



# **ACTION RESEARCH INTO IMPROVEMENT IN LOCAL CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

**Summary from regional workshops**

**Ben Bryant and Simon Rea**  
Isos Partnership



# LGA CHILDREN'S SERVICES REGIONAL WORKSHOPS ON IMPROVEMENT IN LOCAL CHILDREN'S SERVICES

**Birmingham, London, Manchester and Taunton – October / November 2016**

## **Introduction**

This summary report contains the key messages from four regional workshops commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) during October and November 2016. It explains the purpose of the workshops, the main issues that were discussed and debated, and some conclusions.

Isos Partnership ([www.isospartnership.com](http://www.isospartnership.com)) were delighted to be commissioned by the LGA to undertake this research project and run the workshops, and we were grateful for the colleagues from local authorities who attended. We were particularly grateful for those four senior officers who introduced each of the workshops for us: Julia Hassall (DCS, Wirral); Marion Ingram (Operations Director, Hertfordshire); Tony Oakman (Strategic Director, People, Dudley); Julian Wooster (DCS, Somerset).

## **Isos/LGA action research project and report on improvement in local children's services**

The purpose of this research project was to understand how best to enable and support improvement in local children's services by seeking answers to two central questions:

- a. What are the key enablers of (and barriers to) improvement in local children's services?
- b. How can the system as a whole facilitate and support improvement in local children's services?

Isos Partnership worked with 17 local areas in undertaking the action research, including in-depth engagements with nine that were at different points on their improvement journeys. The research report was published by the LGA in June 2016 and can be found [here](#), and the practical summary for lead members and senior leaders is available [here](#).

## **Purpose of the four regional workshops**

During the autumn, the LGA commissioned Isos Partnership to facilitate four regional workshops (in Birmingham, London, Manchester and Taunton) to which political leaders and senior officers were invited. The purpose of the workshops were to:

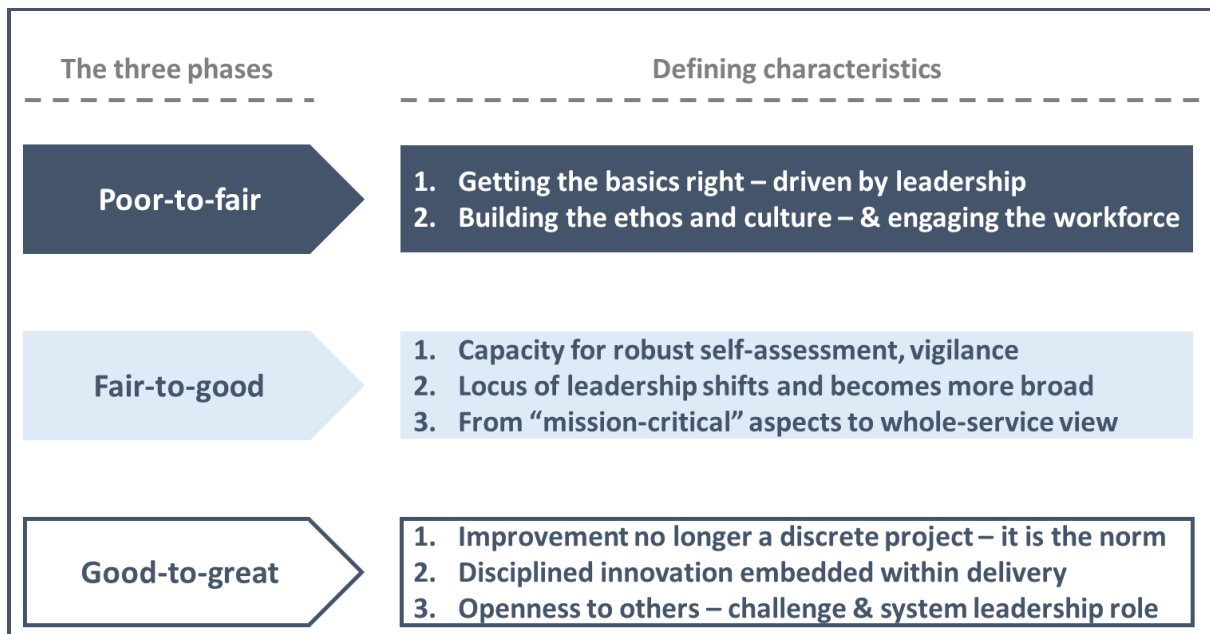
- share the learning from Isos' research and enable local areas to explore and discuss themes and messages from the report that were relevant to their circumstances;
- create opportunities for local areas to share their priorities and learning with their peers, and enable dialogue about the opportunities for improvement; and

- create networks of improvement across each region based around common challenges that might be sustained after the workshop.

### 1. Children’s services improvement journeys – how did the journeys of the participating LAs compare with the Isos research?

The workshops were an opportunity to hear the key messages from the Isos research, explore the issues raised in more depth, and also compare the improvement journeys of participating children’s services with the framework in the Isos report. Colleagues that attended recognised the different stages of the improvement journey that were set out in the report (and included in the graphic below) and agreed with the different characteristics at each stage – “it resonates hugely!” said one senior leader. Some colleagues had used the framework to benchmark where they felt their children’s services were on their improvement journey. Others had used the framework to engage their elected members. Others were using the concept of different stages of improvement to support their own self-evaluations and shape their own improvement priorities and actions required. There was also a consensus that, alongside the helpful concept of different stages of improvement, the report was correct in acknowledging that at every stage there was the risk of “slipping back”.

#### *(a) Defining characteristics at each stage of the improvement journey – from Isos report*



The Isos report summarised and explained seven key enablers of improvement in children’s services based on the learning from the action research. Colleagues that attended the workshops agreed with these enablers of improvement and emphasised the importance of:

- the journey before ‘getting to the starting line’ to understand the real depth of the situation;

- understanding that if the leadership is in denial about the inspection outcomes then the result will be delay – “accept the findings and move on”;
- leadership as a crucial driver of strategy, practice and engagement;
- grappling with the workforce issues to promote sustainability and continuity, as well as the importance of engaging the workforce in culture and performance change;
- building loyalty and understanding social worker motivations;
- sustaining improvement when an external inspector recognises improvements have been made, and avoiding the risk of falling back due to a “collective sigh of relief”;
- the focus on the quality of practice and having a strong grip on how this was developing;
- the importance of and often challenges around working with partners; and
- how often it was necessary to hold your nerve around timescales, strategy and finances.

**(b) Seven enablers of improvement in children’s services – from Isos report**

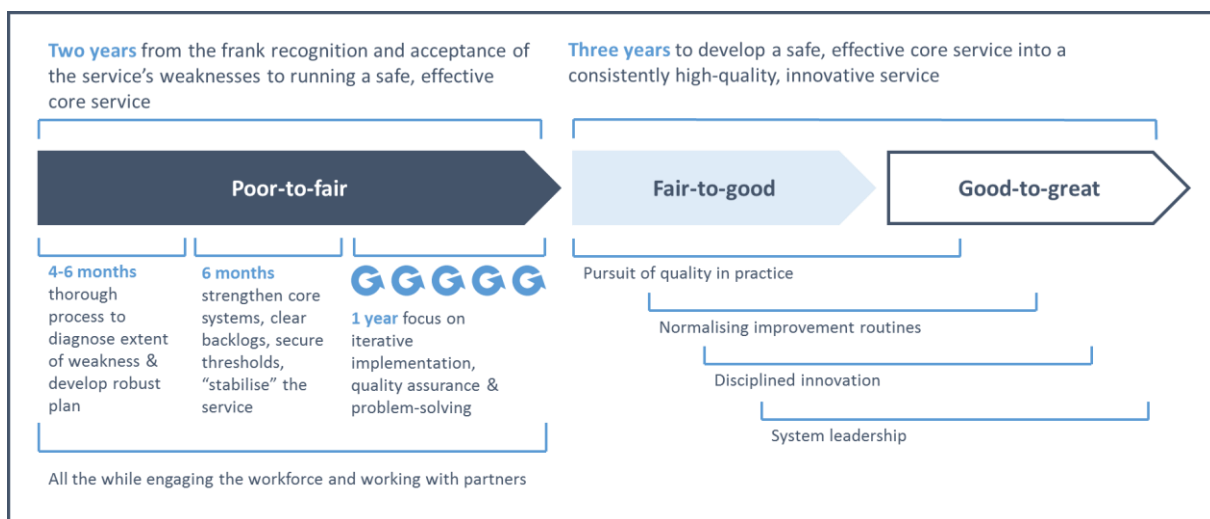


The Isos action research involved 17 LAs. The regional workshops were an opportunity to engage an additional 40 local areas. This enabled us to capture a broader set of views about different journeys of improvement. There were particular issues that attendees wanted to highlight that were important in terms of their own improvement journeys. These included the need to ensure corporate and member ownership of the challenges faced by children’s services; understanding the drivers of and incentives for the local social worker agency market; dealing with the challenges in recruiting team managers; and the differences in challenges between large rural authorities and small urban ones. One point for reflection from colleagues was that the concept of *innovation* in practice should not just be seen as applying to local areas moving to ‘good’; it might be vital for those at an earlier stage of their improvement journey, either because they needed to do things differently to drive rapid

improvement or because it was important in building the confidence of staff and breaking out of a perceived narrative of failure.

Finally, colleagues attending also saw much that they recognised in the indicative timescales of the different stages of the journey (and included in the graphic below). Whilst agreeing that this was not designed to be a one-size-fits-all model and contexts would necessarily mean that timescales might be different, there was much that they recognised, particularly in the time needed to move from ‘poor’ to ‘fair’. However the journey was seldom linear and smooth - one colleague describing it “as often more like the Himalayas”.

**(c) Estimated timescales for each phase of the improvement journey – from Isos report**



**2. Improvement priorities – what were the priorities shared by participating LAs?**

Following our workshop discussions about the Isos report and how it compared to the improvement journeys of those attending, we asked participants to share some of the improvement priorities on which they were working. Each colleague had the opportunity to explain an aspect of their improvement work, highlight the issues they were seeking to address, and also share some of the learning they had gained from this work. The workshops provided a valuable opportunity for local areas to hear from colleagues and explore issues of mutual interest, as well as discussing some of the benefits that had been gained. We have grouped the improvement priorities that were shared at all the workshops under the following five broad themes with some examples of the priorities and learning below.

**(d) Improvement priorities from participating local areas**

Theme	1. Workforce development, creating conditions for effective frontline SW practice	2. Practice improvement	3. Strengthening key aspects of the children's services system	4. Effective scrutiny and role of members, securing efficiencies, or planning for improvement	5. Innovations in delivering services
Local areas	Halton Leicester Wirral Tameside Bracknell Forest Cornwall South Gloucestershire Lambeth Cheshire East Dudley Solihull	Manchester Cumbria Lancashire Surrey Kent Essex Cheshire West and Chester	Blackburn with Darwen NE Lincolnshire Halton Bradford Trafford Warrington Poole Bexley Oxfordshire Bristol Devon Somerset Swindon Wolverhampton Blackpool	Barnsley Bury Lewisham Birmingham Leicestershire	Hertfordshire Waltham Forest Islington
Examples of priorities	Recruitment and retention of experienced social workers	Developing consistency in practice	Re-establishing an early help offer or support for looked-after children; or strengthening an integrated front door	Strengthening political scrutiny	Bid to the innovation fund to develop multi-agency safeguarding teams
Examples of learning	Use innovative practice on recruitment and retention to make progress	Having a good practice framework e.g. <i>Signs of Safety</i> , helps to orientate practice	Importance of culture: difficult to shift and crucial to embed real change	Often need to win over hearts and minds of other council services	Need to describe what the difference will be for social workers' day-to-day work

### 3. Support for children's services improvement

In the final section of each of the workshops, local areas shared their views about the external support that they had sought or experienced to help with their improvement journeys. A number of areas spoke about their experiences of peer reviews. Others shared their experiences of working closely with a single other local authority (for example as an improvement partner), or with a range of other local authorities as part of regional networks.

The participating authorities found it useful to compare and contrast their experiences of external support. Isos were also able to share their learning from a current project for the LGA about the

different forms of external support available to support the improvement of local children's services. Our key lessons from this work will be published by the LGA in the new year.

- the role of external support is an enabling one – it helps leaders, managers, staff and partners to create the conditions for high quality front-line practice. There is no 'silver bullet';
- for external support to work best, it needs to be proactive and not simply respond to crises. We heard from several local areas that were moving through the 'poor' to 'fair' stage of their improvement journey that they had planned for a peer review to take place sometime after an external inspection to both validate the improvements that had been made and also provide a challenging review of where improvements were still required and 'hold the mirror up' to their own capacity and performance;
- colleagues agreed that support needed to be chosen wisely and used effectively – brokering (whether from the region, national LGA, or other organisations) could be important in ensuring an appropriate match. This was key to developing a trusting relationship. And it was vital that external support added to the capacity of the organisation rather than detracting from the capacity of the organisation to improve;
- there were examples of strong regional networks for both senior leaders and elected members;
- external support had to engage staff throughout the organisation in order to have a chance of improving frontline practice. It also needed to engage members and corporate leaders – not just children's services in isolation – to ensure there was a common understanding of challenges and solutions; and
- in considering the particular form of external support that might be appropriate, it was important to take account of the leadership grip, the organisation's self-assessment of its own capacity, and its strategic priorities.

#### 4. Conclusion

Colleagues welcomed the opportunities the workshops provided to discuss the strategic issues, work with and hear from other local areas, and have the space to reflect on their own improvement journeys. There was clearly an appetite for such events at a regional level, both at a strategic level but also potentially linked to specific improvement priority themes.

The workshops demonstrated the importance of a *dialogue about improvement* as a way of supporting the sector as a whole to improve. There are clear benefits to be gained in terms of building capacity and knowledge about what enables sustained and rapid improvement, and how the system as a whole supports local areas to achieve this. We welcome the fact that the LGA identified the need for these workshops and supported them in order to share practice, build awareness, and use the findings of the research to support improvement.

#### Isos Partnership

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