Getting the Best from Social Services
Learning the Lessons from Joint Reviews
Contents

1. Introduction 1
2. Evaluating Social Services 2
3. Reviews in Context 4
4. How Well are Councils Doing? 6
5. Review Findings 8
   5.1 Are Services Focused on Users? 8
   5.2 Are Councils Well Placed to Shape Better Services? 15
   5.3 Do Councils Manage Performance Effectively? 20
   5.4 Are Resources Managed to Maximise Value for Money? 23
6. Are Reviews Helping? 28
1. Introduction

Joint Reviews provide an independent assessment of how well the public is served by social services in each council in England. This is a brief summary of the key findings from the 29 reviews conducted so far. This report is intended for councillors, lay people concerned with social services and the public. It will be followed by a fuller account of the findings in a handbook designed for use by managers, professionals and researchers.

Providing good social services requires well-run councils. This report is about how well councils run their social services. Its single most important message for councils is "ask people what they want, explain what they can expect and deliver what you promise promptly".

No clear relationship has been found between councils' performance and how much they spend. Councils that spend more do not necessarily provide better services. Equally councils that spend less have questions to answer about their performance. The critical factor is organisational culture.

Councils that are open and are not defensive, that look to themselves for improved performance and that have a management grip on the key issues, will learn what works and can deliver it. Councils that take to heart their corporate responsibility to protect vulnerable people and look after the children in their care can protect and empower their citizens.

Councils that see the bigger picture and the part that social services can play in it will build more trusting partnerships and shape better services.

Councils that have developed the skills to map, shape and influence markets in an increasingly mixed economy of care and that do not respond passively to new challenges will develop the new services required to meet new needs.

Councils that measure what they do, that count what services cost, that support their staff in becoming more effective and productive, that are prepared to challenge established employment practices will become more efficient and better value for money.

While the relationship between user satisfaction, service effectiveness and spending remains complex it is clear that the key to improved performance lies largely with councils asking themselves how they can improve their own organisation and culture.

---

1 Councils are defined throughout this report as comprising councillors, chief executives and senior social services managers. They employ staff or appoint contractors to carry out their duties.
2. Evaluating Social Services

The purpose of Joint Reviews is to evaluate how well councils' social services perform. This requires a clear understanding of what social services are for and a rigorous framework for assessing performance.

What are Social Services for?
Social services are there to protect and empower vulnerable people. Councils can achieve these aims by working with individuals, by fostering communities that support people and by funding other organisations that help people. Councils are accountable for social services through a 'contract' which works at three levels:

- with citizens who use social services (EXHIBIT 1);
- with communities that share responsibilities with councils; and
- with taxpayers who fund social services.

The contract is expressed in citizens' rights to have their needs assessed and the council's duty to meet needs that have been assessed using the money intended for the purpose.

This contract is renewed thousands of times every day - each time someone approaches social services for help. Council staff make or break this contract every time they answer the phone, meet a caller or visit someone in their home. Councils that manage their contract consistently at every level - in reception, in people's homes, on the phone, in staff supervision, in their dealings with other services, in the management team and the council chamber - command confidence and improve services.

Councils have limited funds so citizens have an interest not just in the quality of services but in how efficiently they organise and deliver them.

How is Performance Assessed?
Reviews ask four questions:

- Are services focused on users?
- Is the council well placed to shape better services for the future?
- Is performance managed effectively?
- Are resources managed to maximise value for money?

Each review draws together the views and experiences of users and carers with evidence about the council's plans, standards and costs to reach an overall judgement about how well people are served and how well placed the council is to do better in future.
2. EVALUATING SOCIAL SERVICES

EXHIBIT 1
The contract with service users
Ensuring that people asking for help get clear and consistent answers from councils.

IS THERE A NEED?
WHAT WILL WORK?
WHAT CAN I OFFER?
WHAT SHOULD I RECORD?
WHAT STANDARD IS GOOD ENOUGH?
HOW MUCH CAN I SPEND?
WHO ELSE NEEDS TO KNOW?

HOW DO I ASK?
WHAT AM I ENTITLED TO?
HOW CAN I STAY SAFE?
WHAT IF IT DOESN'T WORK?
HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?
3. Reviews in Context

Councils deliver social services in a changing context. Government initiatives on combating social exclusion, achieving best value, building modern and dependable health services, promoting public health and renewing local democracy require new responses from councils and their social services. Contributing to social inclusion and achieving best value are at the heart of improving social services.

**Contributing to Social Inclusion**

The duties of local authorities to provide social services are set out in statute. The most important pillars of the legal framework are the National Assistance Act of 1948, the Children Act of 1989 and the NHS and Community Care Act of 1990. Drawing together the many requirements and powers these confer, the role of social services can be simplified as:

- to keep vulnerable people safe; and
- to promote independence.

Combining these two purposes effectively creates an enabling service that keeps people safe and helps them sort out their own problems in their own ways (EXHIBIT 2).

Social services play a vital role in generating social inclusion by:

- Supporting families that are marginalised by poverty, ill health or disability.
- Helping children to play a full role in society, for example, by supporting them to attend school.
- Making families and communities safer for vulnerable people by protecting their physical safety, mental health and individual rights.
- Working with others to enable frail, vulnerable and disabled people to live safely and independently in their own homes by supporting them and their carers.
- Arranging specialist help for people with many or complex problems. And ensuring that this help does not exclude them from the families and communities to which they belong (EXHIBIT 3).
Empowering citizens by working with them contributes to ‘inclusive’ communities

Best Value
Best value is still developing as a means of assuring quality and value for money in council services. Measuring social services performance requires an understanding of how social services contribute to social inclusion backed up by:

- Judgements about whether the right people get the right services (EXHIBIT 4).
- Scrutiny of costs and whether each pound spent is justified by the value it generates (EXHIBIT 5)

Reviews look at how councils set priorities between different demands on their resources and assess how councils allocate resources to meet these priorities.

EXHIBIT 4
Effective targeting includes early intervention

EXHIBIT 5
Increasing activity requires reducing unit costs

We got the communication right from the beginning, and we’ve not been smothered by help. We do what we can, if it doesn’t work we do it another way. We’ve been encouraged to think ahead.

- A carer from Suffolk
4. How Well are Councils Doing?

Nineteen reports have been published (July 1st 1998) and each gives an overall judgement on current services and on future prospects. Seven authorities were found overall to be serving people well. Five were judged not to be serving people well and not to be well placed to improve services. The other seven presented a mixed picture with some aspects of performance going well, but others less so. The table opposite maps councils into six groups (each group is in chronological order).

Overall Conclusions

Overall, there is a mixed picture. Many councils perform well in some aspects of their social services. Councils can draw encouragement from the findings that:

- Nearly three-quarters of users and carers rate services as excellent or good.
- Most councils have rigorous procedures for protecting people at risk.
- Links with other services are improving.
- Most councils fulfil their regulatory role, and some are going well beyond the minimum requirements.
- Most councils have maintained continuity for users and kept finances in control while taking on the new funding responsibilities for community care.

Equally there are some common areas where improved performance is necessary:

- Fewer than one-third of people know about social services before they use them.
- Some councils fail to keep people safe because they do not apply guidance and procedures and do not allocate staff to priorities.
- Many councils are not able to learn from the day-to-day experience of users and carers because they do not ask for feedback or carry out reviews.
- Many councils’ future plans are based on shaky knowledge about needs and how well current services are working.
- Some councils fail to inspect properly the services they regulate and many do not enforce standards consistently in the services they run themselves.
- Most councils do not fully understand costs and struggle to forecast future activity and expenditure.
- Many councils could save substantial sums of money by using more independent providers and by tackling the costs of their own services.

Reviews are about improving services. Each council that has been reviewed adopts an action plan to improve services. The agenda for improvement revolves around common themes, including:

- Being better informed about what they do, how well they do it, what it costs, what other people think.
- Building trust with their communities, employees and partners so that services can change for the better.
- Having more citizen-based standards by involving lay people and organisations that represent them in setting and enforcing standards of service, and in planning how services can be improved.
- Supporting stronger service management by giving managers a stake in policy making and the tools to improve performance.
4. HOW WELL ARE COUNCILS DOING?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good prospects of sustaining improving services</th>
<th>Concern about capability to sustain and improve performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall serving people well</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockport (March 1997)</td>
<td>Wandsworth (June 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutton (May 1997)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somerset (June 1997)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowsley (Nov. 1997)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwark (Dec. 1997)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffolk (March 1998)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Serving some people well with some areas needing improvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwell (June 1997)</td>
<td>Oxfordshire (July 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincolnshire (July 1997)</td>
<td>Barnet (February 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden (July 1997)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not serving people consistently well</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calderdale (January 1998)</td>
<td>Barnsley (October 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Sussex (June 1998)</td>
<td>Sefton (October 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barking and Dagenham (November 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sheffield (January 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bury (April 1998)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This report has used data from 29 reviews. Ten reviews have reached the stage where data is available but the reports are not yet finalised or published. These are Cornwall, Coventry, Enfield, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Hertfordshire, Liverpool, North Yorkshire, Rochdale and Wolverhampton.

This report will return to the four key themes for improvement in the questions highlighted for councils after each summary of main findings. These findings are gathered together under each main question: Are services focused on users?; Are councils well placed to shape better services?; Do councils manage performance effectively?; and Are resources managed to maximise value for money?

Nationally, work that is underway to bring together consistent frameworks for measuring activity and costs, promoting trust between public services and encouraging councils to manage themselves better can help councils address this agenda.
5. Review Findings

This section reports findings from each of the main components of a review:

- Are services focused on users?
- Are councils well placed to shape better services?
- Do councils manage performance effectively?
- Are resources managed to maximise value for money?

Good practice examples are highlighted and the review team draws attention to common pitfalls which impede improvement.

Each section concludes with the key questions that councils should address to improve performance.

5.1 Are Services Focused on Users?

Three questions provide the framework for analysing these findings:

- What do users think?
- Are services safe?
- Are services equally accessible to all?

What Do Users Think?

Nearly three-quarters of users and carers continue to rate services as excellent or good. Older people rate services more highly, as do women. Overall, this represents a high level of public satisfaction but individual council’s scores for "excellent or good" vary from 84 per cent to 59 per cent (EXHIBIT 6). Services are most likely to be well regarded if users have a say in their care and if councils deliver what they promise promptly (EXHIBIT 7).

---

1 Reviews have collected the views of over 4,000 users and carers in 29 authorities.
5. REVIEW FINDINGS

EXHIBIT 7
Users who get services quickly rate them more highly

It is important to understand that this is speed of delivery once a service has been promised. It is equally important that councils give users and carers a say and explain clearly what services they can offer. Users and carers value quick responses when they are well managed responses.

It might be expected that councils that spend more money are more likely to be well regarded. However, there appears to be no correlation between how well councils involve users, the extent to which they are meeting their expectations and so get good ratings and how much councils spend, or how many staff they devote to trying to do it (EXHIBIT 8). Councils’ ability to secure approval from users and carers seems more influenced by their organisation and culture than by how much they spend.

EXHIBIT 8
There is no correlation between total expenditure and percentage of users and carers who rate services as excellent or good

Source: Joint Reviews Questionnaire for Users and Carers, 1996-1998
Are Services Safe?

Most councils have clear procedures to keep vulnerable people, especially children, safe. Other findings counter the general picture of public confidence in social services. Joint Reviews have found councils that do not meet basic statutory requirements to protect children and look after children in their care properly. These councils are not serving people well. A number of councils do not know enough about how well they are doing as parents for the children they look after. The Review Team is concerned about coordination between services that ensure the safety of people with mental health problems and their children.

Child protection policy varies very widely between councils, and also within individual councils. There is a clear link between high numbers of children registered as needing protection, and deprivation. However, even within similarly deprived areas registration rates can vary, sometimes by as much as a factor of 3 (EXHIBIT 9).

EXHIBIT 9
Deprivation and high registration of children sometimes go together

Source: Department of Health Key Indicators, 1997

Are Services Equally Accessible to All?

Most people still know too little about what social services can do to help them. Information is not getting through (EXHIBIT 10). Even in the best performing councils only one-third of people have information about social services before they use them.

EXHIBIT 10
Fewer than one-third of people had information before being referred

Source: Joint Reviews Questionnaire for Users and Carers, 1996-1998
COUNCILS VARY SUBSTANTIALLY IN THE NUMBERS OF REFERRALS THEY RECEIVE. COUNCILS ALSO DIFFER IN WHAT PROPORTION OF REFERRALS LEAD TO ASSESSMENT AND THEN ON TO SERVICES BEING OFFERED. MANY PEOPLE ARE REDIRECTED ELSEWHERE FROM SOCIAL SERVICES. MANY ASSESSMENTS DO NOT RESULT IN SERVICES. MANY COUNCILS ARE NOT MONITORING SYSTEMATICALLY WHO DOES NOT GET AN ASSESSMENT OR SERVICE AND WHY. COUNCILS WOULD BENEFIT FROM SURVEYS OF NEED AND ACCESS TO SERVICES COVERING THE WHOLE POPULATION.

REVIEWS HAVE ANALYSED ASSESSMENTS AND SERVICES TO SEE HOW THEY RELATE TO THE NUMBER OF REFERRALS RECEIVED. THERE APPEARS TO BE NO CONSISTENT LINK BETWEEN REFERRALS, ASSESSMENTS AND SERVICES EITHER ACROSS COUNCILS (EXHIBIT 11), OR INDEED ACROSS DIFFERENT SERVICES WITHIN THE SAME COUNCIL. THE REVIEW TEAM CANNOT, THEREFORE, REACH ANY STRONG CONCLUSIONS ABOUT TARGETING OF SERVICES. LIMITED RESOURCES NECESSITATE SOME ELEMENT OF TARGETING TO GET MAXIMUM VALUE FROM THE SERVICES AVAILABLE. SERVICES SHOULD BE TARGETED ON PEOPLE WHO CAN BENEFIT MOST, WHICH MAY NOT ALWAYS BE THE MOST DEPENDENT OR DEPRIVED PEOPLE. HOWEVER, COUNCILS ARE NOT COLLECTING THE INFORMATION ABOUT NEED, OR ABOUT SERVICE EFFECTIVENESS, TO UNDERPIN THEIR TARGETING STRATEGIES. THE RESULT IS A MIXED PATTERN IN WHICH NEITHER CITIZENS NOR COUNCILS CAN EASILY JUDGE WHETHER SERVICES ARE HITTING THE RELEVANT TARGET.

EXHIBIT 11

THERE IS NO CONSISTENT TARGETING OF ASSESSMENTS OR SERVICES

Assessments are not experienced as taking proper account of people's ethnic, religious and cultural needs. On average, only around one-third of people who identified themselves as having particular needs reported that these were taken account of in their assessment or in the services they received. The best rating achieved by a council in response to this question was just over 50 per cent. There is a huge task for councils to make their systems and services sensitive to the diverse needs of the communities they serve.

Source: Joint Reviews Survey of Referrals, 1996-1998
**Good Practice**

Some councils have established rigorous systems for protecting vulnerable people. There are also councils that successfully involve users in planning care and fulfil their promises promptly. There is good practice to learn from and there are clear pitfalls to avoid. Councils need to check how they work at all levels to make sure the lessons their service users can teach them are being learned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good practice</th>
<th>Pitfalls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Involving people in services – see Knowsley and Sandwell</td>
<td>✗ Not being clear about who does what – confusion over team roles, service purpose and accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Delivering services promptly – see Southwark and Wandsworth</td>
<td>✗ Not providing continuity – constant changes of worker, moving children from place to place or always having to start again each time a person contacts social services (EXHIBIT 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Making sure children are safe – see Cornwall</td>
<td>✗ Not knowing what is going on – many councils do not review how well services are going – on average four in ten people report never being asked how things were going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Being a good parent – see Southwark on making sure children go to school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Keeping people well informed – see Wandsworth and Camden on telephone help services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Dealing well with the public – see client services in Hertfordshire (EXHIBIT 12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Defining clear eligibility for services – see Hertfordshire, Knowsley and Southwark</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. REVIEW FINDINGS

EXHIBIT 12
Good practice
The client services role in Hertfordshire provides a clear route for all referrals and ensures that effort is focused on priorities.

EXHIBIT 13
Pitfall
One child, 24 placements - the perils of inconsistent responses to complex needs.
Questions to Ask - Focusing Services on Users

Findings from reviews show that coherent standard setting backed up by even-handed and co-ordinated enforcement are key attributes of councils which have the capacity to serve people well.

The key questions for councils are:

- What arrangements are there to co-ordinate standard setting in the council?
- Is the council fulfilling its statutory obligations to register and inspect services?
- Have users and carers been involved in setting standards, do lay people contribute to enforcing standards?
- Do users and carers know how to complain and are their complaints dealt with to their satisfaction?
- Do the council’s own services meet the requirements placed on independent providers - if not, how will this be rectified quickly?
- Are the distribution of resources and the allocation of contracts informed by how well existing services meet required standards?
- Does the council collect information about workload and performance, whom is this reported to and who is expected to use it?
- Is responsibility for making sure standards are achieved integrated with responsibility for managing services and budgets, if so, at what level in the organisation?
- Does the council have independent, safe, procedures for users and staff to report abusive or dangerous practice?
- Does the training plan start from the priorities of the council, and are future skill deficits being addressed, especially for vocational staff and managers?
5. Review Findings

5.2 Are Councils Well Placed to Shape Better Services?

Review findings have been analysed around four dimensions of planning and changing services:

- understanding needs;
- forecasting future activity and expenditure;
- working alongside other services; and
- improving relationships with service providers.

**Understanding Needs**

Councils need better information about current services to increase their ability to shape better services for the future. Social services authorities have valuable experience in consulting with, and hearing, users and carers. They will not be able to reap the full reward from this activity until the resulting plans are made more credible by being rigorously connected to service delivery, resource allocation and other services’ plans.

A crucial contribution can be made to this by reviewing current services more thoroughly and systematically. Case files are analysed to assess whether services are being reviewed. In most councils they are not reviewed unless required to be by law. This finding is underpinned by users’ and carers’ experience. Many report that they have not been asked how things are going (EXHIBIT 14). Users and carers have valuable knowledge about services but many councils are not asking them to share this knowledge.

**Forecasting Resources**

Reviews have found that councils forecast their resources more readily than they forecast future needs. There is however little connection between the two projections. Forecasting future activity and funding needs to improve (EXHIBIT 15, overleaf). The overall pattern and mix of services has not changed dramatically in the councils that have been reviewed. However, there has been growth in home care services and in the proportion of services provided by independently-run services.
EXHIBIT 15

Counсils often do not link past trends with future expectation - predicted growth in total expenditure in the year of the review compared with the previous year’s growth.

Forecasting Activity

Joint Reviews also ask councils to forecast activity, using referrals as an indicator of demand. Far fewer councils supply forecasts of activity than forecasts of spending. Cornwall was the only council that supplied activity trends and forecasts that matched past and proposed spending.

Working Alongside Other Services

Working in partnership spans a wide range of services, and needs to be central to the way councils think and organise themselves (EXHIBIT 16). Reviews have found that council services are now more ready to work with one another and with other public services to make whole systems work better. Joint Reviews are finding more information sharing and joint management. Schools need to be brought into the system more effectively if children's services are to benefit from this new culture.

Improving Relationships With Service Providers

Councils still rely on limited regulation to accredit most independent providers of services, and contracts continue to be based on single users. Councils should know enough about the choices users wish to make, and the capacity of providers to meet them, to move towards longer-term partnerships with providers. This would enable better incentives for improvement to be introduced. There would also be more shared learning about what works well.
5. REVIEW FINDINGS

**Good Practice**
More councils are specifying clearly what they expect from the services they manage themselves. Many still do not set service level agreements or link budgets to performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good practice</th>
<th>Pitfalls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✔ Business planning to drive change – see Southwark’s approach to managing</td>
<td>✗ Inconsistent funding – especially where confidence in plans is undermined by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change in home care services</td>
<td>failure to maintain funding commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(EXHIBIT 17, overleaf)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Listening to users and carers – see Hertfordshire’s work to create self</td>
<td>✗ Unrealistic specification based on ‘ideal’ benchmarks instead of current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>managed user and carer organisations</td>
<td>performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Using analysis of local needs to inform resource allocation and maintaining</td>
<td>✗ Conflict with other services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joint databases of needs and services with other services – see Stockport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Working closely with health services, including family doctors to develop</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joint information and service strategies – see Sandwell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXHIBIT 17

Integrated change management to reshape home care in Southwark

Southwark's data on service needs is informed by reviews of current services for individual users (left ring). There are three integrated initiatives driving change (middle ring):

• re-negotiating the role and employment practices of the council's own service;
• re-negotiating the contract with voluntary sector providers to reduce the cost of specialist services; and
• introducing cost and volume contracts with private suppliers to free funds to develop new services for ethnic minorities.

Finally these changes are put into practice through managers that hold the relevant budgets and collect the data which monitors implementation (right ring).
5. REVIEW FINDINGS

**Questions to Ask - Shaping Better Services**

Findings from reviews show that councils are well placed to shape better services when:

- Information from current services can be analysed to establish what is working well.
- Users and carers are supported in a structured and independent way to say what they think about the council's services.
- Plans include realistic forecasts of future workload and expenditure and these factors are directly related to one another.
- Joint plans with other services address the problems of the whole system rather than concentrating on marginal areas of common interest.
- Independent providers have clear specifications and are checked up on regularly.
- There are incentives for other providers to do what the council wants, and providers can trust the council to follow through its stated priorities.

The important questions for councils are:

- Are services being reviewed, and information collected and analysed to inform future planning - does this include information on costs and feedback from service users?
- Does the council support users' and carers' organisations, run and managed by users and carers, independently of council officials? Do councillors meet directly with these organisations?
- Is budget allocation driven by forecast workload and policy priorities - or are decisions made the other way round - doing what the council can afford?
- Have councillors and lay members of other public authorities (for example the Health Service or Police) looked at the needs of their whole community and set down priorities for the system as a whole - or do they only meet to agree joint projects in specific areas?
- How many independent providers have a long-term partnership with the council - why were they selected and are the benefits of partnership being realised in improved services or lower costs?
- Have users and carers been involved in specifying services and selecting providers?
- What happens when providers are not performing satisfactorily?
5.3 Do Councils Manage Performance Effectively?

Findings from reviews have been analysed to assess:

- Whether councils set coherent standards and involve users in determining standards?
- Whether councils enforce standards even-handedly?
- How well do councils manage their own services?

Setting Standards

All councils reviewed have set standards in charters and most have a comprehensive range of operational policies governing the services they run. The majority of councils apply registration standards to independent services. Some councils have made good use of the contribution users and carers can make to setting standards. Overall, however, standards are still seen as professional property. Many councils could do more to coordinate the various approaches to setting standards and involve users and carers and their representatives at an earlier stage in the process (EXHIBIT 18).

Enforcing Standards

Overall councils are rigorous in their inspections but less so in the enforcement of inspection requirements, especially for the services they run themselves. Reviews have found many instances where residential homes run by councils are not required to meet the standards enforced for independent providers. Users are in effect being denied equal choice in these councils, because some must go into homes which are not of the physical standards required.

Managing Services and Staff

Job roles need to be clarified, better understood and backed up with clear targets. There are opportunities for councils to re-specify job requirements and address shortfalls in management competence. Many councils need to invest more in making sure middle managers both appreciate strategy and priorities and have the systems to manage day-to-day performance. The majority of councils rely too much on one-to-one supervision and could enhance staff effectiveness by collecting better information on workload and performance and sharing it with their staff. These changes are more deliverable in councils that adopt clear business management and planning, integrating responsibility for performance, workload, costs and information in general managers close to service delivery.

EXHIBIT 18

Councils need to pull together each element in setting and enforcing standards and involve users at every level.
5. REVIEW FINDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good practice</th>
<th>Pitfalls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating ‘standards units’ with a clear role and resources to bring greater coherence to standard setting and enforcement – see Hertfordshire and Suffolk</td>
<td>Failing to enforce standards equally for all providers – so undermining public confidence in the impartiality of the council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving users in standard setting – see Hertfordshire’s work with user organisations and Southwark’s consultation with children it looks after</td>
<td>Making quality a separate business – so making it difficult to integrate with line management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting information on staff perceptions and performance and reporting this – see Oxfordshire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions to Ask - Managing Performance Effectively

Findings from Reviews show that users value participation, expect councils to keep their promises promptly and value services that meet their expectations.

The most important questions for councils are:

• Are the people who receive referrals clear, friendly and well briefed?

• Is the function of each team and office set out clearly for councillors and members of the public who approach them?

• Does the council receive a regular report on how many children are on the Child Protection register confirming that they all have a social worker? Does this report say why each child is registered and how long they have been on the register?

• Does the council know whether all the children it looks after are going to school, how they are progressing and when they were last reviewed?

• Are people with mental health problems, especially young people, being sent to distant and inappropriate hospitals?

• Does the council know what happens to those referrals that do not go on to assessment?

• How many assessments do not lead to a service being offered and why - could some pre-screening make the system more efficient?

• Do care plans record what users say and set out expectations which can be reviewed?

• Are reviews of services being carried out and what can the council learn from them to be sure that services are working and of good value?
5.4 Are Resources Managed to Maximise Value for Money?

The most important findings concern:

- understanding costs;
- identifying scope for savings;
- income from charging; and
- management information.

Understanding Costs

Variations in costs between councils are so wide that they can only be explained by inconsistent accounting. For example unit costs of councils’ own home care services reported to the Review Team range from £7 per hour to over £15 per hour (EXHIBIT 19). The variation in prices paid to independent providers is as great (EXHIBIT 20).

The principal problem is the allocation of costs. The largest and most poorly defined cost is care management. The proportion of expenditure treated as ‘care management’ varies fivefold between councils that have been reviewed (EXHIBIT 21, overleaf). Until this is properly defined and accounted there will always be a suspicion that costs are not true costs.
There is a fivefold difference in the proportion of spending classed as 'care management'.

**Percentage spent on care management**

- New South Wales: 60%
- South Australia: 50%
- Western Australia: 40%
- Queensland: 30%
- Victoria: 20%
- Tasmania: 10%
- Northern Territory: 5%

**Source:** Finance and Activity Data Supplied for Reviews

**Scope for Savings**

There are significant potential savings to be made from using independent providers of services for elderly people instead of council run services (EXHIBIT 22). In home care for elderly people, in all but one council, the council's own services cost significantly more per hour than the reported cost of independently provided alternatives. Across services for elderly people as a whole many councils could save at least £1 million and some others as much as £5 million. Realising savings requires a step by step approach to reshaping services and markets. This will require a planned approach over a number of years:

- To minimise councils' use of expensive service options when less expensive ones are available - for example replacing high cost nursing home placements with community or residential care services.
- To reduce the costs of high cost council run services by changing employment practices and increasing flexibility - for example making home care services work effectively over a long day and at weekends.
- To replace high cost council services with less expensive and equally good alternatives - for example closing residential homes that do not meet the necessary standards or inviting other suppliers to provide home and day care services as well as residential options.

The main impediment to progress in a number of councils appears to be concern about the impact on councils' own staff. While councils need to be good employers some councils could be putting the interests of their staff before those of users and carers and this should be challenged by councillors.

**EXHIBIT 22**

Local authority costs exceed independent providers - home care for older people

**Difference in cost of home care per hour**

- North West: £10
- South: £5
- Inner: £0
- Outer: £5
- Northern Territory: £10

**Source:** Finance and Activity Data Supplied for Reviews
There are services where investing more in council services would save money. The prime example is foster care, where in most councils the council’s own foster care service costs significantly less than independently run alternatives (EXHIBIT 23). Councils could work together to secure more consistent foster care and control costs charged by independent providers.

**Income from Charging**
The amount councils receive in income from users and carers varies widely from 4 per cent to 28 per cent (EXHIBIT 24). There is no evidence that loss of income inhibits councils’ ability to change the mix of services - though councils that raise only mandatory charges are also less enthusiastic to move away from traditional residential models of care.

**Management Information**
Management information needs to be improved. This is a matter of defining what services are for and measuring them. It is a management issue, not a technology problem. Councils need encouragement to become more evidence based and more rigorous in information collection and interpretation. The Review Team is supporting an initiative by a group of London councils to improve information on costs and activities and this work will be published later in 1998.
Good Practice
There are councils which have established good models of costs which help measure efficiency and improve budget allocation. Better management information is key to achieving this more widely. A national framework shared by all councils would enhance cost comparisons and improve management information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good practice</th>
<th>Pitfalls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Modelling costs properly so that care managers and social workers understand the budgetary implications of the decisions they make – see Barnet, Lincolnshire, Wandsworth and Hertfordshire</td>
<td>X Overspending – two councils which were not serving people well had undermined their ability to manage services by failing to control overall spending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Measuring the workload of staff so that activity can be measured and priorities assessed more clearly – see Hertfordshire</td>
<td>X Centralising resource control so that managers get better at playing the system than serving the user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Using technology to add value to existing systems – see Cornwall</td>
<td>X Separating financial accountability from staff management – so weakening influence on costs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions to Ask - Getting Value for Money

Better resource management implies better knowledge about what things cost; clearer definition of activity and especially management overheads; devolved, integrated business management; and wider use of data about how effective and productive staff are.

The key questions for councils are:

• Has the council calculated unit costs for all major services in a consistent fashion?
• How do unit costs compare with those paid by similar councils?
• Are there wide differences in the costs of different providers offering similar services?
• What scope is there for the council to save money by transferring council-run services to other less expensive suppliers?
• How willing is the council to change the numbers of staff it employs and to employ staff on different terms and conditions in order to meet users’ and carers’ needs better?
• Has the council assessed which services it might invest in to save money in other council, or indeed public service, budgets?
• How has the council defined the purpose of each service and which particular piece of information will measure whether that aim is being achieved - for example, if the aim of the fostering and adoption service is to place more children more quickly, how many more and how much more quickly?
• Are budgets held by managers who control day-to-day activity and particularly by those who manage staff time?
• Does the council collect information on the workload and effectiveness of staff and, if so, how does it share this to support improved performance?
• If special budget control systems have been introduced (e.g. panels), when will they cease and how are they ensuring that devolved management can re-assume proper responsibility?
6. Are Reviews Helping?

The Joint Review team exists to help improve social services. It can contribute to this by:

- Giving an outside perspective on how services are working.
- Finding out from a small sample of users, carers and service providers what is going on and checking this against the council’s stated priorities.
- Listening to users, carers and other organisations and telling councils what these groups think and feel about social services.
- Analysing the whole social services system and identifying the organisational, cultural and practical obstacles to improved performance.
- Highlighting what councils are doing well and explaining how they might build on this good practice.
- Examining councils’ costs and exploring how they are changing and where there are opportunities for savings.
- Supporting staff by providing a snapshot of how they are performing and how this could be improved.

Reviews work best as part of a longer term approach to service improvement. A council which prepares a ‘defence’ against the review and nine months later places the report on the shelf with a sigh of relief is not making the most of the process. Self-assessment and review is a very valuable preparation for the team’s arrival. The review itself requires each council to complete a ‘position statement’ analysing their performance. Reviews are followed by an action plan setting out the council’s response.

Councils have the chance to take a three-year perspective on raising their performance: preparing and self review; the review itself; and then implementing the action plan. Joint Reviews work best when they are part of a council’s own efforts to do better.

Have Reviews Helped?

A review is a demanding piece of work for a council. As well as the £45,000 each review costs the Department of Health, councils have to meet the cost of preparing and organising the review locally. This begs the fundamental questions of how much impact reviews have and is it sustained. A year ago only six reports had been presented and published. It is too soon to assess the impact on the ground in many authorities. Only later in 1998 will it become possible to start properly assessing the outcomes of reviews.

Some feedback is available about views of the process:

- The Local Government Association has convened meetings of councils which are undergoing reviews to exchange experiences.
- The Association of Directors of Social Services has undertaken a survey of directors in councils that have been reviewed.
6. ARE REVIEWS HELPING?

Feedback from the Local Government Association
The Local Government Association group welcomed reviews and had found them useful in bringing together a clear overall picture of social services issues for councillors. They expressed concerns about the assumptions underlying the review methodology - for example that it assumes there is a separate department for social services and that services are delivered from local offices. Other issues were the use of a 'commissioning' language that sits uneasily with councils that still run lots of services themselves and may neglect important issues in children's services. The group wished to be reassured that the staff on the Joint Review team are impartial and able to grasp the complexities and uniqueness of each council.

Feedback from the Association of Directors of Social Services
The Association of Directors of Social Services surveyed 28 directors of whom 21 replied. Most Directors found reviews accurate - 15 per cent reported that they felt the review was inaccurate. They also found them fair, cordial, frank and broadly in line with their own assessment of performance - again 15 per cent found reviews too critical.

Reviews have helped make change possible in councils. Directors shared the view that the methodology should continue to evolve as the Joint Review team learns more and circumstances change. Some directors had criticisms of some aspects of how reviews were conducted.

Some directors were concerned that staff on the Review Team were credible, understood the uniqueness of each council and behaved professionally. Many felt that the financial analysis could be better and that getting better data must be a priority. Some directors experienced the review as having an agenda they could not share. Others found the written report more critical than they had expected following earlier discussions with review staff.

The Association's own conclusion is that 'In general joint reviews have been well received by the majority of directors, although all qualify this with strong criticisms and suggestions for improving the process in future'.

Comments and criticism are welcome
The Joint Review team welcomes comments and criticism. It aims to practice what it preaches. The review process continues to develop as the team learns and adapts to changing circumstances. The challenges of best value, corporate working, whole systems approaches and renewal of local democracy face the Review Team as much as councils. In response to this the methodology has been reviewed and was republished in a more approachable and updated form in February 1998 (Reviewing Social Services - Guiding you Through). Dialogue, self-assessment and learning on the job will, hopefully, improve reviews in 1998/99.
## The Programme

**Position at 1 July 1998 - 50 authorities in programme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report published</th>
<th>Started (after set-up meeting)</th>
<th>Notified as in programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stockport</td>
<td>North Yorkshire</td>
<td>Isle of Wight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutton</td>
<td>Harrow</td>
<td>Devon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somerset</td>
<td>Harrow</td>
<td>York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wandsworth</td>
<td>Hammersmith and Fulham</td>
<td>Haringey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwell</td>
<td>Cornwall</td>
<td>Northumberland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxfordshire</td>
<td>Coventry</td>
<td>Tower Hamlets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincolnshire</td>
<td>Wolverhampton</td>
<td>North Tyneside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>Hertfordshire</td>
<td>Lancashire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sefton</td>
<td>Rochdale</td>
<td>Leicester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnsley</td>
<td>Enfield</td>
<td>Bradford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowsley</td>
<td>Cumbria</td>
<td>Stockton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barking and Dagenham</td>
<td>Northamptonshire</td>
<td>East Yorkshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calderdale</td>
<td>Rotherham</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheffield</td>
<td>Westminster</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnet</td>
<td>Gateshead</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffolk</td>
<td>Hampshire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bury</td>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Sussex</td>
<td>Solihull</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reviewers

DAVID ASHCROFT joined the team from East Sussex County Council, where he managed elderly people’s services. He has also worked in publishing and management development and is vice-chair of SCOPE.

CHARLES COPE is seconded to the Joint Review Team from the Social Services Inspectorate, where he specialised in community care, inspection units, complaints procedures and learning disabilities.

MIKE FOX spent five years as an assistant director of Social Services in a large county authority, where he was responsible for quality assurance and inspection. Joined the team at the start and helped build methodology for Joint Reviews. Left Joint Review Team April 1998 at the end of his secondment.

FRAN GOSLING THOMAS is seconded from the Social Services Inspectorate, where she had national child care leads. Before this she was a senior manager with NACRO and part of Surrey Social Services Department’s strategic planning section.

KEVIN MANSELL is a qualified social worker and studied in the USA before working in India. He had 18 years experience as a practitioner and manager in East London Social Services Departments, and joined the Social Services Inspectorate in 1990. Joined Joint Review Team April 1998.

SUSAN MEAD joined the Joint Review Team from Birmingham Social Services where she held the post of Chief Inspector. She has worked in Social Services for over 25 years and has extensive experience of undertaking inquiries and reviews into matters of public concern, particularly in respect of childcare issues. Joined Joint Review Team September 1997.

JANE OULTON is seconded from Manchester Social Services where, for the last three years, she has managed Change Projects in Human Resource Management and Financial Management Systems. She is a qualified Social Worker with 11 years’ experience of the Children and Families service, after an earlier career in academic and government posts. Joincd Joint Review Team April 1998.

LIZ RAILTON joined the Review Team from Hertfordshire Social Services, where, as an assistant director, she held responsibility for a range of child care and adult services. Left Joint Review Team February 1998 to become Director of Cambridgeshire Social Services.
PETER SCURFIELD was seconded from the Audit Commission, where he carried out VFM reviews with District Audit. One of his particular areas of interest is management and financial arrangements. Left Joint Review Team April 1998 to work on the Audit Commission's study on Older People's Mental Health Services.

JANE SHUTTLEWORTH joins the Joint Review Team from Camden Social Services where she has been Head of Strategic Planning for the last 5 years. Jane's career also includes work with the Play Service, Youth and Community Service and 3 years as a trainer/Consultant. Joined Joint Review Team June 1998.

DENNIS SIMPSON worked for the last 13 years as Director of Social Services with Southwark. Worked in social services for 27 years starting as a social worker and then in a range of management rôles. Now works part time with Joint Review Team. Joined Joint Review Team April 1998.

Barbara Smith is seconded from Oxfordshire County Council, where she is Assistant County Treasurer and Assistant Director of Social Services.

Bob Welch has 20 years’ experience as practitioner and manager in several Social Services Departments and for 8 years in the Social Services Inspectorate where he was closely involved with community care reforms. Works part time for the Joint Review Team.

Review Staff

Andrew Webster, Project Director. Worked for Cambridgeshire Social Services and led community care commissioning for Greater Glasgow Health Board. He has a PhD in Public Policy.

Richard Elliott, Project Manager. Background in information management and management consultancy. As a consultant with Essex County Council, he specialised in project management, business planning and workload analysis.

Lloyd Davis, Information Manager. Joined the team from the Local Government Studies Directorate of the Audit Commission. His role is to design and manage information systems for reviews.

Phillip McCaughan, Project Secretary. Background in graphic design and HIV and AIDS work. Currently completing a degree course in English Literature.

Mark Wareing is concluding a year with the Joint Review Team as part of a degree course in Mathematics & Business Studies that he is undertaking at the University of Surrey.
How to find out more

For more information about Joint Reviews please contact:

Joint Reviews of Local Authorities' Social Services
35-37 Grosvenor Gardens
London SW1W 0BS

Tel: 0171 630 0105
Fax: 0171 630 0182
Email: joint.reviews@audit-commission.gov.uk

For copies of published reports on local reviews (£15) telephone 0800 502030