Improving children's services

The LGA annual conference 2017

Birmingham, 5 July 2017

Research carried out by **Isos Partnership**

Commissioned by the **Local Government Association**

About our work with the LGA

The context

The improvement challenge for local children's services and the need for system-wide improvement – 20-25% of judged inadequate, c.50% judged to require improvement, 20-25% judged good or better.

Our LGA research

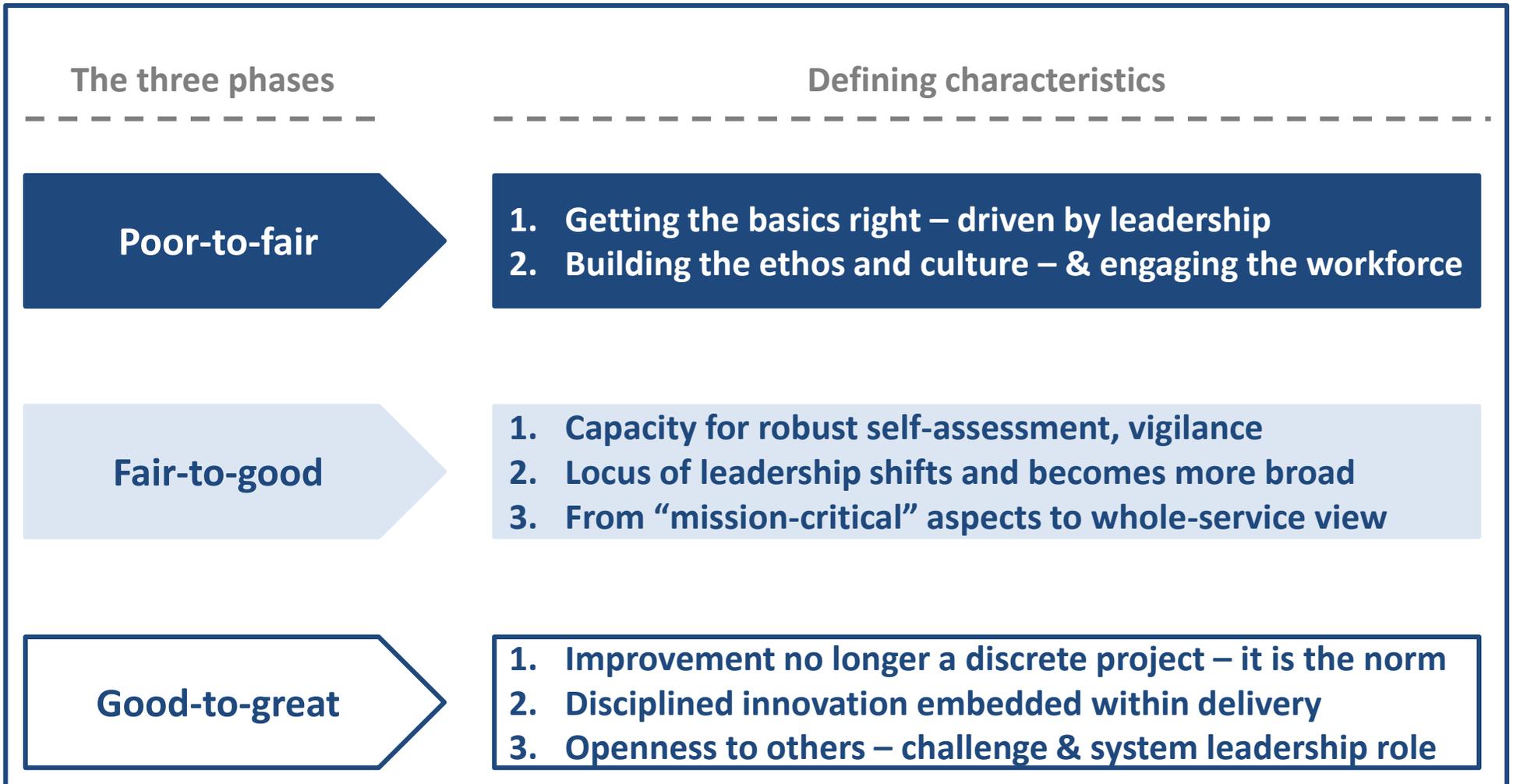**Two research projects, focusing on two key questions.**

1. What are the enablers of (and barriers to) improvement for local children's services?
2. How can the system as a whole support and facilitate improvement across local children's services?

The local areas with whom we have worked

63 local areas have been directly involved in this research – with elected members, senior officers, partners and staff sharing experiences of their improvement journeys.

Our findings: Phases of the improvement journey

The three phases	Defining characteristics
Poor-to-fair	1. Getting the basics right – driven by leadership 2. Building the ethos and culture – & engaging the workforce
Fair-to-good	1. Capacity for robust self-assessment, vigilance 2. Locus of leadership shifts and becomes more broad 3. From "mission-critical" aspects to whole-service view
Good-to-great	1. Improvement no longer a discrete project – it is the norm 2. Disciplined innovation embedded within delivery 3. Openness to others – challenge & system leadership role

Two years from the frank recognition and acceptance of the service's weaknesses to running a safe, effective core service

Three years to develop a safe, effective core service into a consistently high-quality, innovative service

Poor-to-fair	Fair-to-good	Good-to-great

4-6 months thorough process to diagnose extent of weakness & develop robust plan

6 months strengthen core systems, clear backlogs, secure thresholds, "stabilise" the service

1 year focus on iterative implementation, quality assurance & problem-solving

Pursuit of quality in practice

Normalising improvement routines

Disciplined innovation

System leadership

All the while engaging the workforce and working with partners

1 Our findings: Seven enablers of improvement

1 Strategic approach
- Rigorous and forensic self-assessment
- Honest and open response to any external feedback or inspections
- Develop a vision & strategic plan that is right for the organisation

2 Leadership & governance
- Maintain the right, stable, focused leadership at all levels
- Don't rush into a restructure
- Effective, professional governance

3 Engaging & supporting the workforce
- Change the rhetoric, avoid the "blame game"
- Articulate high expectations & ambitious goals
- Stabilise the workforce and develop staff from within

4 Engaging partners
- Engage senior partners – create a mandate to collaborate
- Align thresholds to ensure consistent decision-making
- Review practices through multi-agency audits, and remain outward-facing

5 Building the supporting apparatus
- Maintain a secure front door
- Ensure the flow of cases reflects a child's journey
- Know the business and develop routines to track progress, the child's voice

6 Fostering innovation
- Create a learning culture, open to new ideas and innovation
- Test and pilot new ideas carefully – based on what works
- Evaluate rigorously – to learn from and respond to innovative practice

7 Judicious use of resources
- Ensure strategic & financial planning are aligned, in the short & long term
- Invest where it is needed to solve short-term challenges
- Sustain investment in long-term priorities

Support for improvement: Key messages

The role of improvement support

… to _facilitate_ and _enable_ improvement …

- To help leaders, staff, partners put in place the conditions for long-term, sustained improvement
- Not to substitute for leadership and day-to-day practice of improvement

Three characteristics of effective improvement support

1. **Demonstrate credibility** – to diagnose, advise, engage
2. **Enhance capacity** – for improvement to take place
3. **Not treat children's services in isolation** – recognise links with political, corporate and partnership areas

Three broad forms of improvement support

1. **Sector-led improvement**
2. **External scrutiny & formal intervention**
3. **Alternative delivery models**

… there is no panacea – each has its own potential benefits, success factors, and conditions to be considered

A framework for considering the three forms of children's services improvement support

Type of support	Potential benefits	Key success factors	Circumstances when it is likely to be effective
Sector-led improvement	**Builds capacity** – working alongside those who have done the job. **Rigorous and developmental** – challenging, but can create space for improvement, less high-stakes. **Helps to avoid insularity** – avoid the risk of "believing your own narrative".	**Rigour** – whether formal (rigorous challenge) or informal (project focus). **Quality and credibility** – must bring practical expertise, gain trust. **Flexible and tailored** – must be grounded in context of that local area, at the right time and with right people.	**Start of an improvement journey** – to give (new) leaders a baseline. **During the journey** (perhaps between inspections) – to test, are we on track? **To draw on additional expertise or capacity** – in a specific area of practice.
External scrutiny and formal intervention	**Creates robust governance** – brings focus, shapes improvement journey. **Brings partners together** – creates impetus and can facilitate partnership. **Mediates between key players** – "honest broker" between national and local partners.	**Independence** – of the person / body providing external scrutiny. **Strategic focus** – if not, can become bogged down, critical and defensive. **Triangulation** – able to triangulate reports with evidence from frontline. … and the **basics of good governance**.	Where there is **the right children's services leadership capacity**, but one of two things may be missing: 1. **"grip" on one key area of practice** – "taken their eye off the ball"; or 2. **effective governance** – political, corporate and/or partnership.
Alternative delivery models	**Fresh start, re-focus improvement journey** – getting to good, not running away from inadequate. Able to stabilise leadership, workforce. **Speed and focus** – of decision-making, sole focus on creating environment conducive to strong children's services.	**Informed design** – clear aims about how this will support improvement. **Clarity about relationships with council and partners** – governance, services. **All other enablers of improvement** – an alternative model can enable, but will not on its own drive, improvement.	Where **issues are systemic, deep-rooted and/or persistent** … … and where **leadership "grip" is lacking in three areas** – capacity to: 1. diagnose weaknesses accurately; 2. develop a strategy to address; and 3. implement the strategy effectively.

What are the implications for councils?

Local implications

Putting in place conditions for sustained improvement …

- **Robust self-assessment** – knowing the "health" of local children's services

- **Robust strategic priorities** – with partners and staff, shaping the actions that will drive improvement

- **Conditions and capacity to deliver** – resources, workforce, governance, partnerships

System-level implications

Helping to sustain improvement across the system …

- **Selecting the right form of improvement support** – at the right time, maximising its value

- **Engagement with the system** – open to opportunities to work with and receive challenge from peers

- **"Tough conversations"** – challenging where there are risks of serious decline before crisis-point is reached

… underpinned and informed by the evidence on what works to drive and sustain improvement

To find out more …

www.local.gov.uk/action-research-improvement-local-childrens-services

www.isospartnership.com/publications
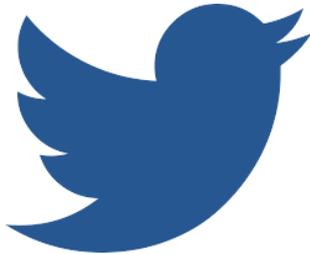
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