

CAMHS suffer from performance focus

By Helen Gilbert
Children & Young People Now
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Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are in danger of being performance managed into the ground, sector experts have warned.

The warning follows the publication of the interim report by the government's CAMHS review. The report, *Improving the Mental Health and Psychological Well-being of Children and Young People*, revealed current performance indicators for the service focused too much on processes and not outcomes.

The report, based on more than 400 responses from mental health professionals, social workers, teachers, parents, children and young people, also found that "significant emphasis is still placed on a performance regime".

It described the four CAMHS proxy indicators (see box) as necessary and said they had led to some improvement. But the report said the reality is that outcomes and evidence-based approaches have "less focus within individual services or across the system as a whole".

Jo Davidson, chair of the review and group director of children and young people's services at Gloucestershire County Council, said performance management based on process indicators can only go so far. "It doesn't give you any indication about the quality, what people are getting and what difference it's making," she said.

"There's a lot of innovation happening where people are listening carefully to children, young people and their families about what would work for them and altering the service to meet that. If you have rigid performance management you can sometimes squeeze out innovation. There has to be arrangements that don't stifle it and we have to find out what works best."

Stella Charman, director of CAMHS Consultants, said a constructive and non-punitive approach should be adopted. "Setting targets and penalising people for not making them is not necessarily the right way forward," she said. "It needs to be a more constructive and developmental approach."

Elsewhere, the report flagged up a lack of leadership and effective joint working and said the responsibilities of the Department of Health and Department for Children, Schools and Families needed clarifying. The review's final report is due to be published in October.

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PROXY INDICATORS FOR EFFECTIVE CAMHS

- A full range of CAMHS for children and young people with learning disabilities commissioned for the council area
- 16- and 17-year-olds from the council area with mental health needs to have access to appropriate services
- Arrangements in place to ensure that 24-hour cover is available to meet urgent mental health needs and for a specialist mental health assessment to be undertaken within 24 hours or the next working day
- Protocols are in place for partnership working between agencies for children and young people with complex, persistent and severe needs.