

21st Century Schools: A World-Class Education for Every Child DCSF consultation

Action for Children response
February 2009



Action for Children welcomes the opportunity to respond to this important consultation which sets out a vision of a school system that is capable of preparing every young person to make a success of their life. Action for Children supports the ambition set out in the consultation paper and we are keen to play our part.

Specifically, we support the consultation's aim to develop a schools system which:

- Breaks down the barriers to achievement and the link between deprivation and attainment
- Is able to meet children and young people's additional needs as early as possible
- Works at the centre of a system of early intervention and targeted support
- Ensures greater collective accountability for outcomes for children and young people in the local area

Action for Children

Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. We believe all children and young people have unique potential and that they should have the support and opportunities they need to reach it. Action for Children helps nearly 170,000 children, young people and their families through nearly 450 projects across the UK. We also promote social justice by lobbying and campaigning for change. Today, Action for Children is the leading UK provider of family and community centres, children's services in rural areas, services for disabled children and their families, and services for young people leaving care. Action for Children is committed to working in partnership to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people.

We are keen to contribute our views to this review and see our response as part of an on-going dialogue with the government and key stakeholders about how we can work together to improve outcomes for children and young people. We have only responded to those questions which relate to our direct work with children and young people.

Q 1: Do you support the overall vision of a 21st century school system in paragraphs 2.1 - 2.12?

Action for Children fully supports the consultation's aim to develop a schools system which is supported to:

- Break down the barriers to achievement and the link between deprivation and attainment
- Meet children and young people's additional needs as early as possible
- Work at the centre of a system of early intervention and targeted support
- Ensure greater collective accountability

To help make this vision a reality for all children and young people schools will need to be supported to work more effectively with parents, other providers and children's services. Effective engagement with voluntary sector providers will be an essential component of this mix

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ensuring that the 21st century school system can reach out to all children and young people and be enabled to respond to their individual needs.

Q 2: Is there anything missing from the vision for a 21st century schools system?

Supporting infrastructure

Action for Children would like to see further detail on proposals to support effective partnership working; both to incentivise schools to work collaboratively across a local area, and, to equip schools to become effective commissioners of additional services that meet the range of local and individual needs.

Children in care

Within the vision, children in care are not highlighted as a group of children and young people who will be better supported by a 21st Century School. Given the information about the multi-agency practice and sharing of resources that will take place in a 21st Century School, it is exactly this cohort of young people who should benefit from any changes made. We feel that children in care need to be highlighted in the vision as well as the 21st Century School plan incorporating and recognising the changes in education and support that will be provided for children in care with the implementation of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and the Care Matters White Paper.

Young carers

Young carers are children and young people whose life is affected by looking after someone in their home. The result for the young person can be that their caring role impacts on their ability to maintain a consistent attendance at school. They may have a high level of absenteeism, but with little communication as to why this is so. Again, with the Department of Health estimating that there are 30,000 children and young people in the UK who are the main care givers in the family home, we believe the consultation needs to set out how the new arrangements will support the needs of young carers.

Trafford Young Carers

"I don't think the teachers understand what it is like. Half of the time they think we're not telling the truth. Or some let the class know things about your situation and a few naughty kids smirk or take the mickey. I wish they understood it, and would treat it with care." A young carer

Last year Trafford Young Carers received funding from their local authority education department to produce young carers' guidance for all 106 schools in Trafford.

In producing the guidance they consulted with young carers, parents and teachers. The guidance is aimed to help teaching staff and to raise awareness in schools about young carers. One of the main reasons it was commissioned was because the service and local authority recognised that there needed to be more support from teachers for young carers, particularly during transitional years moving from primary to secondary school.

The guidance covers a range of topics including how to spot warning signs that a pupil could be a young carer, ideas on how schools can actively create more awareness into the issues of caring, and, practical tips on what teachers and the school can do to help young carers.

The guidance is being launched in March 2008 and the hope is for schools to use this a standard policy to include young carers in PHSE lessons, hold young carers themed school assemblies, have dedicated named staff to be responsible for young carers.

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Special schools and alternative education provision

The 21st Century School vision must, we feel, emphasise the need for specialist and alternative provisions to be included within each local authority's 'community of schools'. By doing this both the mainstream and specialist sector will have the opportunity to learn; sharing best practice, resources, knowledge and expertise, to support the children and young people in their own schools but to also ensure that all children in a community are able to access the same opportunities.

Pupil aspiration

The overall vision set out in the 21st Century Schools Consultation covers the aspiration of parents, teachers and the government. However, it does not explain how it will support children and young people themselves to raise their own aspirations of what they would like to achieve within their school career and beyond.

Q 3: How can we support stronger partnership with parents for the purposes of teaching and learning and wider school activities (paragraphs 3.4-3.11)?

When creating a stronger partnership with parents it is crucial to recognise that many families will need support to be able to engage in a partnership about their child's education. Families need support in different ways and at different times, and systems will have to be sufficiently flexible to respond to their needs.

Action for Children believes that agencies should work in partnership with parents and carers (mothers and fathers), providing a range of support that is available at different times and in different places. High-quality engagement with families is critical to improving outcomes for children and young people.

Action for Children has a long history of working with the most vulnerable families in society. We are now the largest provider of family support services in the UK, helping children and families with the most difficult problems.

We have developed local initiatives in partnership with schools to pilot models of family learning. For example, in one pilot in the East Midlands underachieving KS2 children were referred to a community project where they received intensive academic support, whilst their parents were supported with their language skills and to develop their understanding of the education system. Within our services Action for Children also runs a range of participation projects to ensure that the voices of vulnerable and marginalised children and young people are heard and acted upon.

Action for Children is experienced in involving parents and the wider community in the delivery of our services through membership on management boards – in many cases, parents make up over half the management board. In this way, services offer more than just improved outcomes for users but also a way for the whole community to be active.

For children and young people in the care system it is equally important that schools engage with that child's carer. The Children and Young Persons Act and the Care Matters Implementation Plan outline methods of communication with carers and this must be incorporated into this plan.

Q 4: Do you agree with the description in paragraph 3.17 of an effective system for early intervention?

Schools are the main universal service for children and young people. As such they play a

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crucial role in identifying any additional needs children and families might have and helping them to receive the support they need – either from the school itself or from other children’s services in the local area. Schools also play a key role in spotting vulnerable children and children who might be at risk, including those who are persistently absent from, or unprepared for, school.

At Action for Children we have welcomed recent initiatives to develop models for early intervention within schools supported by locally-based multi-agency teams. For example, Action for Children runs a number of rehabilitation projects for families at risk of losing their homes as a result of anti-social behaviour (often referred to as Family Intervention Projects). The work of these services has been evaluated by Sheffield Hallam University. The results are impressive: not only have the levels of complaints about anti-social behaviour substantially reduced, but in 84 per cent of families school attendance had improved by the end of the intervention.

Leicester Family Intervention Project

Action for Children’s Leicester Family Intervention Project works with families who are at risk of eviction due to their anti social behaviour (ASB). The project focuses on tackling anti-social behaviour by identifying the root causes of problems and then supporting the whole family to sustain their tenancy. Following a comprehensive assessment of the family's issues, a multi agency agreement (contract) is developed detailing expectations and possible sanctions if the family fail to engage with the project. A key worker will then undertake a period of intensive challenge and support work with the family, regularly reviewing progress to ensure non compliance is identified at the earliest opportunity.

The project recognises that a chaotic home environment can impact on school attendance and underachievement, in which case the key worker will liaise with individual schools to find out what resources are available to address these issues. In effect, the service helps to broker an individual support package tailored to the needs of the child and agreed by the children, their parent(s) and the school. They will then monitor the child’s achievement against this package. In some cases they will also introduce a system of incentives to support the achievement of goals; rewards for consistent school attendance for example.

In all of this the service will work closely with the child’s parents helping to forge a constructive relationship with appropriate staff within the school, whilst working towards the overall aim of sustaining the family tenancy. The aim is to provide parents with the support and confidence to address these issues with the school themselves. Arrangements within individual schools will vary, often with the role of the service being focused on setting up initial contact and negotiating access to services.

“We have had experience of good communication with schools, which includes regular updates, feedback and discussion about how to deal with certain situations. The behaviour contract is agreed and signed at the initial assessment meeting and then reviewed. The schools will attend the regular FIP review meetings and take responsibility for the relevant actions of the behaviour contract.”

Some examples of good inter-agency working include developing behaviour management strategies that can be used within the school setting and at home. Also the Education Welfare Officers keep the service updated on attendance and will pre-warn if the parent/carers are going to be issued with a fixed penalty notice or warning. This enables the service to discuss the situation with the parent and hopefully prevent it from escalating.

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We agree that there is much more to do to ensure that effective practice becomes the norm everywhere. From our experience it is apparent that too often schools remain unclear about their role, and the extent of their responsibilities, in relation to early intervention. Effective engagement with schools remains uneven; in some areas we are working successfully with clusters of schools to deliver innovative services focused on early intervention and targeted support – yet in other areas engagement has remained problematic.

Early intervention – an effective system

An effective system for early intervention must begin with the school accessing information about the child, using current tools for sharing information. With this information the school will then be in a position to put in place appropriate support and or be aware of potential problems which may manifest themselves later in the child's school career.

We agree that there needs to be a clearer national framework for early intervention which sets out the roles and responsibilities of schools and local services. This framework will need to be sufficiently flexible to reflect local needs and existing service provision.

Service gaps and multi-agency working

Schools do not work in a vacuum and there is a real need for joined up services, especially from those who provide support for the most vulnerable groups.

Currently there is a lack of services for children and young people assessed as being at Tier 2 who might be considered vulnerable but whose problems have not evolved to the extent that they have complex needs that require specialist services. The pathway from schools for referral to such targeted provision remains unclear. This is an issue that will need to be addressed explicitly within the proposed national framework for early intervention.

It is in the commissioning of targeted services aimed at meeting this level of need that schools need to join up. It is also here where economies of scale come into play. It will never be effective for single schools each to employ a social worker. Our experience of working with clusters of schools demonstrates that this is the most effective mechanism for delivering early intervention services that are sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of individuals and communities. To a certain extent in some areas it has been the availability of an effective service that has enabled the cluster to develop.

An example is Action for Children's Chance for Change project which works with 26 schools to support school children in Northern Ireland.

Action for children Chance for Change project

The Chance for Change project is targeted at 7-11 year old children who are experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties. It is delivered through a strategic partnership between the Western Health and Social Care Trust and Action for Children.

The service has been developed within the broad context of Family Support Services and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Tiers 1-2) as an early intervention prevention initiative. The project aims to improve outcomes for children, particularly their emotional health and wellbeing. The Chance for Change programmes involve 8-10 children and 12-16 carers/parents, although all programmes are tailored to meet the specific support needs of participating children and their families.

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A recent evaluation of Action for Children Chance for Change service has highlighted that:

“Chance for Change provides a unique model for effective partnership working, through a successful tripartite approach involving children, parents, and teaching staff. Its operational effectiveness has enabled the project to achieve its aims in relation to addressing a number of issues and good outcomes concerning primary school children experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties.”

The evaluation also highlighted that these benefits could not have been achieved without the integrated, holistic approach adopted by the Chance for Change project.

Multi agency teams should include a CAMHS professional

Early intervention and identification of issues that lead to problems in the class room will inevitably involve addressing children and young people’s mental health issues and preventing these from progressing to an acute stage.

This may require timely access to the appropriate support and therapy at an early stage. NHS research has shown that 76% of parents with concerns about their child’s mental or emotional well-being took their concerns first to a non-specialist such as a teacher¹. It is therefore important that the wider children’s workforce possess both the skills and information to detect the warning signs that a problem exists and information to signpost the appropriate services. It is also crucial that there is a willingness amongst CAMHS professionals to treat outside of the higher tiers of the CAMHS model.

It is not uncommon in the experience of Action for Children practitioners for CAMHS professionals to refuse access to the service for a young person because of the presence of other factors, such as high IQ scores. This is a particular risk for young people with ADHD or Asperger’s Syndrome since it will mask underlying issues that are potentially of concern. Again, it is often the case that in cases like this the problem then has to become acute in order to receive attention.

Children moving to a new school or an alternative provision

The impact of moving school on a child’s education can be dramatic. Any information travelling with young people must do exactly that, ‘travel with them’. Information must not arrive weeks after the young person has started his/her school. It should arrive before the young person, to assist them in settling down in their new environment. Again with this information, the school will be in a position to understand how staff will need to work with the young person to support and prevent any crisis that may have led to them moving schools in the past.

Q 5 What additional support is needed to enable schools to extend their role in developing sustainable and cohesive communities (paragraphs 3.20-3.24)?

The voluntary sector’s community focus makes it extremely well placed to provide services to families – particularly those who traditionally may have been unlikely to engage with services. Often vulnerable families are wary of local authorities and the ‘formal’ services that are available to them. This can include schools. The voluntary sector, in these cases, is in a good position to

¹ (1) Mental health of children and young people in Great Britain, NHS, 2004, p17.

http://www.ic.nhs.uk/webfiles/publications/mentalhealth04/MentalHealthChildrenYoungPeopleSummary310805_PD
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engage families who might be perceived to be hard to reach, and offer a creative solution that works in partnership with them.

Our universal and preventative services not only exist to prevent children, young people and families' needs from escalating, but also to engage with the wider community to foster cohesion, inclusivity and responsibility. Action for Children offers a number of preventative, community-based services.

Without strong communities, families can develop multiple and persistent needs that will require high-cost interventions such as police, youth offending and child residential care. Services, such as Sure Start Children's Centres (SSCCs), which provide services such as safe play, parenting classes and immunisation services, are key to establishing a neighbourhood 'hub' and must be recognised as part of the 'glue bringing communities together'. Schools need to be part of this.

Space 4 U

Space 4 U is an Action for Children service supporting young people seriously affected by someone else's substance misuse, funded in partnership with Derbyshire Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT). It works with young people aged 11 - 16 years old in Chesterfield, North East Derbyshire, Staveley, Ilkeston and Amber Valley/Erewash.

Space 4 U aims to improve outcomes for young people affected by someone else's substance misuse, with a particular focus on the first three outcomes in Every Child Matters, namely, Be Healthy, Stay Safe and Enjoy and Achieve. It offers time limited, 1:1 support, focused on individual need.

Workers believe that work with schools has been a key part of what has worked well within the service. Right from the start workers felt that schools really embraced the service, both in terms of sending referrals and helping to organise sessions. On the whole, support staff in schools have shown a real interest in the welfare of the young people they have referred and have liaised well with project workers. Feedback from referrers and other agencies, many school based, has been positive about the integrated working that has taken place.

The establishment of longer term support networks – whether they are formal or informal - is an important function of the project. The significance of this has grown over time and has become more achievable with the increased number of support networks that now exist within many secondary schools. However, not all young people want to access support within schools and many leave at 16. This points to the need to build additional links with organisations such as Connexions, youth services and the local colleges.

Throughout the history of the project schools have been very proactive in making referrals and allowing project staff the space to see young people. An evaluation of the service has shown that it has been effective in meeting its objectives. It will continue to develop its work with schools, other agencies and particularly adult treatment services, probation and the youth service.

Q 6: a) Which do you think would be a more effective partnership model?

We agree that more consistent and effective partnership working needs to be encouraged and supported within schools. However, within this there will need to be sufficient flexibility to enable

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fluid partnerships to evolve from existing best practice and be responsive to local needs and circumstances. What needs to be set out is the aims and objectives of partnerships working, the range of agencies that should be involved (including the voluntary sector) and how these arrangements will be supported and monitored – but the make up of the local partnership itself will need to be responsive to local circumstances – for example geography.

Whatever model of partnership working is adopted, this will have implications for funding arrangements. Effective partnership working is not resource neutral and arrangements for pooled budgets will need to be strengthened in support of this. We would like to see the links between the proposed White Paper and the expanded responsibilities proposed for Children's Trusts made explicit.

Action for Children is actively engaged in partnership arrangements with schools. Where this has worked well there has been access to extended and targeted services through cluster arrangements, allowing a greater range of provision and better value for money.

Schools Multi-Agency Resource Team Torfaen (SMARTT)

The Schools Multi-Agency Resource Team Torfaen (SMARTT) is a multi-disciplinary service supported by Cymorth funding and managed by Action for Children in Wales. SMARTT provides assessment and early intervention family support services delivered through schools. It is a pilot project, testing out a model of multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working, which aims to enable key professionals to effectively work together at a preventative lower tier level.

The service works in partnership with schools, children's social services, health and other agencies and organisations to support children and their families jointly and locally. The aim is to reduce the need for a higher tier of specialist intervention later on in their lives, and to improve the life chances of individual children.

SMARTT focuses on the inter-relationship between family and school environments, in recognition of the fundamental importance of these to children's development. The service delivers family support services that are school-based, supporting children aged 3-11 years old and their families. Referrals are accepted from head teachers and all referrals are voluntary. The service is targeted at children who have a level of vulnerability, under-development or challenging behaviour that is of concern, but which is unlikely to have generated any kind of inter-agency support package.

The children may present: disruptive behaviour in school, at home or in the community; poor educational performance and/or inadequate health and social development. Staff address the early onset of difficulties being experienced by referred children and their families in order to stem their escalation. A holistic approach is taken with the aim of resolving problems. The SMARTT service undertakes an initial assessment of the needs of referred children and their families, which includes their views on contributions from other agencies. The service provides a range of interventions as appropriate, including:

- Delivering the Family Links Nurturing Programme (parenting skills) via group work to parents of referred children, or on a one-to-one basis
- Offering practical and emotional support to individual parents
- Tailoring interventions to suit individual children, for example, work might focus on developing anger management skills and self-discipline, boosting confidence and self-esteem, helping a child to develop a clearer understanding of their home circumstances, exploring anxieties and worries. The intervention might also involve reinforcing changes

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being brought about at home by parents developing their own use of positive parenting strategies

- Circle time for children (group work) developing such concepts as friendship circles, a sense of responsibility and citizenship and enhancing social skills, self-esteem, self-discipline and positive relationships
- Staff organising opportunities for parents and children to improve their relationships, and learn and develop new skills by undertaking activities and playing together

Q 6: b) How best can the performance/impact of partnerships of schools and other services be recognised and monitored (paragraphs 3.25-3.34)?

We welcome the development of a new accountability framework based on schools working together to improve outcomes for children and young people. We believe that such a framework is necessary to address the current competition between schools seeking to attract able pupils in order to secure good performance measures.

Current arrangements undermine the collaborative working between clusters of schools, which we believe are necessary to secure an improvement in outcomes for all children and young people (especially the most vulnerable and excluded). Clustering arrangements are also essential to enable third sector involvement, which would not be feasible with individual schools.

Measures of schools performance must be explicitly related to improvements in outcomes for children and young people. Currently there is still too great a focus on process rather than on outcomes.

Action for Children is concerned that the vision for 21st Century Schools appears predicated on a sophisticated level of commissioning for which there is scant evidence at present. Commissioning within schools remains underdeveloped and this will need to improve before the vision in the consultation paper can be achieved.

Emotional wellbeing

When measuring performance against outcomes, it will be essential to measure how schools help children develop emotional wellbeing and support those who particularly need emotional support. Recognising that children's emotional wellbeing is critical to their learning, some schools have set up buddy schemes and circle time and have trained staff to spot potential problems early. Action for Children wants this to be standard practice in all schools.

We understand the problems of identifying effective emotional wellbeing indicators within an educational setting, and with this in mind, below is an extract from an evaluation which looked at the impact of our promotion of emotional wellbeing within three of our specialist schools. The outcomes from the evaluation show that our schools have been successful in improving their pupil's emotional wellbeing.

We have identified the following themes as being essential to success:

- **Self esteem:** a common approach for all the schools is to start by looking at the level of a child's self esteem. There is a clear indication from schools of the value of using reliable baseline information developed with young people themselves and reviewing this information as a young person develops in order to gauge progress or otherwise.
- **Peer relationships:** each school promotes the development of positive peer relationships, for example using an interactive curriculum model which recognises that children have primary, social and interactive needs which all need to be addressed if they

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are to effectively access the academic curriculum. All the schools use assemblies as a public opportunity with their peers to report on and celebrate achievements.

- **Targets and rewards:** each school includes the children in the setting of targets for behaviour and achievement and these targets are included in the child's individual crisis plan or daily living plan.
- **Multi disciplinary approach:** all the schools combine a multi disciplinary staff group working on site. There is a tremendous advantage in being able to access immediately services needed for children on site without having to refer on to outside services with waiting lists. It also means that the additional professionals have a working relationship with the staff or school and a better understanding of the approaches needed to contribute effectively to the children care plans.
- **Healthy lifestyles:** a common theme was the promotion of 'Healthy Schools' covering a range of issues including diet, smoking, exercise, bullying and self care skills.
- **Adult role models/staff groups/communication:** the benefit to the children of having staff available to them in both care and teaching capacities who are consistent and caring probably cannot be underestimated but is undoubtedly the hardest area to measure. All the schools emphasised the need to keep close and good working relationships with the children's parents and carers and also those professionals involved with each child and had systems and staff in place to enable this.

Q 6: c) Other than how we measure performance, what are the key changes that need to be made to drive the development of stronger partnerships (paragraphs 3.25-3.34)?

To realise the vision set out, the right incentives will need to be identified to encourage schools to narrow the gap the gap in attainment. These should include both resources and rewards. Particularly, schools should be rewarded for working in partnership to improve outcomes for all children and young people. Currently rewards appear attainment focused (achieving more A*), a system which can disincentivise working with particularly vulnerable or excluded children and young people. It also undermines the achievements of much specialist provision which cannot aspire to compete within such a rigid performance framework.

Q 9: is there a need for any further guidance that would help create a system for 21st century schools?

We believe that any additional guidance should be focused upon:

- Improving commissioning arrangements. We are aware that draft commissioning guidance for targeted mental health interventions in schools is being drafted, but were concerned to see no reference to this consultation paper or to the proposed White Paper. It will be essential that any additional guidance that is produced can be read against, and be informed by, existing guidance
- Assisting 21st Century Schools to measure the difference they are making in improving outcomes for children and young people in their community.