

- **Providing momentum for change** – Local authorities’ trajectory for commissioning improvement is impacted by the workforce churn amongst commissioners, Commissioning Champions and Directors of Children’s Services. The CSP’s core services are perceived by some Commissioning Champions to equip them with the skills and knowledge to maintain the direction of travel for better commissioning.

The majority of interviews with Directors of Children’s Services and Commissioning Champions highlighted the ongoing complexity of attributing improvements in service delivery to CSP, when there was wider local authority activity also in place.

“CSP has moved us to a point where we can effect real change.”

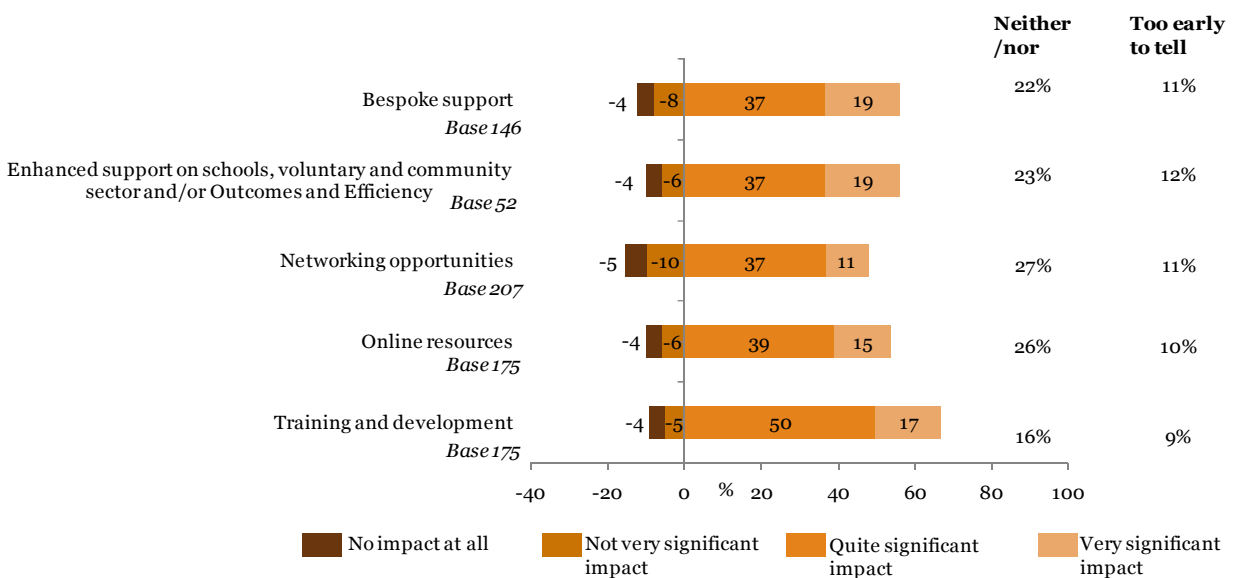
There is a consistent view that the key areas which have the most likely impact on service delivery in Year 2 are training and development and bespoke support.

In Year 1, all respondents found it difficult to identify where CSP has had an impact on service delivery to date. To some extent this was still an issue for Directors of Children’s Services and Commissioning Champions in Year 2 and in fact Directors of Children’s Services (who were more removed from the programme) were more likely to state that they felt that CSP has had a perceived impact on service delivery to date. This may be due to their strategic view of the CSP but it also signals their value of the potential of the CSP.

There were consistent views in Year 1 and Year 2, in relation to CSP activities which would have the most benefit towards service delivery. The top three areas commissioners forecasted in Year 1 as having the most impact in 12 months time were training and development, bespoke support and online resources. Figure 7 shows that these were indeed the services delivering most impact on service delivery to date in Year 2.

Figure 7: Impact of CSP on service delivery to date

How would you describe the likely impact of CSP support on the effectiveness of your commissioning (as an individual) in 12 months time? Please note that respondents were only asked this question in regard to the services they had accessed



Given the wide reach of training and development (63% of commissioners have accessed training and development), and the actual benefit it has had on skills and knowledge (78% stated it has increased their skills and knowledge) it is not surprising that this aspect of CSP is the leading perceived impact on service delivery. Whilst the reach of bespoke support is not as wide as training and development, its role in improving service

delivery has the potential to be far reaching, given the nature of the support and the direct engagement with strategic and operational commissioners.

“[We’ve had] evolving bespoke support, working with the commissioning team to build understanding and awareness, common language and our commissioning framework. More recently have been looking at efficiencies, and building a strategic approach to efficiency such as market testing and broadening the involvement to senior management team. [This has had] resonance around the Council.”

(Commissioning Champion, County/Rural)

CSP’s online resources are one of the most commonly accessed aspects of the programme, 63% of commissioners surveyed had used the website (the same amount as people who had accessed training and development opportunities). Commissioners saw the website primarily as a repository for information. The website may have the potential to support sustainable benefits from the programme by making sure that learning is still available post 31st March 2011.

“Yes the content was pretty good. They felt at first the website was not very good but over time more authorities have joined up and started sharing their materials which has made the website much more valuable.”

(Commissioning Champion, Metropolitan/Urban)

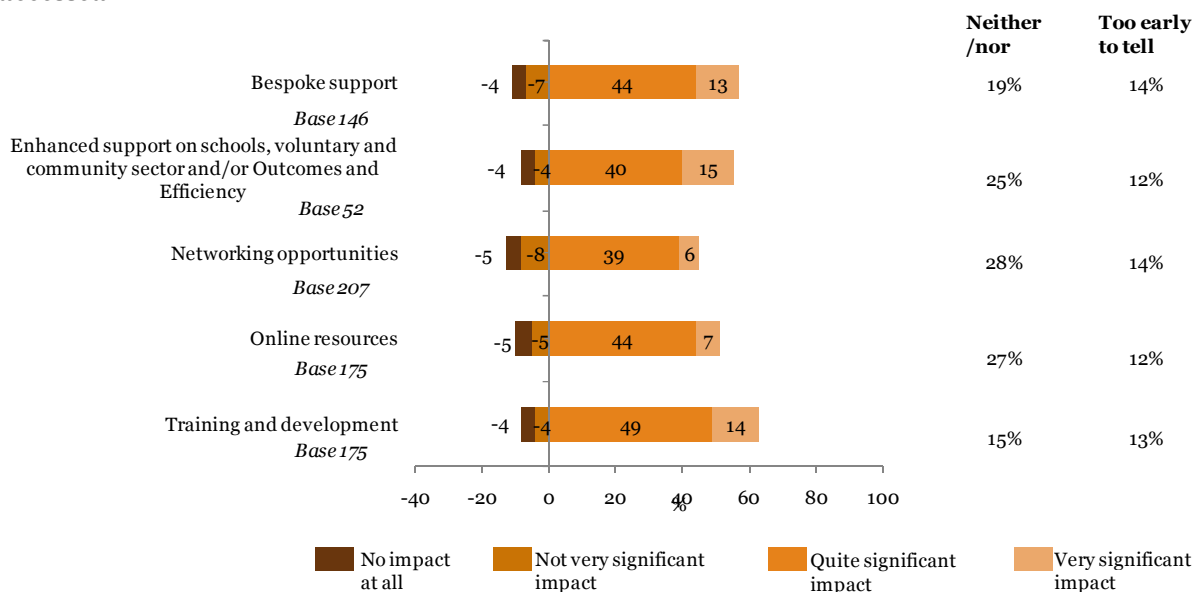
Commissioners were hesitant to forecast the impact of CSP on service delivery in 12 months time, although Figure 8 below indicates that enhanced support may play a greater role in driving this.

Training and development (63%) and bespoke support (57%) remain the main aspects of the programme with the potential to impact on service delivery. Interestingly, those who had accessed enhanced support were hopeful that this too would have an impact on service delivery in the future.

Figure 8: Impact of CSP on service delivery in 12 months time

How would you describe the likely impact of CSP support on service delivery in 12 months time?

Please note that respondents were only asked this question in regard to the services they had accessed



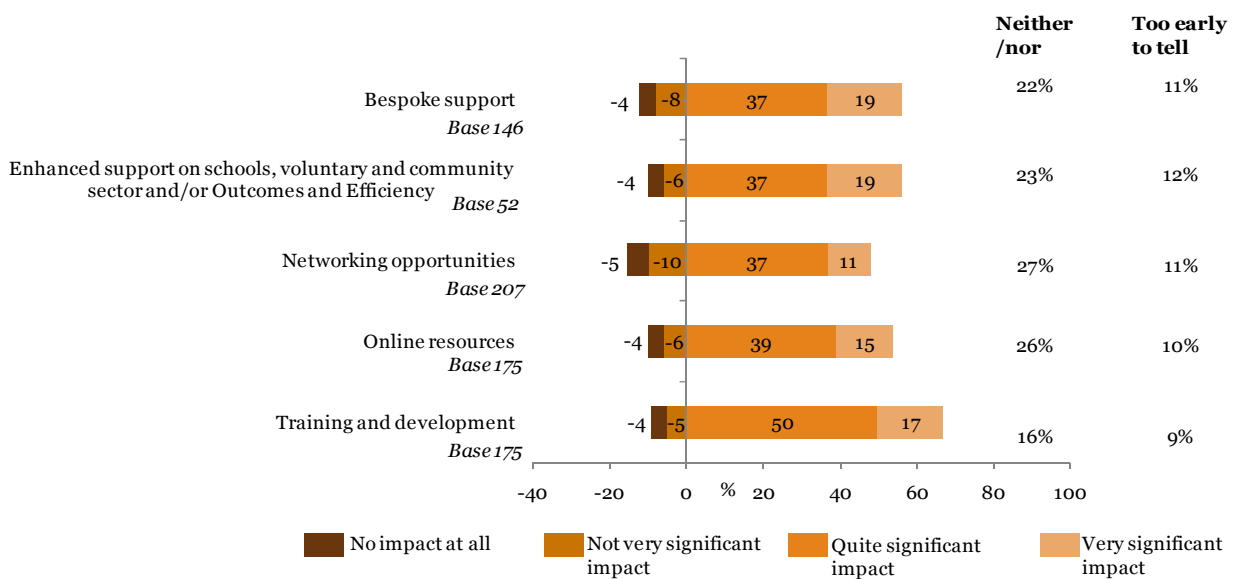
Commissioners are hopeful that training and development will have an ongoing impact on commissioning effectiveness

As described by our change journey framework (see Methodology chapter), improving skills and knowledge is a precursor to impact on service delivery. Overall, as shown in Figure 9, commissioners surveyed in Year 2 were unsure of the impact on commissioning CSP would have in 12 months time.

Overall, half of commissioners surveyed felt that CSP’s impact would be sustainable, and of this the impact of training and development (67%), bespoke support (56%) and enhanced support (56%) are seen as the main activities driving improvements in commissioning.

Figure 9: Perceived impact of CSP on commissioning effectiveness in 12 months time

How would you describe the likely impact of CSP support on the effectiveness of your commissioning (as an individual) in 12 months time?
 Please note that respondents were only asked this question in regard to the services they had accessed



There is a realisation that the degree to which CSP benefits are sustained will be tempered by existing pre-conditions. It was recognised that the financial climate and changes to the commissioning landscape also frustrate improvements to commissioning as a result of CSP.

“Any potential impact is dwarfed by CSR changes.”
 (E survey respondent)

“CSP has put us in the position whereby we can use shared understanding of commissioning to improve services we were not in this place 12 months ago. How we sustain this is to be confirmed.”
 (Commissioning Champion, County/Rural)

Impact on outcomes



This section explores the extent to which local authorities have started to benefit from their engagement with the programme in terms of improved outcomes for children and young people. In Year 1, the majority of Directors of Children’s Services, Commissioning Champions and commissioners said that it was too early to tell. Like impact on services, it was also difficult to isolate the impact of the programme from wider initiatives.

“CSP has laid some foundation, and provided gravitas and timeliness, but is not the sole driver of the change.”
(Directors of Children’s Services, County/Rural)

This section will also explore what conditions enhance a local authority’s readiness for CSP support and whether CSP’s impact to date will be sustainable, so that learnings can be drawn for a sector-led model in the future.

Roughly a third of commissioners believe that CSP has had an impact on outcomes to date, an improvement in expectation since Year 1

A higher proportion of respondents in Year 2 felt able to give an opinion on CSP’s impact on outcomes for children, young people and families, around a third of commissioners felt that CSP has had an impact on outcomes to date, across all core services. This is an increase from Year 1, where less than a quarter of respondents felt that CSP has had an impact on outcomes to date, across all core services.

“Outcomes [in our area] have improved in the last 2 years and the CSP has had a small part of getting the more focused and having more conversations with the people it relates to.”
(Directors of Children’s Services, Metropolitan/Urban)

Figure 10 below shows that respondents are still hesitant in describing what this impact is and what it may be a result of. This may be a realistic reflection of perceived impact in some cases, given that commissioning time frames can be protracted and the CSP has only been in operation for two years.

Figure 10: CSP impact on outcomes for children, young people and families to date

How would you describe the impact of CSP support on outcomes for children, young people and families in your local area to date?

Please note that respondents were only asked this question in regard to the services they had accessed

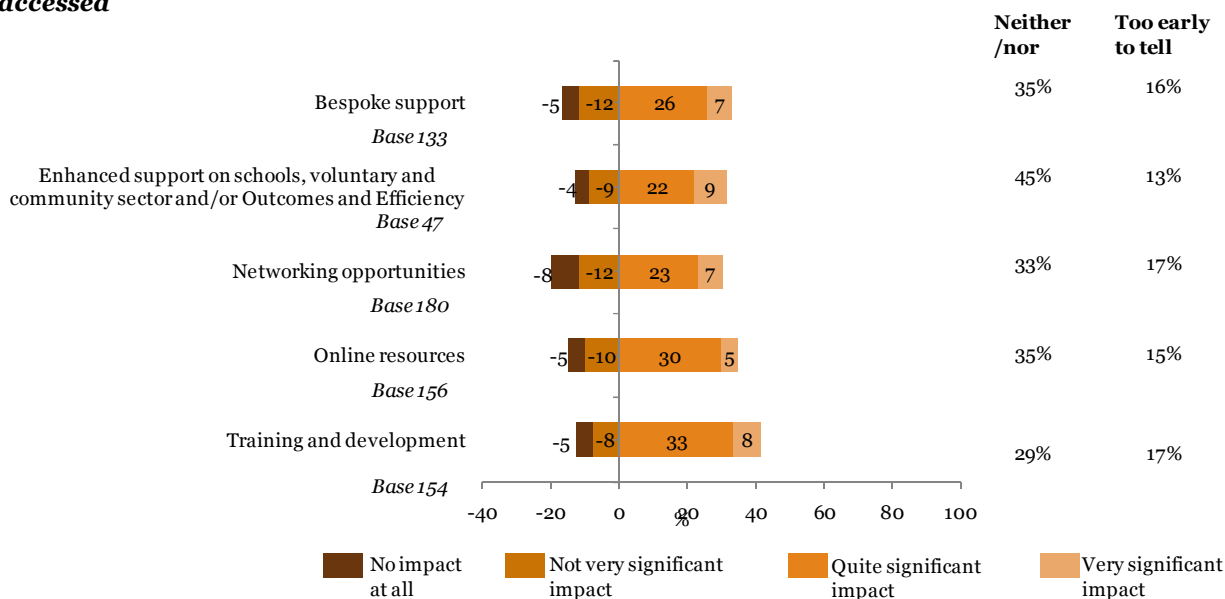


Figure 10 also shows that the three aspects of CSP’s offer believed to have contributed most to outcomes are training and development (41%), online resources (35%) and bespoke support (33%). In contrast, enhanced support, bespoke support and online resources are the three aspects commissioners are least decided upon. This indicates that commissioners have divided views about the potential of bespoke support to improve outcomes for children and young people. Twenty per cent of commissioners perceived networking to have the least impact on outcomes to date (-20%), followed by bespoke support (17%) and online resources (15%).

“[We are] much better at understanding what commissioning means, and what competencies are required and are moving beyond contracting and procurement. [We are] shaping the market, and evaluating impacts [identifying] what skills and knowledge are required.... Not all things have moved because of CSP alone, but it’s definitely been a catalyst.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, Metropolitan/Urban)

“Hard to link the programme to outcomes there have been a huge raft of changes.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, Unitary/Urban)

Training and development and bespoke support are perceived to help improve outcomes in 12 months time

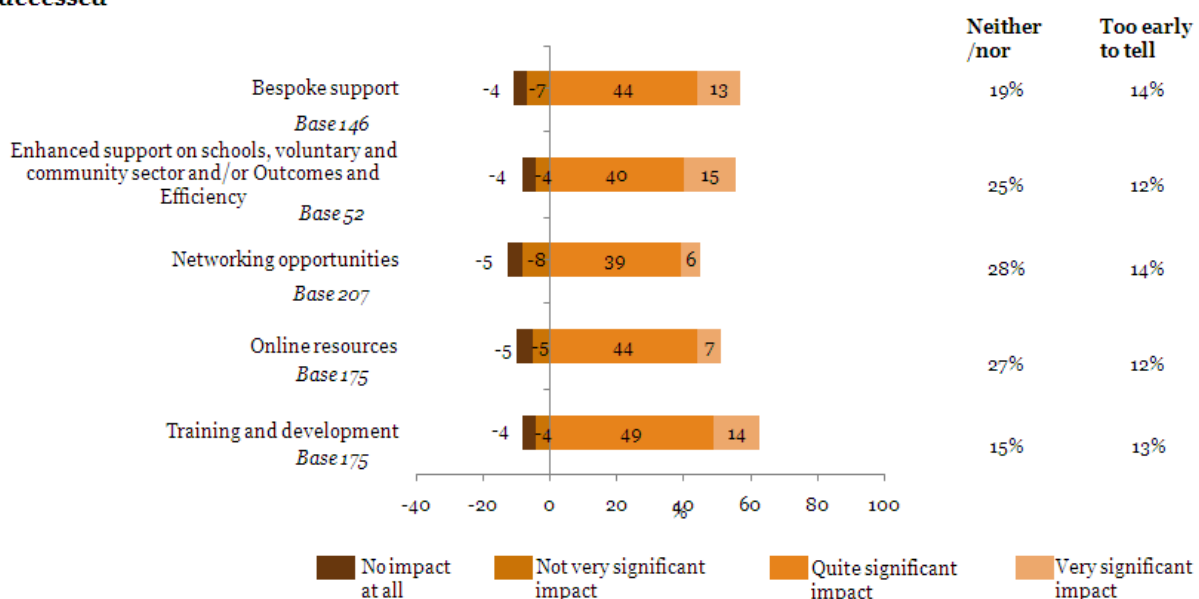
Over half of all commissioners surveyed believed that training and development (57%) and bespoke support (54%) would impact on outcomes in 12 months time (Figure 11). The fact that 19% of respondents were undecided and 14% felt it was too early to tell whether bespoke support would have an impact in 12 months time also reflects the fact that that much of the bespoke support was delivered in the second half of 2010. As mentioned earlier, a range of lead times for making changes to arrangements exist across local areas and this will have an impact on when commissioners are in a position to assess whether there has been an impact on services.

Respondents were less likely to think CSP’s contribution was “neither/nor” and bears out the hypothesis that the benefits of bespoke support are longer term in nature, as well as linked to wider work happening in the authority. Again, networking was perceived to have the least impact on outcomes in the future.

Figure 11: CSP impact on outcomes for children, young people and families in 12 months time.

How would you describe the likely impact of CSP support on service delivery in 12 months time?

Please note that respondents were only asked this question in regard to the services they had accessed



CSP's impact on creating efficiencies to date is varied, but Directors of Children's Services, Commissioning Champions and commissioners were positive that it would have an impact in the future.

The majority of Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions felt that it was too early to comment on whether or not CSP had had an impact on efficiencies to date. A minority (n=5) of Commissioning Champions believed that where this had happened, it was mainly due to its contribution to enhancing skills and knowledge, which have laid a foundation for achievement of potential efficiencies. Any impact here was also qualified as complementary with other efficiency drive efforts.

"[Staff] now have a better understanding of commissioning, better partnerships, moving through the steps of making better outcomes. There will be efficiencies but it is likely to be in a few years time."

(Directors of Children's Services, Unitary/Rural, Medium)

"Hard to track down CSP has dovetailed with our VfM approach. Together, both are demonstrating efficiencies."

(Commissioning Champion, Unitary/Urban)

Commissioning Champions and Directors of Children's Services were more positive about CSP's impact on efficiencies in the future. When asked a number of statements relating to CSP's ability to commission more effectively and efficiently in the future, the results were as follows:

- The majority (n=36) of Commissioning Champions agree or strongly agree with the statement that 'through its impact on commissioning, CSP's package of bespoke support has led, or will lead, to the better use of resources in my local area where it has been deployed.'
- The majority of Directors of Children's Services agree or strongly agree with the statement that "Through its impact on commissioning, CSP support has led, or will lead, to the more efficient use of resources in my local area where it has been deployed."

"CSP probably gave us reassurances that processes can make this possible but cannot say there is tangible evidence. CSP gave good basis to challenging salami slicing probably too early to tell for us if impact here."

(Commissioning Champion, Unitary/Urban)

- The majority (n=35) of Commissioning Champions agree and strongly agree with the statement that "CSP's package of bespoke support has led to more effective commissioning in my Local area where it has been deployed "

Some 59% of commissioners who had accessed training and development and expressed a view, felt that it would help them to generate efficiencies. Some 81% of the commissioners who had accessed bespoke support and expressed a view, felt that it would help them to generate efficiencies.

Commissioning Champions were able to identify conditions that made a local area more likely to benefit from CSP support

In considering the conditions that made it most likely that a local area could benefit from the support offered by CSP, Commissioning Champions and Directors of Children's Services offered a range of views. These views also describe factors which can influence a local area's readiness for improvement. These included:

When local area strategic partnerships are developing their vision and a commissioning approach

Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions recognised that CSP was able to increase understanding at a critical time for them, when the Children's Trust Board was being developed and a clarification of vision and 'levelling of commissioning knowledge' was required across the partnership, before it could confirm its strategic approach and culture. In this sense CSP is buoyed by political drive within a local area. This theme was also present in Year 1 of the evaluation. Looking into the future, this form of support would also be valuable to local authorities when navigating relationships within new commissioning arrangements such as GP led consortia and the revised role of schools' commissioning.

"[CSP] works best if there is a willingness within the NHS to work closer with children's services, and there is a strong sense of partnership. Stable children's services economy helps, ranging from frontline to the leadership team."

(Directors of Children's Services, Metropolitan/Urban)

"CSP came along at the right time for us, however the strong Trust partnership is being 'shaken up' by dissolution of PCT and new role of GP led consortia. This provides a new context to joint commissioning for the local area and CSP tools may be helpful in adapting when forging new relationships with new partners."

(Commissioning Champion, Unitary/Urban)

When the local area is developing joint commissioning arrangements (operational level)

Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions found that bespoke support could provide helpful support on a number of operational issues such as developing section 75 arrangements, joint commissioning frameworks and market development. On an operational level, CSP support was felt to increase a shared understanding of trajectory for improvement but it was recognised that the context required for this to be a success was financial stability and a workforce committed to working in an integrated manner.

"Understanding of commissioning has enabled me to move into the area of pooling resources to meet local needs. Extended use of our school building being a key resource for the local area."

(E survey respondent)

"[As a result of CSP we are] clearer about the outcomes to be achieved, better commissioning in ensuring costs are fully understood and better market management so we are developing services to respond to local needs ensuring we keep children at the heart of the commissioning process."

(E survey respondent)

When there is wider stability within the local area

An important pre-condition which enhanced CSP support within a local authority is stability on a number of levels and includes stability: of local leadership (political and executive); of organisational structures; of workforce; and of finances. Commissioning Champions and Directors of Children's Services who had engaged less with the programme or appeared to have benefited less from their engagement tended to be from authorities who had instability on one or more of the levels mentioned. Currently, many councils are operating in a flux on a number of levels, and any future sector-led model would benefit from recognising that a phased support package may be required, over a longer time window, to enable some local authorities to fully participate and benefit from the support they need.

"LA needs stability. For us timing is not right new structures need to settle in."

(Directors of Children's Services, Metropolitan/Urban)

"Leadership and partnership working all have to be functioning and need to be at a certain level of maturity."

(Commissioning Champion, Unitary/Urban)

Conditions that made it less likely that support from CSP mainly related to:

- A lack of political drive and staff capacity to engage with the programme, both to attend events and to access universally material available on the website; and
- Local authorities being preoccupied with other internal affairs, such as decisions and actions regarding their budget settlement and internal restructures.

For all of the conditions above, there were no trends regarding a particular local authority size, type or performance.

The current environment for local government presents many challenges and opportunities for a programme like the CSP. Local authorities face the pressure to deliver more or better services more efficiently and this is compounded by the re-drawing of local accountability structures around commissioning. Directors of Children’s Services and Commissioning Champions recognised that there were opportunities for the programme if it could translate its offer to help ‘kickstart’ commissioning in a new environment. In some instances, it was reported that the CSP were already meeting this gap.

“CSP is currently delivering a bespoke commissioning skills programme across the council and PCT. This will enable the council to meet the challenge of the current national policy direction with regard to plurality of provision and GP commissioning. There will be greater emphasis on commissioning against outcomes and robust contract and performance management against locally agreed targets and value for money.”

(E survey respondent)

Local areas can benefit from CSP at early levels of commissioning maturity if they are ‘open to learning’

- Whilst CSP’s flexible package of support enabled it to be of benefit to local authorities at all levels of commissioning maturity, some Commissioning Champions felt that CSP appeared to be of most benefit when local authorities were at a relatively earlier stage of the commissioning maturity, as CSP support could help shape and accelerate thinking.

“It’s been most effective with the Joint Commissioning Arrangement. Helped us to think the whole process though and we believe that the support came in at exactly the right time.”

(Commissioning Champion, Metropolitan/Urban)

- Of the 35 Commissioning Champions who could recall their commissioning maturity score at the beginning of their engagement, these tended to be score 1 (n=14) or score 2 (n=17)¹⁰. These are authorities who describe themselves as *having no clear agreement about what is needed to move forward* (score 1) and *agreeing what is needed to move forward and are beginning to move forward* (score 2).

“CSP came at the most effective time for us...we needed to level understanding and culture. I will regret not having the support in next 12mths. It is a shame as LAs role fundamentally changes and the landscape for commissioning changes.”

(Commissioning Champion, County/Rural)

- As a result of CSP engagement, 23 scored themselves at level 3 and 11 at level 4, which describes local authorities who are *making good and very good progress towards meeting the standard*. This also illustrates the fact that the CSP tends to make an impact when local authorities are open to learning and there is commitment to improve. These factors are also interdependent with political drive and stability on a wider local area level.

“[We are a] small unitary authority, co terminus with PCT, forward thinking in approach and style, prepared to try new things, not steeped in bureaucracy, and like to challenge ourselves.”

(Commissioning Champion, Unitary/Urban)

¹⁰ Score 1: We have no clear agreement about what is needed to move forward; Score 2: We do agree what is needed, and have begun to move forward; Score 3: We are making progress towards meeting the standard; Score 4: We are making very good progress towards meeting the standard and; Score 5: The standard is fully achieved across the Children’s Trust

There are mixed views of the sustainability of benefits gained from CSP

The sector was positive about the sustainability of the benefits of the CSP programme in terms of its contribution to increasing the appreciation of the value of effective commissioning as a driver of better outcomes, and the skills to deliver it.

Whilst the majority (n=33) of Commissioning Champions believe that CSP has embedded commissioning skills within the sector in a way that is sustainable in a rapidly changing financial environment, 11 did not have enough evidence to answer this question.

CSP has been valued and used by commissioners, with training and development and bespoke support being the key elements which are enhancing commissioning skills and knowledge. Some 63% of e-survey respondents felt bespoke support has strengthened commissioning processes and 50% felt it has improved partnership arrangements in the local area. These are the types of impacts which make it more likely that the benefits of the change will be sustainable.

In exploring the factors which enable a momentum for self-sustaining commissioning improvements to take place, Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions cited a number of common factors, many of which CSP's programme of support has addressed.

A virtuous circle for self-sustaining improvement is reported to occur when there is:

- **Stable local leadership**

The extent to which there has been churn amongst the Commissioning Champion and Directors of Children's Services population is important context for a local area's cycle for self-sustaining improvement. Since Year 1, there have been 38 new Commissioning Champions and 22 new Directors of Children's Services in post.

"There needs to be Strong Senior leadership from within to be able to dedicate resources to their new plan."

(Commissioning Champion, London/Urban)

"[The] ability to retain skilled staff is the challenge. Commissioning is a central responsibility [in our area it is] embedding not embedded."

(Directors of Children's Services, County/Rural)

- **A clear governance arrangement around commissioning**

A partner-wide and council-wide understanding of roles and responsibilities is vital for improvements in commissioning to take root.

"The voluntary sector have a place on the steering group and the Board of the Children's Trust, influencing allocation of resources and priorities. All senior and middle managers in Children's Services now understand the centrality of commissioning to improvement of services which better meet the needs of children and families."

(E survey respondent)

"We needed to have a Commissioning Champion due to immaturity and inconsistent views about commissioning...[we need] common understanding and skills and can lead the programme. Able to move our fragmentation forward."

(Commissioning Champion, Unitary/Urban)

- **A shared understanding or 'culture' of commissioning amongst partners**

Similar to the above point, this is an important requirement, particularly in local areas where there is less consistency in language and/or understanding of commissioning.

“Engagement with CSP has reached enough of our commissioners from LA, health, and representatives from the third sector this will help sustain CSP legacy.”

(Commissioning Champion, London/Urban)

- **An enhancement of staff commissioning skills and knowledge base, resulting in process improvements**

A workforce which is skilled, knowledgeable and experienced of commissioning theory and practice provides the basis for improved and more efficient ways of commissioning across the council and local area partnerships.

“[We] have come a long way in the last 9 months [we have a] new joint commissioning unit and 575 agreements for the new financial year. The workshops for all Children’s Trust partners created momentum and buy in and...increased drive for improvements...Sustainable as we now know what we need, and how to ask for support from partners.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, County/Rural)

- **Secure financial resources**

The majority of Directors of Children’s Services and Commissioning Champions identified themselves as having improved their commissioning capability as a result of CSP engagement, but were open regarding room for improvement. For example, continuing to invest in workforce development whilst working within reduced budgets was important to maintaining enough skills and knowledge in the commissioning system.

“Budget restrictions makes it difficult [for CSP] to have an impact. Shifts to schools and GP commissioning is not congruent with the CSP programme’s focus on LA commissioning, with partners.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, County/Rural)

- **In house plans to roll out commissioning capabilities are being prioritised**

For example, some Directors of Children’s Services referred to CSP events such as the national ‘Train the Trainer’ conference as a strand of their in-house commissioning capability strategy in the future.

“[We are working on the] development of a training programme, including workforce development around commissioning skills.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, County/Rural)

“[We are] working with a local university to fill skills gaps in senior commissioners embedding as part of sustainability.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, Metropolitan/Urban)

Conclusion

In the final year of the evaluation, there has been clear evidence that the sector (comprising of commissioners, Commissioning Champions and Directors of Children's Services) value the overall CSP offer. As described in this chapter, there have been high levels of usage across all of CSP's core services.

Whilst commissioners have made most use of the CSP's **universal elements** (online resources, networking events and training and development), Commissioning Champions and Directors of Children's Services have reported that **bespoke support** is the element of the CSP that they have found most useful.

Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions have also identified the value of the CSP in bringing people together to share good practice and benchmark, and in being a critical friend and providing bespoke and responsive support.

Commissioners value the opportunities the CSP has provided via **its networking events**, in bringing people together to learn from each other. Over half (55%) of commissioners surveyed believed that the networking events had helped them to commission services more effectively. **Enhanced support**, being the more recent part of the CSP's offer, was the least accessed service, but those who have accessed it spoke positively, with some commissioners feeling it will play a greater role in 12 months time.

The **CSP local lead role is viewed positively**, with respondents more readily sighted on the CSP local lead compared with the CSP regional lead. There are mixed views in relation to the value the local lead provides, compared with a traditional field force. Commissioning Champions are the primary link with CSP local leads and over half of Commissioning Champions interviewed who held a view, perceived CSP local leads to provide more value than a traditional field force. A key benefit over a traditional field force is their independence and ability to start from the local authority's agenda.

The Commissioning Champion role was generally viewed positively, particularly as a point of contact with the programme which enabled real engagement between the local area and the programme. An additional benefit was cited as helping to raise the profile of commissioning within the local area. There was uncertainty whether the role would continue in the future as commissioning became more mainstreamed within teams and given the new financial climate.

The CSP support was reported to have improved the **skills and knowledge of staff**. Around three quarters of commissioners believed that the CSP's bespoke support and training and development services had improved their skills and knowledge. The Resources Bank on the CSP website is also seen as providing a valuable body of sector knowledge that is relevant to commissioners. Over half (52%) of commissioners stated that it had helped them to commission more effectively. In contrast, the community area has not been reported as being widely used.

The CSP was reported to have had an **impact on service delivery**. Half of the commissioners and Commissioning Champions we spoke to felt that the CSP has had an impact on service delivery to date. This was also reported to be due to training and development and bespoke support.

Roughly a third of commissioners perceive that the CSP has had an **impact on outcomes**, which is an increase from Year 1, where less than a quarter of commissioners perceived this to be true. Training and development is felt to have played the greatest part in this to date. Respondents felt that bespoke support was more likely to have an impact on improving outcomes over the next 12 months time.

The CSP's reported impact on creating efficiencies to date is varied, but Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions had a more positive view about the CSP's likely future impact on efficiencies and the majority of commissioners believed that that bespoke support and training will help generate efficiencies in 12 months time.

The sector was positive about the sustainability of the benefits of the CSP programme in terms of its contribution to increasing the appreciation of the value of effective commissioning as a driver of better

outcomes, and the skills to deliver it. There were however concerns about the continuation of the benefits given the new financial climate.

A number of factors were identified as defining the point at which effective commissioning becomes self sustaining. These were: a stable local leadership; a clear governance arrangements around commissioning; a shared understanding or 'culture' of commissioning amongst partners; an enhancement of staff commissioning skills and knowledge base; a secure financial base; and a set of in house plans to ensure commissioning capabilities are being prioritised.

*Conditions which enable a
sector-led model to develop*

Conditions which enable a sector-led model to develop

Introduction

This final section discusses some of the broader issues that arise from our evaluation and could inform the ongoing development of a sector-led model for improvement.

We begin by outlining the conditions which enable a sector-led model to be effective, including the factors enhancing an area's readiness for improvement and the conditions in a local authority that make it more or less likely that the support will have an impact. The focus here is on our general findings, with examples that are specific to the two programmes set out in more detail in the earlier sections of the report.

We then draw together some generic issues from both programmes on what the sector has valued and where the most benefit was gained. We conclude by summarising the priority areas for improvement identified by Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions and where further improvement support might be welcomed.

Factors which influence an area's readiness for improvement

We asked Director's of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions which factors needed to be in place to trigger or enhance an area's readiness for improvement. Interviewees reported a range of views and perceptions in relation to this question. Those raised most consistently were:

- The importance of strong leadership;
- Effective partnership working;
- Clarity and direction regarding the national policy agenda;
- Having sufficient resources;
- Clarity about performance and strengths;
- Having access to research and evidence; and
- External challenge and support.

We consider each in turn below.

Strong leadership and political drive is needed to enable improvement

Strong leadership was described by many (n=24) as an essential factor to enhance an area's readiness for improvement. Respondents said that without strong leadership, there was less likely to be clarity about the local area's vision, priorities and objectives. In turn, without senior sponsorship, it could be difficult to dedicate resources to plan and execute plans for improvement.

"You are always working in a political context – sheer fact that CSP existed and CC role being present is an example of this. DCS endorsement has been key."

(Commissioning Champion, Unitary/Rural)

"Leadership is the key, if an organisation is in turmoil it is very difficult to engage in improvement support, or for there to be clarity about local objectives and priorities."

(Directors of Children's Services, Metropolitan/Urban)

Effective partnership working can be a driver for improvement

Seventeen local authorities reported that effective partnership working is critical in influencing a local area's readiness for improvement. A clear approach to integration and partnership working at a local level was reported as a fundamental driver for improvement.

Effective partnership working was described as having integrity and honesty and supporting a culture of openness. In a practical sense it also needs to have partners that are genuinely engaged in and accountable for the support for children, young people, families and carers.

A number of local authorities specifically referenced the need to engage with schools as partners. In addition to local partnerships, there was also recognition of the value regional work can play in readying an area for improvement.

"You have to have the partners in place who are open to it. There needs to be a commitment at the top of the LA to push it forward"

(Commissioning Champion, Unitary/Urban)

"We need schools to engage with [the local authority] more. We find that few schools have a "wider moral purpose" beyond 'my school, my kids', rather than our approach of 'our kids, our schools, our community."

(Directors of Children's Services, Unitary/Rural)

"Those local authorities with strong regional and sub regional links in which service improvement as an acknowledged part of the agenda are more ready to seek external support and more likely to know what change will look like. Any external support should be linked with this type of regional link up."

(Directors of Children's Services, County/Rural)

Clarity and direction regarding the national policy agenda

A number of Directors of Children's Services (n=5) said that it was important that they had clarity about the direction and priorities of the national policy agenda. Understandably, the change in national government has created changes in children's services policy, and the sector is getting to grips with the changes and how policy will translate into practice.

Our interviews identified a degree of anxiety about how to continue to provide quality services that meet local needs that are in line with the new and emerging national requirements. This view was held by local authorities generally but it was expressed most acutely by authorities with lower performance ratings. There was a feeling that, without clear guidance, these authorities might continue to struggle in the future and could potentially be left behind.

The sector would also welcome greater links between key government departments, in particular the Department of Health and the Department for Education, to enable local authorities to strengthen their local area agendas and action plans.

"National Policy Agendas need to be in place as they are a massive driver in getting authorities to push forward."

(Directors of Children's Services, Metropolitan/Urban)

"We need stability within the national children's agenda. Currently the agenda is on shifting sands, which creates opportunities but is also de stabilising to the sector. There is an anxiety that the baby will be thrown out with the bath water."

(Directors of Children's Services, County/Rural)

Local Authorities need to have resources available to them to improve

Local authorities consistently reported that they needed a degree of capacity and resources to be able to plan and implement improvement strategies.

In the current context when all public bodies are tackling challenging decisions around budget cuts and workforce reductions, local authorities reported that it was difficult to identify resources to support making improvements to services. Some felt that this could result in progress on the improvement agenda being halted or lead to it going backwards.

“The current financial context and policy shift will stop the current direction of travel as a lot of people who have been up skilled or benefitted from CSP, may be made redundant and it will be a loss of skills, which need to be replaced. Commissioning workforce who will be left?”

(Commissioning Champion, Unitary/Urban)

External support and challenge

The factor cited most frequently by Directors of Children’s Services (n = 10) was the value of external support and challenge. The key factor mentioned here was that the support had greatest value when it was not provided as part of a performance monitoring process. Local authorities reported feeling able to be more open about the issues that they wished to resolve, as well as more likely to address them earlier.

A number of local authorities described external challenge as a catalyst for change which was helpful in planning for the future. The majority of local authorities that said that they valued external support and challenge had a performance rating of 3 (performs well).

Local authorities also acknowledged the value in being able to compare themselves with others. There was support for self assessment and peer evaluation models, but as part of a wider performance review and challenge process rather than as the sole mechanism for assessing performance. There were no consistent views from the sector as to how inspection and monitoring should be structured in future.

“It can be challenging to break through the mentality that things are okay. External judgement that improvements are needed jolt everyone is recognising when things aren’t working.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, Unitary/Urban)

“There is a temptation for all of us that with the relaxed regulation it becomes easier to potentially take our eye off the ball, and not be as rigorous with our assessment as we once were.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, Unitary/Rural)

“The children’s services sector, with all its diversity, needs to create the external challenge and support rather than it being set by central government. The peer challenge and support build into the C4EO model is a good example. Inspection and improvement is seen as linked by the government, but it should be two separate areas, and we shouldn’t structurally join the two.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, Metropolitan/Urban)

“Peer review and peer conversations can feel more comfortable for local authorities, but external support can provide the catalyst for change (but as long as it isn’t there to monitor or report.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, County/Rural)

Clarity about performance and strengths

Directors of Children’s Services in particular recognised the importance of the local area having a solid understanding of its own performance and strengths. Local authorities were perceived as being more likely to be able improve their services if they took responsibility for investing in self-assessment on an ongoing basis.

A number of mechanisms for carrying out self-assessment were cited, including the use of peer review to provide an external perspective.

“There needs to be honest self assessment and appraisal, at the moment we discover a LA is in trouble when Ofsted tells us, or when something terrible happens. Sector led model needs to tackle this at earlier stage. A move to sector led model needs LA ‘to own’ self awareness.”

(Directors of Children’s Services, Unitary/Rural)

“This is a critical piece there needs to be honest self assessment and appraisal, at the moment we discover a LA is in trouble when Ofsted tells us, or when something terrible happens. Sector led model needs to tackle this at earlier stage. A move to sector led model needs LA ‘to own self awareness”

(Directors of Children’s Services, Unitary/Rural)

Having access to research and evidence (e.g. benchmarking) to inform effective decision making

Directors of Children’s Services (n =15) stressed the importance of having access to good quality research and evidence to inform effective decision making. A key aspect of this was benchmarking data to enable them to compare their own performance and outcomes against other local authorities. Sharing evidence of best practice to support self assessment and self improvement was also seen as important.

Having access to examples of good practice was seen as a critical way of supporting poorly performing local authorities. More generally local authorities said that having access to more material describing successful collaborative working with partners and other local authorities (particularly multi-agency examples) would help to support improvement.

“Fundamentally, most important is that local areas have a strong performance culture. We need access to data this is not the be all and end all, but we need national comparative data that is delivered in a timely fashion and is non judgemental. We also need access to good material re practice and standards. There is no value created for local areas from field forces on tick box issues. We want access to a good quality, insightful government officer with a good knowledge of our local authority and what's going on nationally. It's challenging though!”

(Directors of Children’s Services, County/Rural)

Local conditions which may enhance impact from support.

We also explored with local authorities the local conditions that enhanced the impact of what was achieved from the support they received. The conditions which were identified as being specific to the programmes evaluated are set out in the CSP and C4EO sections earlier in the report. Here we comment on three local conditions which were common to both programmes. These were:

- ***The LA needs to be outward facing and ready to access support:*** It was put to us that a local authority that is outward facing is more likely to have an understanding of how its performance stacks up compared to others. It is also more likely to be interested in understanding what good practice looks like from elsewhere and to engage with support programmes that help it replicate good practice and improved performance.
- ***There is capacity within the local authority to draw down the support:*** A number of local authorities reported that they would have made more or earlier use of both programmes if they had had greater

capacity within their authority to engage with the products and services. This may become a more significant issue in the future as local authorities face greater constraints on their capacity across all services.

- *There is sufficient stability in the local area to make use of support:* Respondents reported that where local authorities experienced significant turbulence, less use was made of available support. This turbulence could be as a result of factors within the local authority, such as departmental or authority-wide reorganisations and local political changes, or they could result from changes in partner organisations.

Core features of improvement support valued by the sector

This section summarises some of the general features of improvement support initiatives that have been most valued by the sector and which are considered to have resulted in greater use of the support by the sector.

Closeness to users

One of the greatest strengths a sector-led model can have is closeness to its users. A sector-led model needs to utilise this closeness to develop the programme of support. This could be via consultation with the sector on themes felt to be critical to the sector at the time, or it could be through use the results of a local area's self assessment activities to identify packages of bespoke support at a local or regional level. Both the CSP and the C4EO have used a mixture of these methods. The greatest benefit from external support is likely to happen when the programme of support closely mirrors, and is co-created in response to, the challenges the sector faces.

A delivery model which can respond to a range of needs

Both programmes have provided products and services that the sector was able to 'dip into' at a time that suited local needs and priorities. In addition, the range of support offered by both programmes increased over time in response to the expressed demand of users and was offered in a way that allowed different users to select different types of support and different ways of receiving it.

A single point of contact for the programme at a local level can help to build awareness and credibility for the support with the local area over an extended period of time. Respondents in Year 1 and Year 2 of the evaluation valued and spoke positively about having this type of relationship.

Benefits and issues of using current practitioners to deliver tailored support.

Both programmes offered a tailored or bespoke support programme element and this was highly valued by users. For example, the sector placed particular value on the fact that the C4EO sector specialists are serving practitioners. The recruitment, accreditation and training of this pool of practitioners has been important to not only encourage a pipeline of people able to perform this role but also to gain the confidence of the sector of the quality and credibility of the support.

The decision to use existing practitioners to deliver support also comes with a number of issues. A consistent concern was the extent to which there was sufficient existing capacity within the sector to support it, particularly in the current financial climate.

Significant value of having a reliable evidence base on which to make decisions

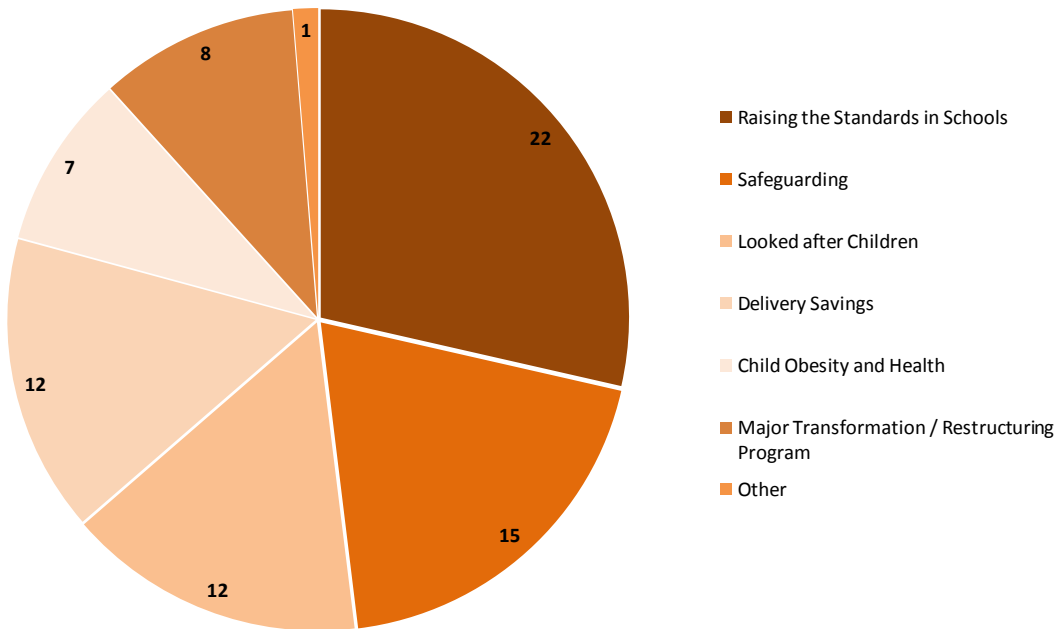
All respondents valued the increased research and evidence base that both programmes brought to the sector. The sector has valued the accessibility of the research and the development of validated examples of best practice and emerging ideas to address the challenges it faces. There is a continuing appetite to find out, "what works", both within the UK context and drawing on international experience.

Priorities for improvement

The evaluation asked Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions what priorities for improvement their local areas had and what strategies they plan to adopt to meet these priorities.

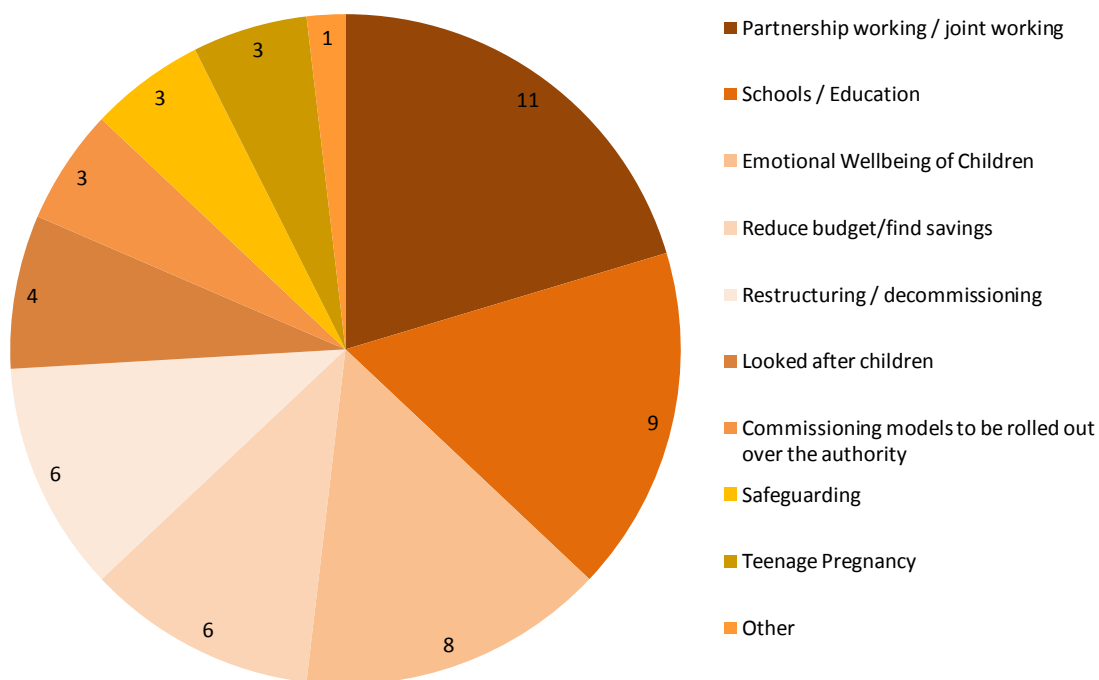
Director of Children’s Service reported that their top 4 priorities were: to raise standards in schools (21 of 47); improve safeguarding (14 of 47); improve services for looked after children (12 of 47) and; deliver savings without harming frontline services (11 of 47). This is shown diagrammatically in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Priorities for improvement, Directors of Children’s Services



In contrast, the Commissioning Champions gave a slightly wider range of priorities for the coming year. Their top 4 priorities were: partnership and joint working (11 of 53); schools/education (9 of 53); emotional well being of children (8 of 53) and; creating efficiencies/savings (6 of 53). The full spectrum is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Priorities for improvement, Commissioning Champions



This section presents the more commonly cited priorities for improvement and the types of issues that were associated with these priorities. The majority of authorities reported that their priorities have changed in the past 12 months due to the financial challenges. Many reported the increased difficulties they face but some reported an upside to this, noting that they now have greater focus on their priorities than previously. Unless otherwise stated these priorities were raised by all types of local authorities (regardless of performance rating, size or type).

Raising standards in schools is the main priority

Local authorities identified raising standards in schools as a top priority. This issue was raised by 21 Directors of Children's Services and a further nine Commissioning Champions.

Local authorities identified a number of areas where they were planning to make progress and where improvement support might be welcomed. These included:

- considering how best to structure, resource and deliver the services currently provided to schools in the context of significant reductions in funding and new government policies that alter the responsibilities of schools and local authorities;
- investing in building stronger relationships with schools; and
- developing new joint commissioning arrangements with schools.

Improve safeguarding

Child protection and safeguarding was reported as a priority, with it being most commonly cited by Directors of Children's Services of medium and large sized authorities. All Directors recognised that it will continue to be a core, statutory function for the local authority regardless of the future design or commissioning of other children's services, and that local authorities must demonstrate robust performance in this area. They were also mindful of increasing media and political interest and ongoing scrutiny of processes such as serious case reviews.

Local authorities identified a number of areas where they were planning to make progress and where improvement support might be welcomed. These included:

- developing new local area policies, including revised threshold levels for access to services;
- supporting strategic partnership working, including safeguarding boards and multi-agency public protection arrangements; and
- understanding the impact safeguarding contacts and referrals have on the system as a whole, including planning and delivery of services for vulnerable and Looked After Children.

Looked After Children

Directors of Children's Services who made Looked After Children a priority tended to come from either small or large local authorities. In addition, four Commissioning Champions identified this as a priority, two of which were from small local authorities. Over half of all local authorities that reported this as a priority were 'performing well'.

Directors of Children's Services who prioritised this area also commented on the impact of funding cuts, with many local authorities reviewing the provision of placements to achieve efficiencies while still meeting needs. There was also awareness of the continuing high level of scrutiny on outcomes in this area, and the key role that provision for this group can make to narrowing the gap in outcomes.

Local authorities identified a number of areas where they were planning to make progress and where improvement support might be welcomed. These included:

- driving down the costs of commissioned services, particularly placements costs and transport;
- achieving more joined up services, particularly in connection with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and wider health services;
- considering ways to raise the educational achievement and aspirations of children in care; and
- better managing the transition to adult services and leaving care.

Delivering high quality services whilst finding savings

The need to deliver high quality services whilst driving down costs cut across all the priority areas raised by Directors of Children's Services, and was cited as the main priority by many. Some 60% of local authorities that reported this as a priority had a performance rating of 3 (performs well) .

Local authorities identified a number of areas where they were planning to make progress in this area and where improvement support might be welcomed. These included:

- targeting services carefully to make efficiencies without damaging outcomes;
- better aligning corporate teams and the resources available to them collectively so that best value is obtained; and
- prioritising services around families and the services that they receive and value from the local authority.

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