look**. The broad view will give you the overall picture but you might also take a closer look at specific areas due to an issue identified during the broad view, an issue arising from evidence gathered on parents' carers' or

children's views or feedback from inspection. In children and families social work, you might want to concentrate on taking a closer look at the key areas, **Key Performance Outcomes, Impact on children and families, Staff and the community**, particularly in the first year of evaluation and reporting. Tools are already being developed to support you in taking a closer look in areas such as *How good is our team?*, *How good are our key processes?*, and *How good is our strategic leadership?*. Additional tools will be developed as required. You should aim to take a closer look at all the areas you have identified as necessary, prioritising in order of severity of impact and aiming to complete all necessary closer looks within three years and putting deliverable action plans in place. This is of course a cyclical process as continuing to check via broad views may highlight new areas where you need to take a closer look.

Example

Authority X takes a broad look at its performance in the delivery of Nurtured. Their performance against the qualitative indicator is self-evaluated as very good and all their quantitative indicators show continuous improvement except the indicator on sibling placements where a high number of sibling placements are separated. Taking a closer look at sibling placements might involve looking at individual case records to establish whether there was a pattern or identifiable reason such as a large number of disrupted sibling placements occurring at the weekend or few emergency foster carers registered to take large families. This turn may lead to a review of the qualitative indicator and a review of weekend procedures and emergency foster care.

It is important to remember that evaluations made in self-evaluation and inspections simply enable staff to ask the right questions. They do *not* represent a set of answers. Equally evaluations should not be aggregated across different indicators, or turned into percentages. In such cases, percentages can be at best meaningless and at worst deceptive. It can however be very useful to look at patterns of evaluations across particular indicators, as these can help to identify whether a particular strength or weakness is localised or replicated across a number of service teams. This can help staff to focus on the underlying causes of weaknesses, and identify appropriate staff development priorities, or resource allocations. Over time, trends can indicate whether a particular action has brought about the improvement sought.

Answering the key question: How do we know?

When coming to a judgement about performance using the indicators in the PIF, we may refer to a number of sources of evidence, including the analysis of quantitative indicators as set out in the PIF, the analysis of other relevant local indicators, criteria used within other quality assurance frameworks and the views of parents, carers, children and young people receiving a service. Reports on progress on the delivery of outcomes in the integrated Children's Services plans submitted annually by authorities will also provide important benchmarks for you to use when evaluating your own department, service sector or team.

Answering the key question: What are we going to do now?

Drawing on the answers to the questions *How are we doing?* and *How do we know?* you should be on the way to planning for improvement and reporting on progress. Self-evaluation is integral to both processes.

You should find the six levels of performance useful in giving your report rigour and in helping you to go beyond providing description to providing real evaluation.

A good report on progress should:

- recognise key strengths
- identify levels of service to be maintained
- identify development needs and priorities
- set targets

There may be occasions when, for some aspects, the answer to the question *What are we going to do now?* may be *nothing at present*. Although not perfect, performance in the aspect considered may be of an acceptable standard and there may be issues of greater concern.

In deciding what to do now, it will help if you select a manageable number of priorities for which you can identify **specific, achievable and measurable targets**. Priorities should:

- reflect the aims of social work services
- incorporate national priorities and related local improvement objectives into the cycle
- be linked at team level to departmental priorities
- lead to clear plans of action

Reporting on progress is integral to the process of planning and self-evaluation. You should share your report with service users, parents and carers, the local community and other interested parties. The report also provides an agenda for discussion with other partners and should inform their view of integrated delivery of children's services.