A maturing approach to children's services improvement: updating the key enablers of progress

Research undertaken by Isos Partnership

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this research has been to work with local authorities and their partners to understand the key enablers and barriers to sustained improvement in Children's Services. This is an opportunity to refresh and build upon the research undertaken by Isos Partnership for the LGA on this topic in 2016.[1]

This research is based on interviews with national stakeholders; local fieldwork engagements in nine participating local areas that had improved children's services or sustained strong performance over several years; and two online action-learning workshops with representatives from the nine participating local authorities to test and refine the findings of the research.

Changing context

Since Isos Partnership's original research on improvement in children's services was published in 2016, the context in which children's services operate has changed significantly, not least given the era-defining impact of the Covid Pandemic. Research participants identified six main ways in which the context for children's services has changed: changes in policy; in inspection; demand for services; workforce; placements and funding pressures.

Policy context

Working Together, published in 2018 set new expectations in how the three statutory partners, children's services, health and the Police interact to deliver effective children's services.[2] The introduction of 42 Integrated Care Systems for health, which have taken over the functions of local Clinical Commissioning Groups, have changed the partnership landscape again. The most recent new policy discourse has been shaped by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care led by Josh MacAlister[3], and the DfE response, *Stable Homes, built on love.[4]* The key themes raised by the review, including the importance of the voice of children and young people, the role of family networks in keeping children safe, the emphasis on early help as a critical element of the offer to children and families and the demands imposed by poorly functioning workforce and placement markets all resonate with the experiences of local areas detailed in this research.

The inspection framework

In 2016 it appeared that the sector was in crisis. Under the SIF inspection framework, 22% of children's services had been found inadequate and 43% required improvement. In 2017 Ofsted introduced the new ILACs inspection framework which moved away from broad-brush inspection, towards a more proportionate response. Now the inspection grade profile of children's services is very different to the SIF, with 55% judged to be good or better and 16% outstanding.[5] This shift is chiefly a result of the hard work of local authorities and their partners. However, most local areas report that the experience of inspection under ILACs is more responsive and that the process of annual engagement and more proportionate inspection has been a positive development. But local areas were also at pains to stress that the overall burden of inspection, including ILACS, SEND inspections, Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAIs) and other service specific inspections is very high and seems to be growing. Many DCSs commented that where an inspection is partnership-focused,

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[1] Action research into improvement in local children's services, Isos Partnership for the LGA, 2016
[2] Working Together to Safeguard Children, DfE, 2018
[3] The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, Josh MacAlister, 2022
[4] Children's Social Care: Stable homes, built on love, DfE, 2023
[5] The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2021/22

such as the SEND inspection or JTAI, the onus on addressing any shortcomings too often falls on the local authority and the DCS alone.

Changing profile of need

Covid was a strong contributing factor to the changing profile of need, with children and families coming to the attention of children's services who would never previously have been at risk. This includes evidence of deepening mental health needs, children whose needs have escalated as a result of missed opportunities for wider socialisation or early intervention and needs related to rising levels of material hardship. In addition to the impact of the pandemic, there is evidence of a longer-term trend in which more young people are coming to the attention of children's social care because they are at risk from harm from their peers or wider societal influences rather than their families. The profile of these young people tends to mean that they come to the attention of services at an older age, when families are struggling to keep them safe and protected, and sometimes present with little prior warning. The last element to the changing profile of need is the rising number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children which is placing pressure on local areas, in terms of funding, staff capacity and accommodation options. Increasing arrivals of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children has led the Government to direct all councils to participate in the National Transfer Scheme since February 2022.

Placements

The availability of placements, particularly for adolescents with more complex needs, is an area where the context now is significantly more difficult than it was in 2016. There are several factors contributing to this. First, the number of young people presenting with complex contextual safeguarding issues, giving rise to the need for more, and a greater variety of, residential placements. Second, the pressure placed on the availability of foster care coming out of the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis which is making foster care less affordable for carers. Third, the impact of inspection on residential placement providers who are increasingly risk averse in accepting young people for whom managing the risk associated with their presenting needs, for example previous evidence of criminal behaviour or absconding, might lead to less positive inspection judgements. These issues are compounded by the changes in legislation which have made unregulated provision, irrespective of its quality, illegal for those under 16. The net effect of this is that for particular groups of young people with complex needs who require a residential and/or specialist placement, and in particular secure placements, high quality provision is very scarce and any provision, whether of high or indifferent quality, is extremely expensive.

Workforce

Recruitment and retention of social workers and other key professionals within the wider children's workforce has been a long-standing challenge. However, the combined impact of Covid and the current cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated these difficulties. Local areas report persistent shortages in social workers, residential care home managers, educational psychologists, school nurses, speech and language therapists, health visitors, early years practitioners and family support workers. The chronic vacancies in the children's services workforce have led, in social care in particular, to unparalleled dependency on workers supplied by agencies, in which costs have risen steeply.

Covid also changed the way in which children's services are delivered. Opportunities for blended working, combining online and face to face delivery of services, have created flexibility and facilitated more efficient opportunities for bringing groups of people together. But it has also posed challenges in terms of onboarding new members of staff and enabling professionals from both

within the same teams and across different disciplines to spend sufficient time in-person together. One of the positive changes emanating from the pandemic is a much stronger focus on staff wellbeing. This has been amplified through the impact of Black Lives Matter which has been instrumental in enabling children's services to positively re-examine its relationships within the workforce, and also relationships with children and families.

Expenditure

In 2016, the country was five years into a programme of austerity, and significant pressures remain on local government funding to the current day. At the highest level, local government funding has reduced significantly, forcing local authorities to make large cuts to other services in order to continue providing support for the most vulnerable. Total expenditure by LAs on children's and young people's services was £11.1billion in 2021/22, 6% more than in 2019/20, but this increase is against tighter local government settlements which means that there is continually the pressure of needing to find savings. Despite this increase, ADCS estimated that there was an in-year funding gap of £778m, which equates to 7.5% of the national children's services budget.[6] The most rapidly rising element of children's services spend is for children in care. Expenditure for targeted and preventative services, such as early help or sure start, and for young people's services has effectively flatlined in comparison.

The seven key enablers

Our 2016 research identified seven key enablers that are essential to the task of improving children's services or sustaining strong performance. These enablers are:

- A strategic approach
- Leadership and governance
- Engaging and supporting the workforce
- Engaging partners
- Building the supporting apparatus
- Fostering innovation
- Judicious use of resources

These key enablers have been used widely in the intervening years by local areas embarking on their own improvement journeys as well as providing a blueprint for the DfE's improvement and intervention teams. The overwhelming conclusion from this research is that the seven key enablers remain as relevant today as they were in 2016. They still provide a solid and practical framework for thinking about improvement. However, there were three cross-cutting themes that permeated all seven enablers and were much more prominent in discussions now than they had been seven years ago.

The first of the cross-cutting themes was **listening, and responding, to the voice of children and young people**. This underpinned all aspects of the improvement journey, from setting the strategic vision through to making the case for increased investment. Being able to understand the lived experiences of children and young people and having this as the touchstone of quality was fundamental to how local areas described and conceptualised their approach to improvement.
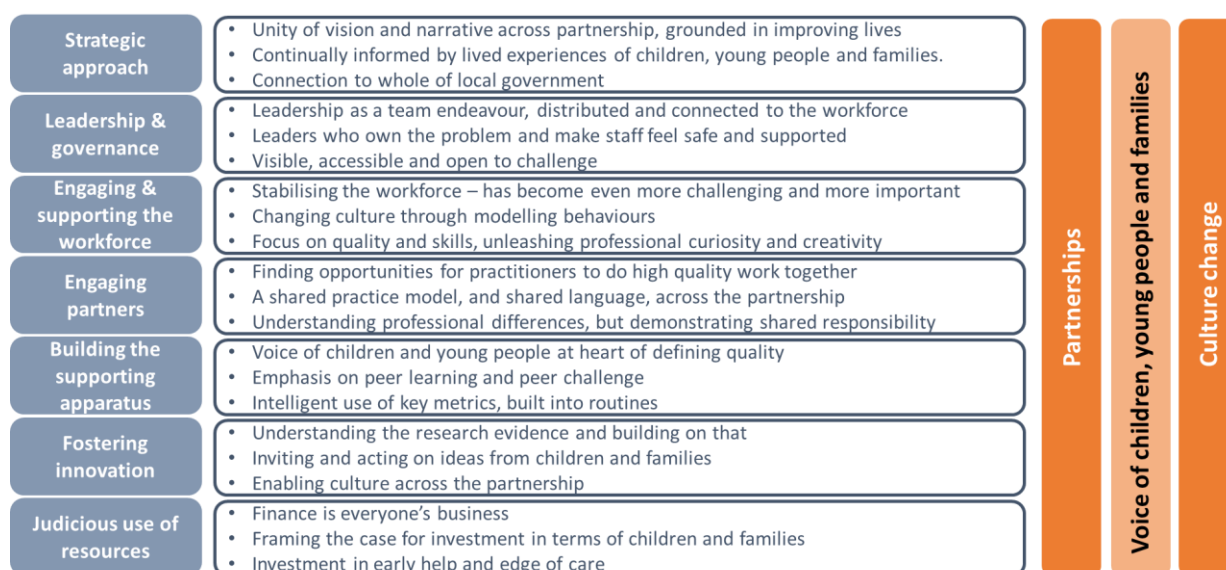
The second cross-cutting theme was a more mature approach to **partnership working**, which was seen as an essential bedrock for improvement. However, many reflected that this was also one of the hardest aspects of improvement to get consistently right. As individual organisations come

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[6] Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8, ADCS, 2022

under pressure in terms of finances, capacity and staffing the tendency is for services to retract towards their familiar professional identity and individual priorities. It requires increasing effort to galvanise effective partnership work in an environment of funding pressure, workforce vacancies and ever-more complex demands.

The final cross-cutting theme was the idea of **culture change**, and the conviction that it is not possible to move from a position of failure to a position of strength without reflecting seriously and critically on the culture of the organisation, and the partnership, and moving that on.

The seven key enablers, and the three cross-cutting themes are set out in the diagram below. The bullet points which describe each of the enablers have been updated to reflect how the enablers have evolved over time.

Enabler	Description	Cross-cutting themes
Strategic approach	• Unity of vision and narrative across partnership, grounded in improving lives • Continually informed by lived experiences of children, young people and families. • Connection to whole of local government	**Partnerships** / **Voice of children, young people and families** / **Culture change**
Leadership & governance	• Leadership as a team endeavour, distributed and connected to the workforce • Leaders who own the problem and make staff feel safe and supported • Visible, accessible and open to challenge	
Engaging & supporting the workforce	• Stabilising the workforce – has become even more challenging and more important • Changing culture through modelling behaviours • Focus on quality and skills, unleashing professional curiosity and creativity	
Engaging partners	• Finding opportunities for practitioners to do high quality work together • A shared practice model, and shared language, across the partnership • Understanding professional differences, but demonstrating shared responsibility	
Building the supporting apparatus	• Voice of children and young people at heart of defining quality • Emphasis on peer learning and peer challenge • Intelligent use of key metrics, built into routines	
Fostering innovation	• Understanding the research evidence and building on that • Inviting and acting on ideas from children and families • Enabling culture across the partnership	
Judicious use of resources	• Finance is everyone's business • Framing the case for investment in terms of children and families • Investment in early help and edge of care	

Strategic approach

Serious improvement cannot begin unless there is real self-knowledge and ownership at that outset about where and how services are falling short or could be better. This was an essential pre-requisite to achieving unity of vision and purpose across the partnership at a strategic level, grounded in improving the lives of children and young people.

Clarity and simplicity were two words often used to describe an effective strategic vision. The ability to distil a complex and changing picture into a small number of very clear priorities, which had resonance with a shared understanding of the local context. In many areas, staff from across the partnership were engaged in shaping the strategic vision and action plan, which helped to achieve ownership of and confidence in the approach to improvement. Local leaders also stressed the importance of the connection between children's services and the rest of local government. In those areas where there was strong corporate backing for children's services, deeper and more mature ideas of what it means to be a corporate parent were also emerging.

Leadership and governance

The leadership qualities that were identified in 2016 as being critical to improvement in children's services – stamina, perseverance, the relentless pursuit of quality and informed engagement in frontline practice – all continue to be relevant today. Then, as now, the stability of leadership continues to be a driving factor in sustaining improvement.

Good leadership is not a solo activity but a team endeavour. There needs to be strong collaborative leadership across a partnership, based on honesty and trust. This enables better integration of resources and the ability to quickly unblock obstacles. Leadership is also a shared endeavour within organisations. The concept of the 'hero leader' feels increasingly outdated. It is the leaders who can empower, grow and give strength to other leaders in turn who are more likely to create an environment for improvement.

Effective leaders of improving children's services make staff feel heard, connected, safe and supported. They are frequently visible and always approachable. They are brave enough to stand up and own the difficulties and instil confidence that there is a clear route to improvement. Leaders play a strong role in both initiating and sustaining the culture change that underpins improvement, through continually modelling and scaffolding the behaviours that they wish to see replicated.

Effective leadership of improvement is reinforced by strong but proportionate governance. Some local areas had used the 2016 Isos research and the framework of the seven key enablers as a way of structuring governance discussions and simplifying their priorities.

Engaging and supporting the workforce

An essential pre-requisite of improvement is having sufficient permanent staff in post to deliver a stable and well-functioning service. Those areas which have had most success in attracting a stable and permanent workforce had put in place a considered strategy for growing their own workforce, combined with a structured approach to retention, talent management and succession planning.

A clear focus on deepening skills and improving the quality of practice within and across organisations was common to all the local areas in this research. Creating the environment in which the quality of practice improves requires changing the culture so that staff are open to constructive feedback and are willing to embrace new ways of working. Many local areas described moving beyond a focus on compliance to encouraging professional curiosity and unleashing the freedom of the workforce to try something different. Another important tool in deepening the skills of the workforce was the consistent application of a high-quality practice model. Many areas had moved beyond training their social workers in the practice model to training the children's workforce across the partnership. This provides a shared language about how to interact with children and families, and a shared understanding of what good quality looks like.

Engaging Partners

The most effective children's services partnerships were able to demonstrate a unity of purpose and familiarity in working together from senior leadership all the way to the front line. The main way in which local areas have achieved this is by finding opportunities for practitioners to do high quality work together. This is often reinforced through establishing a shared practice model across the partnership and having opportunities for learning and training which cross organisational boundaries. Several local areas also highlighted the positive impact of the Covid pandemic in stimulating groups of practitioners to think differently about how they could work together in support of the most vulnerable children and families.

Some of the practical lessons that local areas shared on making partnerships work include being more understanding of professional difference in languages or priorities, but not letting these get in the way of practical action, and setting up structures that get things done and are respectful of individuals' time and capacity. One way in which improving children's services spoke about re-energising their partnership was through their early help offer. This was often used as a way of bringing a broader group of partners round the table, including schools and the voluntary

community sector. Part of creating stability in the system is growing the skills and confidence of partners to hold risk. To do this safely and in a way that ensures partners feel secure was described as a five-year journey.

Building the supporting apparatus

A key element of the improvement journey was getting the balance right so that wherever possible children and young people were supported at the lowest level of intervention at which their needs could be met safely and well. With the introduction of stronger early intervention and preventative measures, including early help, edge of care services and better planning and support for children with child protection plans, many more children were able to remain safely with their families, which improved their long-term outcomes.

The intelligent triangulation of performance data with audit information, a key part of the supporting apparatus, had clearly matured in recent years. A strong emphasis was placed on the usability and simplicity of data - focusing on a small number of metrics that were widely understood and building the monitoring of these metrics into the routines of the partnership. There was a real emphasis on peer learning and peer challenge, with opportunities for partners to look at aspects of practice or process together. Underlying all this was a commitment to hearing from and learning from the lived experiences of children and young people. Indeed, the voices of children and young people were at the heart of defining quality.

Fostering innovation

Innovation was a strong part of the culture of improvement, with a clear emphasis on building on the evidence based provided by research. There was a recognition that some of the entrenched challenges being faced by local children's services could only be overcome through more innovative ways of working. But there was never a sense of pursuing innovation for innovation's sake. It was always anchored in the core purpose of improving children's lives. In that respect, there was growing evidence of local areas creating the capacity to invite and respond to ideas put forward by children, young people and their families. For many areas the Covid pandemic was a catalyst for more rapid innovation, requiring the children's workforce to critically evaluate their working practices and consider different ways of achieving their core purpose.

Several of the local areas we engaged had reflected carefully about how and when innovation contributes to improvement. For some, the earlier stages of improvement should be more focused on achieving consistency and a level of good practice across the board, before embarking upon more innovative practices. For others, elements of innovation were essential right from the outset to enable an effective response to entrenched challenges. Interviewees also recognised the impact that the inspection regime, and the discipline of ongoing monitoring visits, could have on the scope and capacity to innovate. Many felt that the license to depart from accepted practices was much greater for partnerships perceived to be performing well, than those which had been judged to be performing badly.

Judicious use of resources

Achieving improvement requires considerable additional investment and local areas have deployed a range of approaches to renegotiating the funding for children's services with elected members and the corporate centre within councils. In many cases an inadequate judgement was viewed as the catalyst that released the necessary increase in spending required both to stabilise the system and then continue to improve. There was an onus on making sure that the case for any investment was framed, and ultimately could be justified, in terms of the benefits that would be delivered for

children and young people. There was also a widespread expectation that 'finance should be everyone's business'. Senior leaders described how they had supported the children's workforce to be more financially literate and to understand the spending implications of their decisions.

A live debate was how to strike the right balance between investing in early help and preventative services versus meeting the statutory obligations to children and young people with more complex needs already within the remit of children's social care. All the areas we engaged in this research were clear that failing to invest in early help would be unsustainable in the long-term, necessitating ever more costly interventions to keep safe those children and young people whose needs had accelerated to a crisis point. Local areas taking part in this research also expressed a deep tension around how partnerships could equitably address the issue of funding, particularly for those with the most complex needs requiring the highest cost support.

The improvement journey

All the areas that we engaged in this research described improvement as an ongoing process that takes time. Everyone was realistic that moving from a position of poor performance to good performance was a multi-year endeavour and that progress would not always be linear.
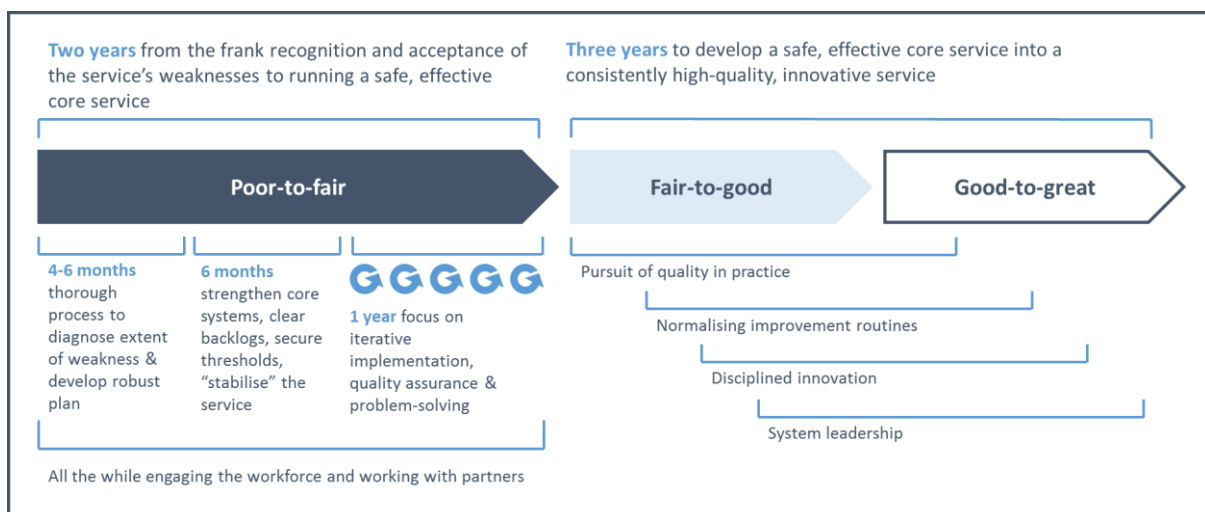
The timeline above, first produced in 2016, is a description of the time it takes, and the broad activities needed, to move from a service (and partnership) that is poorly performing to one that is fair – doing the basics in a safe and effective way. Then on to good and great. The areas that we engaged in this research all recognised this progression and felt that the timelines remained accurate and representative. However, subsequent experience has refined understanding of the improvement journey, its stages and its timescales.

Firstly, it is too easy to fail to take account of the time that it can take to get to the start, or point zero, of the timeline. For some areas there were false starts and multiple attempts at improvement, before real progress started to be realised. Secondly it was possible to be at very different points on the timeline for individual parts of the wider children's services partnership at the same time. In a complex system some parts of the offer of support to children and families might be only fair (or even poor) while other parts of the offer had accelerated onwards in terms of quality, capacity and reach.

Thirdly, the Covid pandemic had a varied influence on improvement timescales. For some areas the message was 'business as usual'. Other areas found that the pace of improvement sped up during the Covid period as enforced innovation and a greater emphasis on regular communication helped

to align people around their shared vision. There were also areas, though, which found that improvement plans were hampered by the additional demands of Covid.

Finally, the challenges change as the system moves from poor to fair to good and onwards. Partly this was a recognition of the impact of inspection. A poor Ofsted judgement galvanises action, attention and investment but can also exacerbate issues around poor staff retention, lack of confidence of partners and low morale. For those areas looking to sustain good or outstanding practice and continue to improve, the challenges shift. At this point it can be harder to keep everyone focused on the disciplines of continual improvement, there is less external challenge to bring in different ideas, leaders who were instrumental in achieving improvement may move on and expectations of finding efficiency savings may be greater. Ensuring that the voice of children and young people continues to inform how the partnership learns and develops is critical to sustaining the momentum of improvement.

Systemic challenges

Some challenges transcend what local partnerships can deliver alone and require a more systemic response at either a regional or a national level.

Lack of national policy coherence

The experience of many local areas is that the expectations of different parts of government are not always aligned. This manifests itself in various ways. There is a perceived disconnect between those who set the policy for children's social care, which tends to be child-centred and trauma informed, and those who set aspects of education policy, such as policies and guidance related to attendance and exclusions, which are more focused on the powers and responsibilities of schools. Although children's services, police and health are all statutory partners, there is significant evidence that in many areas this does not lead to equality of responsibility in terms of funding or responding to the recommendations of inspection. A clear single national vision for supporting the country's most vulnerable children does not exist anywhere. This also creates a tendency towards initiative overload emanating from national government. This can be a particular challenge for smaller areas.

Further ways in which these issues could be addressed include:

- A clearer child-centred vision for supporting vulnerable and at-risk children that is shared within and across Government departments and informs all new policy development.
- An agreed national indicator set focused on the outcomes that matter to children and young people for example long-term education and employment outcomes, reducing homelessness, stability in where they live and where they are educated, reducing offending and reoffending, reducing criminal and sexual exploitation and reducing numbers of young people going missing. The national framework for children's social care, on which the DfE is currently consulting, is moving in this direction but it is narrowly focused on social care outcomes.[7] The Supporting Families outcomes framework is much broader, but is very tied to a specific programme and funding regime.[8] A really inclusive outcomes framework would provide a framework for policy on vulnerable children across government and have equal resonance with health, education, police, youth offending, the voluntary and community sector and other partners.

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[7] Children's Social Care National Framework and Dashboard, DfE, 2023
[8] National Supporting Families Outcomes Framework, DHLUC, 2022

- Clearer statutory expectations for all partners responsible for supporting vulnerable and at-risk children, including expectations around shared funding.

Structural challenges in recruiting and retaining a children's workforce

The difficulties with recruitment and retention across the whole children's workforce include acute shortages of staff in specific roles, spiralling agency costs and too much competition between local areas for the same people. There is a lot that local areas can do to grow their own workforce and put in place the work environment that incentivises staff to stay. However, the underlying risk is two-fold. Firstly, that there are not enough trained people in key professional children-facing roles to fill the vacancies that exist. Secondly that salaries and career progression opportunities in these professional roles are not sufficient to prevent an exodus into equally well-paying and less stressful roles, often outside the public sector. If these two fundamental observations are true at-scale, it means that local attempts to address the issues are likely to only make a small dent in the shortfall, and may in the end displace the challenge but not solve it. Therefore, in addition to a more regulated agency market, on which the DfE is currently consulting[9], national government may consider:

- Carrying out a workforce strategy for the whole children's workforce. This could include detailed estimates for the numbers of key professionals required and support for training and routes into the profession in sufficient volume to fill vacancies.
- Alongside a workforce strategy, reviewing pay and conditions of service for key children's professions with high vacancy levels to consider both the flexibilities within the local government pay-scale and the associated benefits of high-quality training and career progression, to create a more attractive overall offer for hard-to-recruit professional posts. This would require additional funding for local government to make any changes in pay levels affordable at a local level.

Under supply of placements for young people with the most complex needs

Local areas are reporting a cadre of young people who are increasingly hard to place with rapidly escalating individual placement costs. There are also questions about the role of profit-making organisations in children's social care and the way that the unintended consequences of inspection might be shaping the availability of placements. The impact of this is two-fold. First the quality and stability of placements for a very complex and vulnerable subset of at-risk young people is being compromised. Secondly the impact on local budgets is considerable, contributing to both rising spend and increased volatility and unpredictability.

In addition to introducing a more stringent financial oversight regime for the largest providers of children's homes and piloting regional care cooperatives to plan, commission and deliver care places, on which the DfE is consulting,[10] National Government may need to consider more far-reaching options to reduce the demand for residential placements for adolescents with the most complex needs, encourage more existing providers to open up places to those young people and make it easier to open and run new provision. Some of the ways in which this issue might be tackled at a national level include:

- Working with local areas to pilot and fund partnership-based approaches to working with young people at risk of extra-familial harm, revitalising spend and focus on targeted youth services and alternative placement strategies for at-risk adolescents.

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[9] Child and Family Social Worker Workforce, DfE, 2023
[10] Children's Social Care: Stable homes, built on love, DfE, 2023

- Reviewing the inspection and regulatory framework for children's homes to reward and recognise the positive contribution of those providers who work with the most complex adolescents and better take account of the current practical constraints in the market for residential placements.
- Providing additional capital investment and time-limited revenue funding for local areas proposing to open a new residential facility that fills a recognised gap in the market.

Under investment in critical aspects of the offer to children and young people

Local areas have referred to the chronic long-term underinvestment in key parts of the system, in particular support for children and young people's mental health. The lack of funding is compounded by difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified staff. Years of previous austerity, followed by ongoing restraint in public sector spending, have hollowed out the support available to vulnerable young people in the system at large, from youth services to pastoral teams in schools. This creates fragility, with little strength in depth, and everyone stretched to their maximum to meet needs. This does not feel sustainable in the long term. Too little investment in the supportive architecture for at-risk children and young people is coupled with the fact that the investment that does exist is often short-term in nature and linked to a bidding process so that not all areas can benefit. In the past, the funding for early help and intervention has felt particularly insecure, although it is hoped that the strong focus on family support work set out in *Stable Homes, built on love,* coupled with continued funding for the Supporting Families programme, will ensure continued financial support for this vital area of work.

To further support the financial sustainability of wider children's services, national government might consider:

- Putting an end to very short-term pots of funding with a minimum three-year funding window for new initiatives.

- Reviewing funding available for child and adolescent mental health, with a particular focus on funding services that prevent mental health needs from escalating to a point where a CAMHS intervention is necessary.

- Ensure the Family First for Children pathfinders learn from, and in turn inform, local areas that are in the process of establishing Family Hubs, and that in due course funding to support these initiatives is long-term and country-wide.

Introduction

The purpose of this research has been to work with local authorities and their partners to understand the key enablers and barriers to sustained improvement in Children's Services. This is an opportunity to refresh and build upon the research undertaken by Isos Partnership for the LGA on this topic in 2016[11] and to incorporate some of the findings from the review of the key enablers of structural change in Children's Services, also undertaken by Isos Partnership for the LGA in 2022.[12]

The Isos research carried out in 2016 has been influential and widely used by local areas embarking upon an improvement journey. However, the context in which local areas are working has changed significantly since that research was undertaken. Over the last seven years there has been an increased focus on financial planning as more areas have had to balance spending on children's services against falling budgets overall, and specific areas of funding such as SEND have come under pressure like never before. At the same time, responding to the Covid pandemic has led to a very rapid evolution in relationships between local government, key partners, and children and families. The profile of needs of children, young people and families has changed and pressures across key professions within the children's workforce have become acute. Finally, the inspection framework for Children's Services changed in 2017, providing a new set of expectations of performance.

This research, therefore, provides an opportunity to look critically at the key enablers of improvement, and question how relevant they remain in the changed context in which children's partnerships are working. It is also an opportunity to explore how improvement can be sustained and built upon in the face of the myriad pressures currently experienced by the system.

Methodology

To conduct this research, we employed a simple three phase methodology. Firstly, we interviewed national stakeholders who could bring a range of perspectives to the issue of improving children's services. These included Ofsted, DfE, ADCS, Chair of the LGA Improvement and Innovation Board, the vice chair of the LGA Children and Young People's Board, and the CEO of the Staff College.

Secondly, we carried out local fieldwork engagements in nine participating local areas. Seven local authorities were selected which had improved from either inadequate or requires improvement under the previous inspection framework to either good or outstanding in their most recent ILACs inspection. We also selected two local authorities which had sustained good or outstanding performance over a significant period. Within the sample we ensured that we had two local areas which had improved through the establishment of an alternative delivery mechanism (for example a council-owned company for children's services) and two local areas that were sector led improvement partners. We also included one local area that had taken part in our previous research, to provide continuity. We ensured that the sample of nine local areas was reasonably well-balanced in terms of other contextual factors such as deprivation, size, diversity, geography and the type of Local Authority. The final sample of nine was Barnet, Bexley, Essex, North Tyneside, Somerset, Together for Children (Sunderland), Telford and Wrekin, Torbay, and Achieving for Children (Windsor and Maidenhead).

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[11] [Action research into improvement in local children's services, Isos Partnership for the LGA, 2016](#)
[12] [Form and function - exploring structural change in children's services, Isos Partnership for the LGA, 2022](#)

Through our local fieldwork engagements, we aimed to speak to those senior leaders who were best able to describe and reflect on their improvement journey. This included Elected Members with responsibility for Children's Services, the DCS, a selection of Assistant Directors, and the key partners who were instrumental in supporting the improvement journey such as health or the police. We worked flexibly with each local area to determine with whom we should speak to give us the most comprehensive and rounded view of the improvement process. In each of our interviews we aimed to explore:

- How the context of improvement had changed between 2016 and 2023
- the nature of the improvement journey that they had undertaken, the different phases and timescales of that journey and the key actions that had made a difference;
- their reflections on the critical success criteria or enablers that need to be in place to achieve sustained improvement in Children's Services. In particular we asked them to reflect on how these critical enablers might have evolved since the publication of the 2016 research;
- their analysis of the most persistent or challenging obstacles that get in the way of the improvement journey;
- any 'lessons learned' on what they would do differently if they were to embark upon the process again; and
- reflections on what their recent experience as a local area might mean for other local areas faced with a similar set of challenges.

In the final phase of our research, we held two online action-learning workshops with representatives from the nine participating local authorities to test and refine the findings of the research, and to get their input into how these could be presented in a way that would be both useful and practical to other local areas embarking upon a similar improvement journey. We also used the workshop engagements to collectively brainstorm the most persistent obstacles impeding continued improvement in Children's Services that go beyond what local areas can address alone and began to develop possible solutions to these issues.

The changing context for children's services

Isos Partnership's original research on improvement in children's services was published in 2016. Over the last seven years the context in which children's services operate has changed significantly. Of course, the world changing trend that informs so much of this contextual shift is the Covid pandemic. This has made its impact felt on all areas of children's services from the challenges experienced by children and families through to the opportunities and drawbacks of virtual working environments for the children's services workforce. But this era-defining event is particularly interesting in a children's services context in terms of how it interacts with other broader themes and trends that pre-date the pandemic such as the ongoing impact of budget pressures on children's services funding, the changing nature of demand for services and the fragility of the market for children's residential placements. In our interviews, research participants from the nine fieldwork areas identified six main ways in which the context for children's services differs now to what it was in 2016: changes in policy; in inspection; demand for services; workforce; placements; and funding pressures.

The policy context

In 2017 the Children and Social Work Act created a new framework for the delivery of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, which was then crystalised in new statutory guidance in 2018 – *Working*

Together to safeguard children.[13] Following on from the Wood review of local safeguarding children's boards,[14] one of the purposes of the new legislation and guidance was to improve the quality of partnership working to safeguard children. It led to the discontinuation of Local Safeguarding Children Boards and placed a new emphasis on the establishment of effective local arrangements to bring together the three statutory safeguarding partners – the local authority, the clinical commissioning group, and the Police. The 2018 statutory guidance ushered in a new era, and a new set of expectations in relation to partnership working, the implications of which can clearly be seen in how local areas have navigated their improvement journeys in the intervening period.

The way in which the three statutory partners engage in children's services and safeguarding have also been deeply affected by structural changes. Chief among these have been the health reforms, with the introduction of 42 sub-regional Integrated Care Systems, which include Integrated Care Boards (which have replaced Clinical Commissioning Groups) and Integrated Care Partnerships (which are statutory committees that bring together a broad alliance of partners concerned with improving the care, health and wellbeing of the population). In some areas these new arrangements have enabled a reinvigorated strategic conversation around how partners contribute to better outcomes for children, but in other areas it has led to disruption of existing relationships, distancing between strategic decision-making and local frontline practice and in some cases a de-prioritising of children's issues in favour of a focus on adults' health and wellbeing. It is early days in the roll out of ICBs and it remains to be seen how some of these early challenges will be resolved.

Within the Police and Local Authority sectors there have not been major structural reorganisations, but both sectors have suffered from turnover of senior leaders in some areas. In the local areas which we engaged as part of this review, it was not unusual to have experienced several changes of senior leadership, particularly in the period during which performance was poor. One local area described having four Borough Commanders in four years. Two other areas described ten different DCSs over a decade, some appointed on an interim basis and others as permanent appointments. In one local area they had lost every head of service below DCS level between their previous and most recent inspections. ADCS data shows that in 2021/22 there were 47 changes in DCS post-holder which took place across 36 LAs and that the average length of tenure was around 3 years.[15] The combination of institutional reorganisation with rapid personnel changes in a particular area can lead to the sense of a partnership in flux and the loss of institutional memory.

The second major policy discourse in this period has been shaped by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care led by Josh Macalister.[16] In February 2023, DfE published *Stable Homes, built on love*[17] - their response to the recommendations set out in the independent review, as well as to the recommendations of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report into the tragic murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) Review into children's social care placements. *Stable Homes, built on love* sets out six key pillars for nationally reforming children's social care which are:

- Family Help providing the right support and the right time
- A decisive multi-agency child protection system
- Unlocking the potential of family networks

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[13] Working Together to Safeguard Children, DfE, 2018
[14] Wood review of local safeguarding children's boards, 2016
[15] ADCS annual DCS update, 2022
[16] The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, Josh MacAlister, 2022
[17] Children's Social Care: Stable homes, built on love, DfE, 2023

- Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care
- A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one
- A system that continually learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data

The key themes of the independent review and the DfE response, including the importance of the voice of children and young people, the role of family networks in keeping children safe, the emphasis on early help as a critical element of the offer to children and families and the demands imposed by poorly functioning workforce and placement markets all resonate with the experiences of local areas detailed in this research.

The inspection framework

When our 2016 research was carried out, there was a perception that the sector was in crisis. Under the SIF inspection framework, 22% of children's services had been found inadequate and 43% requiring improvement on their first inspection. In 2016, when we conducted our research, not a single children's services department had been judged to be outstanding and by the end of the SIF framework, only 2% of children's services were outstanding.[18] In 2017 Ofsted introduced the new ILACs inspection framework which moved away from broad-brush inspection, towards a more proportionate response based on the underlying performance of local authorities. The ILACS inspection framework allows for annual conversations and engagement with local authorities and is predicated on having more touchpoints in order to catch local areas before they tumble into inadequacy. Under the ILACs framework, Ofsted can give leadership judgements of good or better, even if other areas are not good, which can give recognition to the progress made by local areas that have identified weaknesses and started to address these at pace.

Certainly, the grade profile of inspection under the ILACs framework is very different to the SIF, with over half judged to be good or better and 16% outstanding.[19] This shift in grade profile is chiefly a result of the hard work of local authorities and their partners. However, feedback from those that took part in the fieldwork confirms that, for the most part, the experience of inspection under ILACs is more responsive than it was under the SIF framework and a feeling that broadly the judgements are a fair and accurate reflection of the quality of services and that the process of annual engagement and more proportionate inspection responses had been a helpful development.

"We went through a period of demoralising inspection under the SIF framework. It was a deficit-based approach. The new framework is more subtle and more complex. More people are doing better and it is getting right underneath the complexity. There is a clearer exposition of what is good and bad. SIF was too blunt."

However, local areas were also at pains to stress that the overall burden of inspection is very high and seems to be growing. The combined impact of ILACs inspections, Local Area SEND inspections, Joint Targeted Area Inspections of the multi-agency response to children and families who need help, fostering and adoption inspections, and registered children's home inspections (not to mention inspections of wider aspects of children's services such as CafCass or youth offending services), can feel overwhelming. There were also some concerns that the experience of inspection was not always consistent.

"Overall, the inspection pressure is massive – we would welcome more frequent engagement but it should be less of an 'event'."

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[18] The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2021/22

[19] The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2021/22

Many DCSs commented that although the whole children's partnership, and its joint responsibilities, are the subject of inspections the onus on addressing any shortcomings too often falls on the local authority and the DCS alone, even when their power to affect the outcome is severely limited. Several DCSs also stressed that inspection is not a neutral event. It can be influenced by prior perceptions of local performance and will in turn influence the focus of local areas after the inspection judgement is delivered. The impact of inspection itself on the improvement journey is a theme that we will return to in this research.

Changing profile of need

The third major shift highlighted by those taking part in this research was the changing profile of needs presented by children, young people and their families. Unsurprisingly, Covid was a strong contributing factor to this new profile, with children and families coming to the attention of children's services who were unlikely to have previously been at risk. In particular, local areas have been reporting steep increases in both children and adults presenting with mental health challenges (a factor echoed in the ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8 report), as well as children coming to the attention of services who had missed out on wider socialising influences, preventative support or early diagnoses and whose needs had escalated. Furthermore, the impact of the Covid pandemic, combined with the cost-of-living crisis, has pushed up levels of material hardship and deprivation among children. Government data shows that 1 in 5 children are living in relative poverty[20] and the number of homeless children, or children threatened with homelessness has risen by 23% between 2020/21 and 2021/22.[21]

In addition to changing needs which have been deepened or exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic, participants in the research referenced a long-term and ongoing trend in which more young people are coming to the attention of children's social care because they are at risk of harm from their peers or wider societal influences rather than their families. The profile of these young people tends to mean that they come to the attention of services at an older age, when families are struggling to keep them safe and protected, and sometimes present with little prior warning. The ADCS safeguarding pressures Phase 8 report stated that the percentage of those coming into care who were over 16 increased from 19.5% of the cohort in 2015/16 to 26.2% in 2021/22. The report stated that "74% of respondents [to the ADCS survey] stated that for adolescents, there has been a moderate to high change in their needs or service provision, generally linked to an increase in mental health needs and in some instances, due to family breakdown, leaving the family home voluntarily or being removed. These responses are also likely to include some Extra Familial Risks and Harms (EFRH)"[22]

The range of contextual or societal risks these young people are facing include radicalisation and violent extremism, child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation including through county lines, drugs distribution, gang affiliation and serious youth violence, peer on peer abuse, trafficking and modern-day slavery and antisocial behaviour by and affecting peers. This is having a significant impact on the nature of the support that needs to be put in place to keep these young people safe as well as the range of placements required for those young people who cannot safely live at home.

The last element to the changing nature of demand is the rise in Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) and the pressure that this is placing on local areas. DfE statistics show that in 2016, when we conducted our original research, there were 4340 UASC in care, many of whom were living

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[20] Children in low income families: local area statistics, financial year ending 2022
[21] Statutory homelessness annual report, 2021-22
[22] Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8, ADCS, 2022

in port authorities.[23] However, the same year the voluntary National UASC Transfer Scheme (NTS) was brought in, based on each LA accepting UASCs representing up to 0.07% of its child population to ensure more equitable distribution of new arrivals across the country. This became mandatory in December 2021, and in August 2022, the National Transfer Scheme rate was increased 0.1% of a LA's child population.

In 2022, the number of UASCs in care has risen to 5570 who, as a result of the Home Office's transfer scheme, are more equitably distributed across the country.[24] However, the funding available to support each UASC falls far short of the total required creating a significant unfunded deficit. For example, as one local area explained, the 14 UASCs whom they have accommodated cost the local authority £750K more than the funding they received. If they take their full quota of UASCs it will cost an additional £4 million. Another area estimated that 12% of their staff in children's social care were employed in managing age assessments for UASC. Furthermore, the shortage of appropriate accommodation is compounding the challenges in finding appropriate placements for a range of young people, described below. The administrative difficulties associated with the transfer scheme, the funding deficit and the placement shortages have a knock-on impact on the ability of local areas to provide high-quality care, not least to the UASCs themselves. In the words of one AD *"The whole system feels broken…we have had some brilliant outcomes where we are able to care, but at arm's length outcomes are not great. These young people have really traumatic case histories and that gets lost. The system is very broken, and children are at the centre."*

Placements

The availability of placements, particularly for adolescents with more complex needs, is an area where the context now is significantly more difficult than it was in 2016. The Competition and Markets Authority study into the children's social care market concluded that:

- a lack of placements of the right kind, in the right places, means that children are not consistently getting access to care and accommodation that meets their needs;
- the largest private providers of placements are making materially higher profits, and charging materially higher prices, than we would expect if this market were functioning effectively; and
- some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt, creating a risk that disorderly failure of highly-leveraged firms could disrupt the placements of children in care.[25]

The interviews carried out for this research, point to several factors which, in combination, are contributing to the scarcity of appropriate residential placements. The first factor is the changing nature of demand, and in particular the rising numbers of young people presenting with complex contextual safeguarding issues, giving rise to the need for more, and a greater variety of, residential placements for this cohort. Second is the pressure placed on the availability of foster care coming out of the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis which is making foster care less affordable for carers. Thirdly, the impact of inspection is leading residential placement providers to be increasingly risk averse in accepting young people for whom the risks associated with managing their presenting needs, for example previous evidence of criminal behaviour or absconding, might lead to less positive inspection judgements. In the words of ADCS *"This has a knock-on impact on the willingness*

[23] Children looked after in England, including adoptions, 2022
[24] Children looked after in England, including adoptions, 2022
[25] Competition and Markets Authority research into children social care, 2022

of providers to care for children with complex needs for fear of an adverse judgement, increasing the prevalence of one-to-one provision, and removing huge amounts of sufficiency out of the system."[26]

These issues are compounded by the changes in legislation which have made unregulated provision, irrespective of its quality, illegal for under 16s. While the good intention behind the change is indisputable, it has had had the effect of removing a high number of possible placements for consideration, without increasing supply to be found elsewhere.

Arguably the placements which are most difficult to access are secure placements. The ADCS reports that there are currently 13 secure children's homes registered in England offering a total of 233 beds for either justice or welfare purposes as at 31st March 2022. 91% of respondents to the ADCS survey stated that there were never or rarely enough welfare secure placements in the right place to effectively support children. The Secure Welfare Coordination Unit (SWCU) - a dedicated single point of contact for LAs requiring placements – reports that at any one time, around 50 children each day (up from 25 last year) are waiting for a secure children's home place. For every two to three vacancies in secure welfare placements, there were 60 referrals.[27] The other area of provision that is very scarce is Tier 4 beds for young people with mental health conditions. Again, the ADCS reports that 79% of respondents to their survey stated that there were never, or rarely, enough Tier 4 beds in the right places to effectively support children with the very highest levels of need.[28]

The net effect of this is that for particular groups of young people with complex needs who require a residential placement, and in particular secure placements or those catering for young people with a history of criminal behaviour, absconding, self-harm, exploitation or violence, high quality provision is very scarce indeed and any provision, whether of high or indifferent quality, is extremely expensive. Those interviewed for this research said that 5 or 6 years ago they would have expected to spend around £2,000 a week for placements for this cohort of young people. Today such placements typically cost around £9,000 a week, with the most expensive exceeding £30,000 per week. Such low incidence, high-cost places not only lead to increasing spending overall, but also contribute to a high degree of volatility in expenditure, making it very difficult to operate within a planned budget and leading to frequent overspends in children's services.

"There has been an extraordinary collapse in capacity in the social care residential market – the market is failing. Over the past 10-15 years, councils have reduced in-house provision; so when the market fails, there is no resilience left, and we are left fighting over small number of places and paying huge amounts of money."

Workforce

When we conducted our 2016 research, recruitment and retention of social workers and other key professionals within the wider children's workforce was a long-standing challenge. However, the combined impact of Covid and the current cost-of-living challenges has deepened and extended this trend. Local areas report persistent shortages in social workers, residential care home managers, educational psychologists, school nurses, speech and language therapists, health visitors, early years practitioners and family support workers. Senior leaders talk about a sense of exhaustion in the wider workforce post-Covid, with many individuals reassessing their life choices and some opting for work that might be better paid and less stressful.

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[26] Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8, ADCS, 2022
[27] Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8, ADCS, 2022
[28] Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8, ADCS, 2022

DfE data shows that on 30th September 2022 there were 7,900 children's social worker vacancies - an increase of 21% from the same date in 2021 and the highest number since the data series began in 2017.[29] ADCS data collection reports an increase in the average vacancy rate amongst the 108 respondents to its survey from 14.6% as at 30th June 2021, to 19.0% as at 30th June 2022.[30]

The chronic vacancies in the children's services workforce have led, in social care in particular, to unparalleled dependency on workers supplied by agencies, in which costs have risen steeply. DfE reports that the number of agency workers increased by 13% to 6,760 on 30th September 2022.[31] ADCS data also shows that as at 30th June 2022, 16.7% of the social work workforce were agency workers compared to 15.6% the previous year.[32] The average masks significant variations in LAs, ten respondents reported that over a third of their workforce were agency social workers, with one LA reporting almost two thirds (63%) of its social workers were agency staff.

Many of those we interviewed described the attractions, for younger members of staff in particular, of working for social work agencies in which pay was typically higher and flexibility could be greater. In many regions, mutually negotiated memoranda of understanding to prevent local areas taking staff from neighbouring authorities had ceased to be effective. For those looking to fill gaps with agency workers it is becoming increasingly difficult to just recruit a single worker – instead agencies are only supplying whole teams, with managers, which significantly increases costs.

Covid also changed the way in which children's services are delivered. The growing opportunities for blended working, combining online and face-to-face delivery of services, has created flexibility and facilitated more efficient opportunities for bringing groups of people together. But it has also posed challenges in terms of limiting daily opportunities for teaching, integrating and nurturing new or less experienced member or staff and enabling professionals from both within the same teams and across different disciplines and backgrounds to spend sufficient time in-person together. Some parts of the wider children's services workforce, for example health visitors in some areas, stopped carrying out routine face-to-face visits during the pandemic. Not all of these services have yet returned to full capacity.

There have also been positive workforce changes emanating from the pandemic, in particular a much stronger focus on staff wellbeing which has persisted and grown. This has been amplified through the impact of Black Lives Matter which has shone a welcome spotlight on equality and diversity. The lens of Black Lives Matters has been instrumental in enabling children's services to positively re-examine its relationships within the workforce, and also relationships with children and families.

Expenditure

Finally, it is not possible to understand the changing context for children's services without understanding the underlying environment of funding and expenditure. The picture is complex and not easy to tease out. In 2016, the country was five years into a programme of austerity and since then there has been an ongoing period of restraint in public spending. At the highest level, local government funding has reduced significantly. In their written evidence to the Transforming Children's Service Inquiry, the LGA stated:

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[29] Children's social work workforce, DfE, 2023
[30] Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8, ADCS, 2022
[31] Children's social work workforce, DfE, 2023
[32] Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8, ADCS, 2022

"The significant increase in demand for statutory child protection support has coincided with a significant fall in government funding for councils, forcing local authorities to make large cuts to other services in order to continue providing support for the most vulnerable. Between 2010 and 2020, councils will have lost £15 billion of core central government funding, amounting to 60p out of every £1 the Government had provided for services. Children's services are facing a funding gap of £3.1 billion by 2025, just to maintain services at their current level. This does not allow for any enhancements in services."[33]

ADCS reports that total expenditure by LAs on children's and young people's services was £11.1billion, 6% more than in 2019/20, but this increase is against tighter local government settlements which means that there is continually the pressure of needing to find savings. Despite this increase, in August 2022, 65 respondents to the ADCS survey reported a total shortfall in 2022/23 of £334.8m against their children's services budgets. Extrapolated to all 151 LAs, the total required now to close the budget gap in-year is £778m, which equates to 7.5% of the national children's services budget.[34] The most rapidly rising element of children's services spend is for children in care. Expenditure for targeted and preventative services, such as early help or sure start, and for young people's services has effectively flatlined in comparison.

"DCSs in established positions are asked by Lead Members, "Can we still afford to be good? Should we aim for RI?" The budget pressures are forcing people back into simplistic thinking, simplistic questions."

The seven key enablers

Our 2016 research identified seven key enablers that are essential to the task of improving children's services or sustaining strong performance. These enablers are:

- A strategic approach
- Leadership and governance
- Engaging and supporting the workforce
- Engaging partners
- Building the supporting apparatus
- Fostering innovation
- Judicious use of resources

These key enablers have been used widely in the intervening years by local areas embarking on their own improvement journeys as well as providing a blueprint for the DfE's improvement and intervention teams. During this research project we tested these key enablers with our fieldwork areas to assess the extent to which they remain relevant in the evolving context for children's services. We also invited participating local areas to describe their improvement journeys, and the essential enablers that underpinned them, in their own terms.

The overwhelming conclusion from this research is that the seven key enablers remain as relevant today as they were in 2016. They still provide a solid and practical framework for thinking about improvement. However, the way in which local and national leaders spoke about the enablers, the language they used, and the elements that they highlighted (and other elements that they downplayed) had shifted in interesting ways since 2016. In particular, there were three cross-cutting themes that permeated all seven enablers and were much more prominent in discussions now than

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[33] Written evidence submitted by the Local Government Association to the Transforming Children's Services Inquiry
[34] Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8, ADCS, 2022

they had been seven years ago. These cross-cutting themes reflect how the discourse on children's services has evolved and matured, and indeed how it is responding to the significant changes in context described above.

The first of the cross-cutting themes was listening, and responding, to the voice of children and young people. In our interviews with senior leaders across agencies it was clear that this shaped all aspects of the improvement journey, from setting the strategic vision through to making the case for increased investment. Being able to understand the lived experiences of children and young people and having this as the touchstone of quality was fundamental to how local areas described and conceptualised their approach to improvement.

"To sustain and enhance improvement you've got to 'think children' – and also recognise their needs are changing. One of the reasons why we continue to improve is remaining focused on understanding our context – what do we know about our children, what do we know about our communities?"

"Listening to the voices of the people we deliver services to is fundamental…. We have worked really hard at participation, previously we did annual surveys but didn't do anything with the results. Now we don't just listen to the voices but make changes and show what we do with it."

"Young people's voice is really powerful. You need to hear what it is like to be on the end of services. Using the community voice was a powerful wake-up call".

Listening to the voice of children and young people in Somerset

A continuous and very explicit focus on hearing and responding to the voices of children and families more effectively has been central to the transformation of Children's Services in Somerset. Being attuned to the feelings and concerns of children and families has really galvanised staff. As one senior member of staff said: *"Hearing and acting on the voices of Children and families was part of the journey from RI and always a key motivator for staff….".*

Reforms to the Quality Assurance model have been a central element. A very long and detailed QA framework was re-written and made much more concise, with the focus shifting from compliance to improving understanding of service quality, the voice of the child and parents/carers, and the impact of the service on children and families. Some of the compliance-focused data monitoring has been integrated into other processes allowing newer quality assurance tools to be more centred around capturing qualitative feedback. Alongside this, a strong Participation Team have engaged young people in numerous projects to reflect on language use and the way services are experienced.

The shift in focus has had a profound effect on the way staff think, and how services are delivered and presented. For example, assessment timescales have tightened, driven by increased awareness of how much this matters to young people. Staff members are described as being more likely to articulate their cases for additional resources in terms which demonstrate exactly how it will impact families. As one interviewee described: *"Staff are now very good at describing care planning in terms of impact on families. In response to a complaint from a young person, our paperwork now highlights the child's voice in resource panels and there's usually a discussion about who's feeding back. It's an ongoing conversation."* A lot of the terminology is also now different – in response to feedback from young people, staff no longer say "LAC", due to its negative connotations, and they use "family time" instead of "contact time". The service placements team is now called "The Home Team" (named by young people) to reflect that what we historically refer to as placements are in

fact a child's home. And those from diverse backgrounds within the community are more likely to see themselves represented in material produced by the council.

The second cross-cutting theme was a more mature approach to partnership working, which those we interviewed saw as an essential bedrock that underpinned all aspects of improvement. Indeed, in reflecting on the value of this research some senior leaders suggested that it would be helpful to reframe the seven key enablers in terms that would make them relevant for the whole children's partnership, rather than being more directly focused on children's social care. This is feedback that we have endeavoured to take on board. However, while those taking part in the research were clear that improvement in children's services cannot be achieved without an integrated and committed partnership, many reflected that this was also one of the hardest aspects to get consistently right. As individual organisations come under pressure in terms of finances, capacity and staffing the tendency is for services to retract towards their familiar professional identity and individual priorities. It requires increasing effort to galvanise effective partnership work in an environment of funding pressure, workforce vacancies and ever-more complex demands, as we have described above. Nonetheless, those complex needs with which children and young people are presenting make it even more critical develop an effectively integrated offer of support.

"Recognition that it needs a system response – it needs all partners. Children's Services, Health, Police all come on the journey together. An open transparent conversation. Each partner sees their contribution. There is a collective will to improve. All are there to do the right thing for children and young people. Everyone is valued and it is a rounded conversation. It is common to retract in the face of failure and sort out our own house first."

The final cross-cutting theme that came out time and again in interviews for this research was the idea of culture change, and the conviction that it is not possible to move from a position of failure to a position of strength without reflecting seriously and critically on the culture of the organisation, and the partnership, and moving that on. Again, this is a theme which permeates the other enablers, whether that is the style of leadership to the way in which the workforce is re-energised and reinvigorated. Effective culture change was also found to be a key enabler of structural change in children's services, in Isos Partnership's 2022 research also commissioned by the LGA.[35] We are conscious that the phrase 'culture-change' is easy to say and hard to achieve, we have therefore attempted in the rest of this report to set out some practical examples of how local areas have sought to change their culture from within.

"Culture change is the biggest enabler. It permeates through partnership working. People are empowered and encouraged and can raise problems right to the top. The ability to be creative, take risks, try new things. People willing to have a go. Not standing still."

"What are the practical things that create culture change? Employee engagement. Common purpose. Clear Vision. Development of staff. Skills to do their job. Investing in management. Tackling really difficult things, for example poor performance and poor behaviour. Making clear what good looks like. Walking the floor. Visibility. Seeking the voice of the child."

The seven key enablers, and the three cross-cutting themes are set out in the diagram below, and then explained in greater detail in the following sections. These have been updated from the 2016

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[35] Form and Function, an exploration of structural change in Children's Services, Isos Partnership and the NCB, May 2022

version to incorporate the new emphases that participants in the research brought to each of the enablers.

Strategic approach	• Unity of vision and narrative across partnership, grounded in improving lives • Continually informed by lived experiences of children, young people and families. • Connection to whole of local government			
Leadership & governance	• Leadership as a team endeavour, distributed and connected to the workforce • Leaders who own the problem and make staff feel safe and supported • Visible, accessible and open to challenge			
Engaging & supporting the workforce	• Stabilising the workforce – has become even more challenging and more important • Changing culture through modelling behaviours • Focus on quality and skills, unleashing professional curiosity and creativity			
Engaging partners	• Finding opportunities for practitioners to do high quality work together • A shared practice model, and shared language, across the partnership • Understanding professional differences, but demonstrating shared responsibility	Partnerships	Voice of children, young people and families	Culture change
Building the supporting apparatus	• Voice of children and young people at heart of defining quality • Emphasis on peer learning and peer challenge • Intelligent use of key metrics, built into routines			
Fostering innovation	• Understanding the research evidence and building on that • Inviting and acting on ideas from children and families • Enabling culture across the partnership			
Judicious use of resources	• Finance is everyone's business • Framing the case for investment in terms of children and families • Investment in early help and edge of care			

Strategic approach

In 2016, when we described the importance of establishing a clear strategic approach to improvement, we emphasised the need to achieve real clarity of vision linked to a strong moral imperative for improvement. We spoke about the importance of reiterating that vision frequently to staff in order to build consistency and shared understanding. We also described how local areas had effectively engaged elected members in understanding and buying into the vision, so as to ensure long-term political commitment to the improvement journey. A strong strategic approach was not possible without an unflinching and honest self-appraisal at the outset of the improvement journey, and an ongoing commitment to understanding areas of weakness.

All these reflections continue to be true in 2023. In particular, the senior leaders we engaged reinforced the idea that serious improvement cannot begin unless there is real self-knowledge and ownership at that outset about where and how services are falling short in supporting children and their families. For some areas Ofsted inspection provided the 'lightbulb' moment that crystallised concerns into a fuller understanding of what needed to change. Some interviewees reflected that without an 'inadequate' judgement it can be hard to galvanise the investment and support needed to effect wholesale change. Although, in some cases the impetus to present a positive story to Ofsted was felt to get in the way of honest self-reflection. In other areas an evidence-based appreciation of the weaknesses that needed to be addressed predated inspection and might have been triggered by a change of leadership, a critical peer evaluation or robust self-appraisal. In other areas, despite the evidence presented by inspection or peer-evaluation, there was prevarication in accepting or coming to terms with the judgement that services were not strong. In these cases, improvement typically stalled until that sense of denial or disbelief was overcome.

"In the first few months, it was something we had to strategically manage to get people to see... I don't think people believed what we were telling them. There was so much denial. All their indicators were green."

As well as reinforcing the findings of the original research, those we interviewed provided new insights into how they established a strategic approach to improvement. Firstly, they emphasised the importance of achieving unity of vision and purpose across the partnership at a strategic level,

and that this should be grounded in improving the lives of children and young people. Many described the power of articulating a strategic vision that was anchored in a clear narrative of what needed to be done to improve outcomes for children and young people, which was informed by a clear and honest understanding of their lived experiences.

In reflecting why their local area had struggled to make progress for several years, before more recent strong improvement, one AD commented "*We had lots of previous visions, but never a sense of our community and our children. It was never place-specific, not connected to needs and no buy-in. The previous plan was called the Ofsted improvement plan. It sent a message about feeding the machine, not improving outcomes. This time the communication of vision was completely different – very hands on and leaders very visible. How do we make a difference for children, what do we do and why? There was a sense of identity and evidence base for the first time.*"

Clarity and simplicity were two words often used to describe an effective strategic vision. The ability to distil a complex and changing picture into a small number of very clear priorities, which had resonance with a shared understanding of the local context, was seen as a key first stage in the improvement journey. In many areas staff from across the partnership and the wider children's workforce were engaged in shaping the strategic vision and action plan, which was instrumental in achieving ownership of and confidence in the approach to improvement.

"*In was a very straight forward plan, really simple, really basic but got lodged in peoples' heads.*"

"*The leadership set a clear vision. We changed from having an action plan to deliver areas of improvement to an action plan to deliver a vision*"

Local leaders also stressed the importance of the connection between children's services and the rest of local government. Many reflected on how the corporate strength of the local authority, from elected members to the Chief Executive, through finance, HR, IT and other supporting functions, could significantly support the children's partnership in their efforts to improve. However, where that connection was lost or weak, the disconnect between children's services and the wider local authority could quickly become an impediment to progress. The connection between children's services and wider local government was highlighted as a key design principle for structural change in children's services in our 2022 research.[36] Those areas which had achieved the clearest sense of shared purpose and ambition were able to clearly explain how a thriving children's services was integral to the wider ambitions of the council, for example where locally elected members were looking to achieve economic regeneration, there was a clear narrative that today's children are tomorrow citizens, employers and employees.

"*Five years ago it was quite insular. Corporately and politically that is how children's services was seen. Now seen as part of the wider council. Previously we were on the periphery. Now there is a focus on place and regeneration, and your next community coming forward. There is investment in children.*"

In those areas where there was strong corporate backing for children's services, deeper and more mature ideas of what it means to be a corporate parent were also emerging. There were numerous practical examples of this from whole-council considerations of how to address placement shortages for children in care, including opening of new children's homes and work with housing departments to support foster carers through to elected members undertaking training in restorative justice to

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[36] Form and Function, an exploration of structural change in Children's Services, Isos Partnership and the NCB, May 2022

better interact with and understand the lives of the children they represent. One DCS commented that now 87% of children's services in their area is funded by local taxpayer rates, rather than central government funding. This places a heightened onus and responsibility on elected members both to set the policy direction for children's services and to be able to explain that critical importance of children's services to local voters.

Leadership and governance

It is a truism, perhaps, that in any organisation or context unless there is the right leadership in place improvement will be very hard to achieve. The leadership qualities that were identified in 2016 as being critical to improvement in children's services – stamina, perseverance, the relentless pursuit of quality and informed engagement in frontline practice – all continue to be relevant today. Then, as now, the stability of leadership continues to be a driving factor in sustaining improvement. Through both our 2016 and our current research, areas which were experiencing failure or struggling to improve had often experienced multiple changes of senior and middle leadership in a short space of time.

"Over the last 10 years there had been 11 DCSs. Some battle-hardened social workers would say that each came with their own model and people and children's services were still inadequate".

"Stability of leadership, leaders knew what they were doing and were in for the long haul, willing to be criticised, and had the corporate trust because they had demonstrated they had turned around Children's Services before".

A particularly strong theme that came through the fieldwork for this research is that good leadership is not a solo activity but a team endeavour. For children's services to improve there needs to be strong collaborative leadership across a partnership, based on honesty and trust. Senior leaders from health and the police who contributed to this research described how clear unity of purpose at the strategic level across partner organisations not only enables better integration of resources and capacity, but also the ability to quickly unblock obstacles and resolve differences. Leadership is also a shared endeavour within organisations, with a strong central senior management team and empowered middle leaders all playing a vital role in steering and delivering on the improvement effort. Although the actions of individuals clearly matter, the concept of the 'hero leader' in an environment as complex as children's services feels increasingly outdated. Instead, it is the leaders who can empower, grow and give strength to other leaders in turn who are more likely to ensure the continued growth and sustainability of their organisations. This is also important for succession planning. Where the next generation of senior leaders have come up through the organisation, they understand the culture and priorities which have driven change. This means that progress is more embedded in the organisation and less dependent on specific individuals continuing to be in post.

Several areas commented that a key part of their improvement journey was identifying those middle leaders who, with support, were both able and willing to make the transition to a new organisational culture and ways of working and those who were not. The large majority of leaders, and staff, did so successfully, but part of the role of leaders were to make the necessary decisions to move on those who could not.

"Some people had a niche in a failing organisation. Got to be tough but fair. We really invested in people and some stepped up. We had some amazing successes".

"Be brave enough to lose people who are not right for the organisation."

The qualities that characterise the effective leaders of improving children's services make staff feel heard, connected, safe and supported. To improve children's services, leaders need to be frequently visible and always approachable. They need to be brave enough to stand up and own the difficulties and challenges, and instil the confidence that there is a clear route to improvement. They need to create an environment in which staff feel that they can do their best work, and not fear individual blame and recriminations. Leaders play a strong role in both initiating and sustaining the culture change that underpins improvement, through continually modelling and scaffolding the behaviours that they wish to see replicated through the workforce and across the partnership. In the words of one DCS *"You have to create touchpoints to constantly reinforce behaviours and create opportunities with staff to talk in the way that you want...There is something about being in all environments and meeting with different teams in a cycle to have direct conversations. Never waste an opportunity to speak with staff in the terms that you want them to think."*

Effective leadership of improvement is reinforced by strong but proportionate governance. Most of the areas we engaged had set up a multi-agency improvement board with an independent chair that they felt had been instrumental in asking the right questions and holding the partnership to account on progress. Many argued against letting the improvement board become too unwieldy – in the words of one AD "We started out with an improvement board of 25 – we really needed a maximum of 6 or 7 people."

In achieving effective and proportionate governance, some local areas reflected on the need to manage upwards to ensure as far as possible that there were not multiple points of governance asking different questions and requiring different updates. There is a real risk when outcomes for children and young people have been recognised as poor that the partnership and children's services can spend too much time 'feeding the machine' and too little time focusing on improvement. Ways to mitigate this are to establish a single set of data and a small number of questions, focused on the right things, that might service multiple accountability purposes. It is also important to quickly recover the trust of those holding the service to account, be that partners, lead members, the chief executive of the local authority or an independent chair or commissioner. Some local areas had used the 2016 Isos research and the framework of the seven key enablers as a way of structuring governance discussions and simplifying their priorities.

"The Isos tool was really critical, a really good way of refining thinking, at a time when everything was potentially so overwhelming."

Engaging and supporting the workforce

In 2016 we said that an essential pre-requisite of improvement was having sufficient permanent long-term staff in post to deliver a stable and well-functioning service. We described the vicious cycle that local areas can experience when very high levels of dependency on agency staff leads to high staff turnover and lack of consistency in practice and decision-making. This in turn can contribute to a poor inspection outcome, which causes more permanent staff to leave and exacerbates the issues of inconsistent quality. Analysis of Ofsted and DfE data by Community Care has found that the social worker vacancy rate in inadequate councils (26.3%) was more than three times that found in outstanding children's services (7.7%). At the same time use of agency staff was nearly four times higher in inadequate councils (26.7%) than in outstanding councils (6.9%).[37]

This is a description that would be recognised by many of the local areas that we engaged in this research. In one area, for example, more than 60% of their workforce were agency workers at the

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[37] Inadequate councils bore brunt of social workers quitting posts, Community Care, May 2022

time that they were judged to be inadequate and several areas cited over-reliance on agency staff as a significant contributor to the challenges they faced. Arguably, however, such challenges have become more widespread in the intervening years – even some very strongly performing areas are now reporting increasing difficulty in recruiting and retaining social workers and more reliance on agency staff. Nor are social workers the only children's profession suffering from shortages – as described above recruiting and retaining educational psychologists, CAMHS professionals, health visitors, school nurses, therapists and early years practitioners can be equally challenging.

Those areas which have had most success in attracting a stable and permanent workforce, and which have upended the detrimental dependency on agency workers, are those which have embarked upon a considered strategy for growing their own workforce, combined with a structured approach to retention, talent management and succession planning. The detailed examples below from Sunderland and Torbay describe how this has been achieved.

> ### Recruiting and retaining a stable workforce in Together for Children, Sunderland and in Torbay
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> At the point when Sunderland was inadequate there were very high levels of agency staff. Some teams were entirely staffed by agency workers. "*Agency work had become a profit-making career*". The solution was to set up an academy for growing their own social workers. Following suit from other LAs they paid a recruitment and retention premium of 2% above salaries, recruited supernumerary newly qualified social workers with a clear offer of capped caseloads, and put in place a step-up programme to support other professions into social work. At the same time, they launched a degree in parental counselling. The social work academy was accompanied with a completely revitalised approach to training and development, branded "Thrive@TogetherforChildren" and employees say they have never felt so supported. From a position in 2018 when 44% of their staff were agency workers, they now have no agency workers.
>
> A similar story of progress can be seen in Torbay. Like Sunderland, Torbay had very high levels of agency workers when the service was judged inadequate in 2015 and again in 2018. Very early on when the new leadership team arrived in 2019, Torbay started to talk about establishing the learning academy, which was one of the main priorities in their improvement journey. The keys to success of the learning academy have been totally protected caseloads for three years which included, for at least the first-year, formal training and development inputs on two days a week and family-facing work three days a week. Days spent on training were backfilled by agency staff who were over establishment to ensure there was capacity to still deliver services to children and families in the community. They used a similar approach to recruit social workers from abroad to enable the workers to develop knowledge and skills. After three years social workers are ready to be advanced practitioners. For more experienced staff they introduced career management and succession planning processes, with opportunities to study to Masters level and beyond. The success of the learning academy is such that agency rates have reduced from 60% to 6% (March 2022) and the approach is being widened out to the broader children's workforce for example community nurses or those working with families suffering domestic abuse.

For all the local areas that took part in this research, a key element in improvement or sustaining strong performance was a clear focus on deepening skills and improving the quality of practice within and across organisations. Creating the environment in which the quality of practice improves requires, initially, changing the culture so that staff are open to constructive feedback and are willing to embrace new ways of working. A characteristic of services where performance is poor is that staff are frequently fearful and defensive, anxious about shouldering the blame for a range of

shortcomings, many of which are well beyond their individual control. Turning this around depends on a focus on strengthening relationships and demonstrating a different, positive and constructive set of responses to identifying problems and challenges. Many of those to whom we spoke emphasised the importance of senior and middle leaders getting alongside staff to model new behaviours and create a more nurturing environment.

"Don't go into a blame game. It is an easy way to analyse a problem, but you mustn't do that…. It took time to convince people that the response would be different. It was uncomfortable for a while."

"The most important ingredient is getting alongside staff. Listening to experience – mindful that we needed to align the service to the journey of children. The workforce was immediately involved which flushes out peoples' attitudes. Our mantra was 'be sceptical but not cynical'.

A hands-on approach to practice development in Barnet

Barnet Children's Services has invested a lot in professional skills and development, putting practice improvement at the heart of their journey. Shortly after substantial issues with the quality of practice were identified in a 2016 Practice Enquiry, a new Improvement Consultant and an additional new Head of Service arrived. It was clear that the organisation had not kept pace with developments in practice approaches, as a result there was not a learning environment for staff that promoted their development and practice was not sufficiently focused on children or their outcomes. As one describes it: "There was a lot of advice in the system, but less progression towards tangible change". The new recruits took the view that in order to drive things forward, they needed to develop close relationships with middle managers, working alongside them, and make space for reflective conversations. They prioritised making time to get close to practice; the appointment of Practice Development Managers; working collaboratively with social workers; and exploring how social workers were engaging and recording their engagement with children, all of which enabled different types of conversations. The Directors, together with the Practice Development Managers also ran practice focused workshops each week on approaches to direct work. One explains: "We were able to galvanise practice development in a different way, using an appreciative inquiry approach. No pointing fingers. That's not helpful. It just makes people feel anxious. You have to get alongside people and engage". Both are now Directors of Children's Social Care Services and four Practice Development roles continue to play a critical role in the service, influencing a positive and reflective culture that is now strongly child-focused, with a sense of all professionals pulling in the same direction. "Our system now feels more organic. It enables voices from different parts of the system."

Another important tool in deepening the skills of the workforce and improving interactions with children and young people was the consistent application of a high-quality practice model. Many of those we interviewed reflected that it did not matter too much which practice model was chosen – some had opted for Restorative Justice, others for Family Safeguarding, Appreciative Inquiry or Signs of Safety – the important thing was to choose a model which resonated with staff and with the change that you are trying to effect, and then use it consistently across all interactions with children, young people and families. Many areas had moved beyond training their social workers in the practice model to training the children's workforce across the partnership. This provides a shared language about how to interact with children and families, and a shared understanding of what good quality looks like. It also provides a language for staff to use in interacting with each other when undertaking shared learning or peer reviews.

"Appreciative inquiry is a really good approach in conversations. It empowers people and makes them feel proud."

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Creating a "work family" in Essex

Leaders within children's services in Essex place a considerable emphasis on creating a "work family", which they see as crucial to maintaining low levels of staff turnover and rates of agency staff. Essex have kept a stable operating model and structure in place since 2014, which provides clarity, consistency and confidence – people working with and within the Essex system know who does what, when, where and how. The emphasis on creating a strong "work family" – a supportive team, manager, practice tools, and working environment – has been particularly important during the pandemic and after periods of lockdown, in providing the psychological safety for social workers to practise effectively. The Essex *Your Voice* Survey found social workers to be amongst the happiest employees in the workforce.

Essex also invests heavily in recruiting new and aspiring social workers, for example recruiting newly-qualified social workers (up to 120 annually) and providing placement opportunities for students. Staff are offered a comprehensive further training offer, with a high proportion of staff completing their AYSE year going on to enrol on master's degree-level modules, in the following year, in addition to accessing other non-academic learning opportunities, and helps create a knowledgeable and confident workforce.

Recognising that staff will want to progress and move roles in their career, and accepting that some staff will chose to move away from the local area, Essex seek to offer opportunities for secondments and changes in roles within the Essex system, meaning they see more movement *within* the Essex children's services workforce than losing people moving *out* of the Essex system. Essex's role as a Partner in Practice, and their belief in intensive, sustained support to the local areas with whom they are working to support improvement, provides additional opportunities for Essex staff to develop in new roles – while being able to bring back the benefits from this experience to roles within the Essex system.

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Some of the words used most frequently to describe the change in how staff felt were 'safe', 'supported' and 'contained'. Local areas that had successfully built and sustained improvement recognised that working with vulnerable and at-risk children and young people is inherently stressful, and that in a context where systems and processes including decision-making, supervision, and adherence to timescales have been poor, that sense of anxiety and individual culpability is significantly heightened. Therefore many of the changes brought in to stabilise and reenergise the workforce were designed to give them confidence in the processes that underpinned decision-making and increase staff's feelings of security. These include new and different approaches to supervision, many more opportunities for critical reflection in teams and with peers and panels or other formal arrangements to moderate at key decision-points.

"The culture of safety comes all the way from the top. Risk is managed better when everyone is round a table. Staff feel supported in their decisions."

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Reinventing supervision in Telford and Wrekin

In Telford and Wrekin, a core element of their improvement journey was establishing the right environment for high-quality practice. They made important changes to the way in which social

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workers experienced supervision. They kept in place the routine of individual case management discussions but also introduced 'systemic pods' which were opportunities to bring staff together, share information and bring in multiple perspectives on how best to help a family. The ethos of the systemic pods was that no idea is a stupid idea. Staff were also encouraged to identify and discuss any personal barriers they might be experiencing in supporting change for a family. In addition to the pod discussions, they introduced clinics with trained Systemic Practitioners, led by a child psychotherapist, who could work with social workers to delivery Systemic Interventions.

In reflecting on their improvement journey, many local areas described moving beyond a focus on compliance to encouraging professional curiosity and unleashing the freedom of the workforce to try something different. Often this became possible after an initial period in which the focus was on achieving stability, consistency and getting the basics right. However, many reflected that from the outset they established a culture in which they encouraged staff to come forward with ideas for how support to children and families might improve. Even where those ideas could not be taken forward immediately, or in that form, they were careful that the answer was not a blank 'no' but encouragement to continue thinking through the issue and to come back with other potential solutions. As well as inviting and responding positively to ideas, leaders reflected on how they had attempted to empower the workforce with the skills to make good decisions and where possible devolve those decisions back to those working at or close to the front line, stripping out bureaucracy and reducing bottlenecks in the system.

"Improvement is only sustainable if you have a culture where people feel listened to. Moving away from a culture where you have to seek permission – it has been quite hierarchical in the past. Role modelling is important and allowing people freedom for initiative."

"There was lots to do and staff were allowed to get on with the job. They knew the leadership had their backs. They were given permission."

"We looked at how to strengthen decision-making. We had fewer hoops and less bureaucracy."

Engaging Partners

Effectively supporting children and their families has always been a partnership endeavour. Children's lives are too complex, and the range of needs too varied, for a single organisation response to be effective. Our 2016 research, conducted before the Wood Review reshaped how local areas constructed their safeguarding partnerships, found that close working relationships between senior leaders across statutory partners was essential to unblocking barriers. At an operational level, engagement in multi-agency structures such as the MASH, as well as multi-agency audits to drive improvements, were seen to be effective in bringing together staff from across the children's workforce. Local areas also reflected on the need to turn around partners' views on children's services that had failed.

Seven years on, thinking and practice in how to develop effective and integrated children's partnerships has evolved. The importance of a shared strategic direction, and real honesty, between senior leaders in children's services, health and the police are as critical as ever. However, the emphasis in local areas now is on how to achieve that same unity of purpose and familiarity in working together from senior leadership all the way to the front line. The main way in which local areas have achieved this is by finding opportunities for practitioners to do high quality work together. This is often reinforced through establishing a shared practice model across the partnership and having opportunities for learning and training which cross organisational boundaries. Co-locating staff was seen by some managers as an important component in bringing

staff across the partnership together and enabling a more integrated and streamlined offer for families, although co-location was not the only way to achieve these benefits. Several local areas also highlighted the positive impact of the Covid pandemic in stimulating groups of practitioners to think differently about how they could work together in support of the most vulnerable children and families, which in some cases had the impact of accelerating changes that in other circumstances may have taken much longer to achieve.

"We are more co-located than previously, for example around family hubs. It helps with information sharing, problem solving and knowledge. From a family's perspective they are getting a lot better services – telling their story only once."

"Now we are looking at a single vision for children. The pandemic helped us to think creatively – a conscious attempt to break down silos between professionals. For example, we had teaching assistants from special schools acting as respite foster carers."

However, many areas were also honest in recognising that they felt they had further to go in establishing a truly integrated partnership. This was often a feature of those areas moving from good to great on their improvement journey. They recognised the progress that had been made in bringing the whole children's workforce closer together, but felt that there was more that could be achieved in terms of a more fundamental reconsideration of how to deploy all their shared resources to best support children and young people.

"We are now in the process of how we move things on to be outstanding. We know what we need to do. The hardest thing is getting buy-in from partners…the next step needs to be different, more radical around how we engage different parts of the system around the child. There are still cases where we're working alongside each other rather than together… Partnership work is the big risk. It's going just fine but it so crucial now and the context is harder".

Some of the practical lessons that local areas shared on making partnerships work include being more understanding of professional difference in languages or priorities, but not letting these get in the way of practical action, and setting up structures that get things done and are respectful of individuals' time and capacity. There had been a shift away from very large formal meetings with a formulaic agenda and lots of papers to more practical and action-focused engagements with a focus on unblocking issues for children and families. For example, one area described an operational meeting of assistant directors across the Police, health, children's services and MASH which has met regularly for three years and has honest conversations to resolve issues that have been escalated.

One way in which improving children's services spoke about re-energising their partnership was through their early help offer. This was often used as a way of bringing a broader group of partners round the table, including schools and the voluntary and community sector. Part of creating stability in the system is growing the skills and confidence of partners to hold risk. To do this safely and in a way that ensures partners feel secure was described as a five-year journey. A critical part of this was also seeing families and communities as partners *"You have to create a culture where families can look after themselves and push support down to the lowest common need, only intervening when you have to."*

Multi-agency working in North Tyneside

North Tyneside Council, Northumbria NHS Healthcare Trust and the ICB, North Tyneside Place, formed an eight-year strategic alliance with the national charity Barnardo's in 2017, with the aim of improving the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children, young people and their families.

One of three strategic partnerships across the UK, the aim of the alliance is to develop a preventative and early help model leading to systems change, by moving away from a medical model to a social model of mental health and wellbeing and developing a shared language, underpinned by trauma-informed practice.

During the course of the partnership, a range of projects have been implemented, including a roll out of the Thrive Approach to secondary schools, the development of the Sleepwell North Tyneside programme, introducing Early Help workers into the CAMHS service to work with families not meeting the threshold, and providing Mental Heath First Aid training to all schools. It is a whole system approach with regular symposiums bringing partners together, including the voluntary sector, to identify key priorities, share learning and update on developments. Included in the partnership is a dedicated participation worker responsible for developing co-production with children and young people.

The partnership has enabled them to develop a range of new pathways to mental health and emotional well-being support. The next priorities for the partnership will include a greater focus on neurodiversity, school staff wellbeing and co-designing projects with young people and parents on LGBTQ+ issues and school attendance.

Building the supporting apparatus

Building the supporting apparatus refers to having effective systems and processes in place to drive quality, and the right service architecture to ensure that the needs of children and young people are met in a timely and efficient way. In 2016 we particularly drew out the importance of establishing a secure "front door" to the social work system – reviewing cases and allocating them efficiently – and building on this to achieve a timely flow of cases between teams. These remain important foundations for a well-functioning children's service. Although, arguably, the arrangements at the front door to children's services did not feature quite as prominently in the outcomes of ILACs inspections as it had in SIF inspection, perhaps because this was an area of practice that had generally improved over the intervening years.

In 2023, there was a stronger emphasis on redressing the balance in the system so that wherever possible children and young people were supported at the lowest level of intervention at which their needs could be met safely and well. Many of those we engaged in the fieldwork reflected at the time at which their services were performing poorly, far too many children were being taken into care because needs had been allowed to escalate to crisis point. With the introduction of stronger early intervention and preventative measures, including early help, edge of care services and better planning and support for children with child protection plans, many more children were able to remain safely with their families, which improved their long-term outcomes.

The intelligent triangulation of performance data with audit information, to understand the effectiveness, quality and timeliness of support to children and young people has always been a key underpinning of any effort to improve. From our most recent fieldwork, it was evident that performance monitoring and approaches to auditing had evolved and matured in recent years in important ways.

First of all, a clear emphasis was placed on the usability and simplicity of data. Many of those we interviewed reflected that children's services is potentially so data rich that it is easy to become swamped in data – collecting numerous metrics, but unclear what these really say about the quality or impact of the service. Instead, interviewees described focusing on a small number of metrics that were widely understood and building the monitoring of these metrics into the routines of the

partnership. Ensuring the accuracy of data was also a key issue – several areas commented that when the service was poorly performing recording systems were so ill-managed that nobody could have confidence in the data reported.

"You can continue to strive for the perfect data set before you get on with anything. It is possible to over diagnose the problem. Sometimes you need to take a leap of faith. 'We know enough to act'."

"Performance data can be really simple – 3 pages. Before we had reams of information that didn't say anything. You need a simple system that measures and describes important things. Don't hide behind the data. Be really transparent."

> **Transforming the use of data in Achieving for Children, Windsor and Maidenhead**
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> In Windsor and Maidenhead they realised early on in their improvement journey that they had very limited data on performance, that there was little confidence in the quality of the data, and that staff and managers lacked the expertise to interrogate the data intelligently. They put in place a performance team whose role was to improve the quality and consistency of the data available and to work with leaders and managers throughout the organisation to help them make sense of the information being produced. They created clear reports on benchmarking, regional comparisons and trends over time and set targets. Now they have a robust set of reports and dashboards which are integral to their performance management routines. Managers have these and interrogate them regularly. At every point they are asking what the data is telling them about outcomes for the child. Really understanding the data was seen as a lightbulb moment for many. In the words of one AD "When we started this process, we told managers what the issues were. Now they are telling us, because they understand the data."

In improving systems there was a real emphasis on peer learning and peer challenge, with opportunities for partners to look at aspects of practice or process together. This contributed to changing the culture of the partnership to one in which staff were keen to learn and felt supported and contained by the quality assurance processes. Underlying all this was a commitment to hearing from and learning from the lived experiences of children and young people. Indeed, the voices of children and young people were at the heart of defining quality.

"We used to have a dragon's den style performance day, but the data was inaccurate and the judgements were punitive. There was no reflective conversation. It became a barrier. There was reinvestment in a performance management surgery which was a reflective conversation based on data and led to enhanced buy-in. The connection to the child became crystal clear.

"Quality assurance didn't exist. It was completely disconnected from practice. As soon as the structures were put in place it allowed the workforce to feel contained."

"Peer reviews have been incredibly helpful. Staff now have an appetite for it. It is a completely different culture….we are a learning organisation, not afraid to open up."

> **Multi-agency learning in Bexley**
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> Bexley SHIELD is the name of the statutory multi-agency safeguarding partnership. The name stands for "Shelter, Haven, Inspiring, Empowering, Leading and Defending", and was chosen by Bexley's Youth Council in 2019 to reflect actions that it was important for the partnership to demonstrate.
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> A central aspect of Bexley SHIELD's work is the Learning Hub which is part of Bexley's "back to practice" model. The Learning Hub approach involves identifying specific thematic practice priorities

(as opposed to focusing on individual cases) across the partnership. Each priority will be the focus of the Learning Hub for four months. The work will be carried out by a team made up of nominees from each statutory partner. The leadership of the work on each priority rotates between partners, so each partner leads on one priority project in each cycle. During each priority project, the partnership team will draw together evidence from within Bexley (including multi-agency audits and feedback events with children, family and practitioners) and engage with wider national practice and research evidence, which inform a set of overall findings and recommendations that are made to the Bexley SHIELD Executive.

The Learning Hub therefore provides in-depth, multi-agency reflection and practical recommendations on common themes and challenges relevant to frontline practice, such as mental health, domestic violence, and adolescent safeguarding. One partner described the Learning Hub as a 'fundamental strength of the approach in Bexley'.

Finally, having intelligent performance monitoring, peer review and quality audit systems built into the routines of the partnership was instrumental in building trust and confidence in the progress being made. It allowed the partnership to celebrate their successes, their quick wins and longer-term goals, as well as being open and honest about what still needed to be done. This was essential both for maintaining and building the morale of the partnership and contributing to proportionate and purposeful governance.

Fostering innovation

Our 2016 research stressed the importance of *disciplined* innovation in improving children's services. The way in which services created a disciplined structure around innovation included using pilots or small-scale trials to test a concept before it was implemented wholesale; basing decisions on what works on the forensic use of evidence; and being willing to re-evaluate and redesign (and if necessary abandon) a concept that does not work.

In our most recent research fieldwork areas referenced innovation being a strong part of the culture of the partnership, with a greater emphasis on building on the evidence based provided by research. There was a recognition that some of the entrenched challenges being faced by local children's services could only be overcome through more innovative ways of working, therefore encouraging professional curiosity and dialogue was part of the culture change that local areas were aiming to instil. One area described a process of being responsive to suggestions from frontline practitioners by setting up working groups to try out new suggestions and tasking them with providing feedback on the impact. However, there was never a sense of pursuing innovation for innovation's sake. It was always anchored in the core purpose of improving children's lives. In that respect, there was growing evidence of local areas creating the capacity to invite and respond to ideas put forward by children, young people and their families.

Most of the areas that we engaged in the research had been part-way through their improvement journey when the Covid pandemic turned the delivery of services upside down. For many areas the pandemic was a catalyst for more rapid innovation, requiring the children's workforce to critically evaluate their working practices and consider different ways of achieving their core purpose. The rapid development of virtual working environments and virtual working practices created new and different opportunities to bring people together and the need to keep 'eyes-on' vulnerable children during a period in which the normal routines of daily education and regular appointments were disrupted, often led to much greater dialogue and cooperation between parts of the children's workforce which hitherto might have operated quite separately.

"Everyone was forced into innovation [by Covid]. That period of time really tested the staff group but also allowed people to think what we can do and how can we use resources carefully? Some of what we do now is the result of that."

Several of the local areas we engaged had reflected carefully about how and when innovation contributes to improvement. For some there was a clear recognition that the earlier stages of improvement should be more focused on achieving consistency and a level of good practice across the board, before embarking upon more innovative practices. For others, elements of innovation were essential right from the outset to enable an effective response to entrenched challenges such as very low levels of staff recruitment and retention. In describing the balance of innovation and compliance, one senior leader commented that they gave staff "the autonomy to work creatively within certain parameters."

Interviewees also recognised the impact that the inspection regime, and the discipline of ongoing monitoring visits, could have on the scope and capacity to innovate. Many felt that the license to depart from accepted and more common practices was much greater for partnerships and systems perceived to be performing well, than those which had been judged to be performing badly. The opportunities to bid for pilots or innovation funding were also far more numerous for local areas with a reputation for strong performance than those which had a recent history of service failure.

"It is a complex system with pockets of good and poor practice. You need to bring everyone up to a baseline before you give more freedom to innovate."

Judicious use of resources

The context in which children's services improvement is taking place is one in which growing demand for support for children is outstripping increased spending, and wider funding pressures are taking their toll on other public services. In this context it is vital to recognise that achieving improvement requires considerable additional investment. Research carried out by the LGA and Impower in 2015 estimated the annual cost of improving children's services that had failed was between £3 million and £10 million per local authority[38] and the additional cost pressures facing the system now are only likely to mean that this sum has increased.

In the local areas taking part in this research there had been different approaches to renegotiating the funding for children's services with elected members and the corporate centre within councils. In some areas the Isos framework of the seven enablers of improvement was used to evidence the case for extra resource, communicate the need to wider leaders and provide a framework for monitoring. In many cases an inadequate judgement was viewed as the catalyst that released the necessary increase in spending required both to stabilise the system and then continue to improve. On the flip-side, areas which have sustained good performance for a significant period, or where their improvement journeys have culminated in very strong inspection outcomes, are now facing increased pressure to find savings. Whether continuing to sustain strong performance while also reducing costs is possible, given the spending pressures that we have outlined elsewhere in this report, remains to be seen.

"Re-build has required re-investment. We put investment of 5-10% more into the service to reduce case-loads, develop practice and capabilities."

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[38] A brave new world - is inspection improving children's services, Impower commissioned by the LGA, 2015

"One appreciates that none of the good ideas would have been able to happen without investment – financial and political. That's what enables you to take risks."

"In the next period, the most difficult place for a DCS to be, will be in a well-functioning local authority. Children's Services will come under pressure to cut spending."

Despite the clear recognition that improvement in children's services can only be achieved with significant investment, it would be completely wrong to think that local areas engaged in this research had been given a blank cheque to underwrite their improvement. Instead, there was an onus on making sure that the case for any investment was framed, and ultimately could be justified, in terms of the benefits that would be delivered for children and young people. This rigorous and forensic approach to investment was contrasted with the prior experience of some local areas where too much money was spent on creating stand-alone and episodic project teams to 'fix' individual bits of the system without considering how that experience could be mainstreamed into practice or feed through into higher quality support for children and young people.

Reshaping investment in Children's Services in Torbay

In Torbay, Children's Services had been overspending their budget for many years, prior to the arrival of the new leadership team in 2019, and the council had been meeting this overspend centrally. The new leadership team negotiated an arrangement which meant that that children's services budget was balanced but in the event that savings could be made these would be reinvested into improving the services being delivered. This enabled them to completely reshape their offer of support, moving children out of care and residential placements, where these were not the right options for children, and reinvesting that money back into earlier preventative and better support for children and young people to stay with their families. Investment in a high-quality edge of care service allowed them to reduce the number of children in residential placements by 50% with a corresponding movement to family-based care. They described the hugely positive impact this had on children and young people and the confidence that it gave staff that they could be creative and could improve outcomes for children. The change also generated "phenomenal" savings that were reinvested in support for children and young people. This was achieved by working closely with elected members to 'hold their nerve' through the transformation, significantly aided by the support of the council's section 151 officer and the chair of overview and scrutiny, who were strong critical friends.

The other big shift was a much more widespread expectation that 'finance should be everyone's business'. Senior leaders described how they had supported the children's workforce to be more financially literate and to understand the spending implications of their decisions. Again, this was framed in terms of delivering better outcomes for children – the more cost-effectively a service could be delivered, the greater the opportunities for investing in higher quality support for more children. In essence, the children's workforce was encouraged to see the connectivity between decisions with spending implications that might be taken on a day to day basis with the wider vision for how they were trying to transform the offer to meet children and young people's needs.

"Every bit of spending is an investment. You must have a return in benefits for children."

For many areas, a live debate was how to strike the right balance between investing in early help and preventative services versus meeting the statutory obligations to children and young people with more complex needs already within the remit of children's social care. All the areas we engaged

in this research were clear that failing to invest in early help would be unsustainable in the long-term, necessitating ever more costly interventions to keep safe those children and young people whose needs had accelerated to a crisis point. At the same time, creating the funding capacity to invest in early help at a point when the rest of the service felt stretched to breaking point was very difficult. Individual areas found different solutions to this problem. Some looked to 'invest to save' models of funding. Others used time-limited innovation or grant funding to build their capacity.

Developing the early help services in Together for Children, Sunderland

When Sunderland was found to be inadequate there was not much left of the Early Help service. Funding had diminished over successive years. There was no system, no process and a very small offer to children and families. They started again with a revised budget, including the Troubled Families grant, building five early help teams around their five children's centres and introduced a system of assess, plan, do and review. They did roadshows with schools and worked hard to get them on board. Now they have 30 schools buying early help support, whereas previously it had been four. They were creative in using holiday activities and food deliveries during the pandemic as a way to deliver value and generate referrals, and set up a mobile provision which got lots of parents asking for help. Success breeds success and the service has attracted contracts from Public Health and the CCG, as well as innovation funding. "*The more you do, the more you get, the more you can do"*. Although the core budget is still the same, there is now a very large service, with staff on flexible contracts so they can move around. They have stopped thinking about the risk associated with short-term funding and have moved away from fixed term contracts.

Local areas taking part in this research also expressed a deep tension around how partnerships could equitably address the issue of funding, particularly for the young people with the most complex needs, requiring the highest cost support. In an environment where every organisation is being continually challenged to find savings and reduce costs, many described the constant challenges of determining how the relative financial contributions of the statutory partners could be most fairly determined. In areas where these tensions were most acute there continues to be a sense that the burden of funding falls disproportionately on the local authority. For example, one area described how health investment, through the ICB, in residential placements for children with complex needs was around £1.2 million but, in the view of the head of children's services finance, should be closer to £3 million.
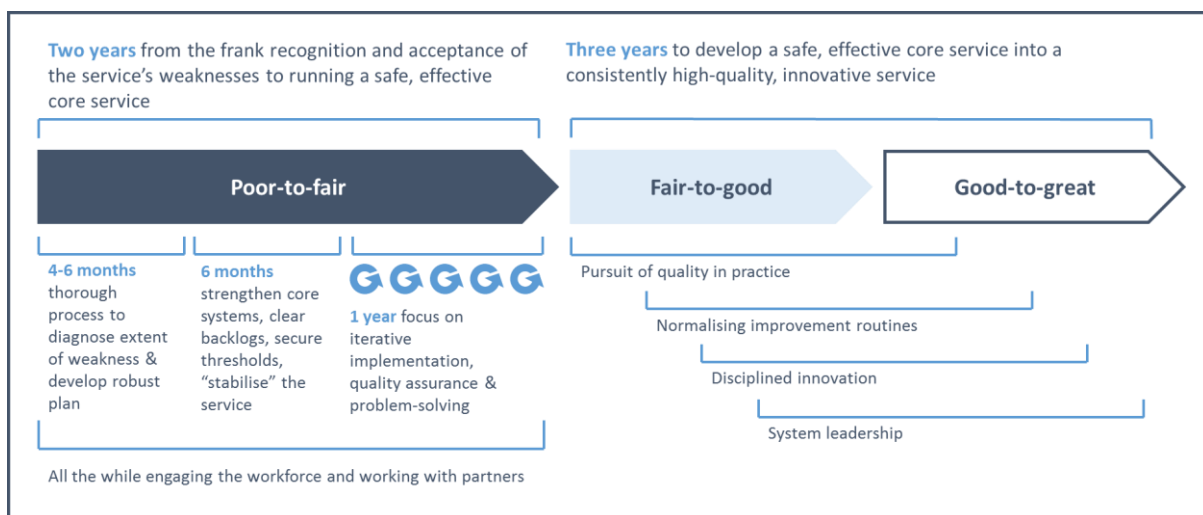
In areas which had made more progress on tackling this issue they described how they sought as many opportunities as possible to demonstrate the equitable split of funding. For example, Essex was one of the first local areas to have achieved the aspiration of equal financial contributions between the three statutory partners to the multi-agency safeguarding partnership. This was phased in over 2 years and has become a very powerful symbol for joint and equal accountability. Some other areas also described the importance of resolving funding disputes wherever possible at a practice level rather than escalating them *"When five chief financial officers get into a discussion about a high-cost placement they end up at loggerheads. You need to stop it getting there by working at an earlier stage to stop it escalating. By working together with the child at the centre you get much better outcomes."*

A further issue that many local areas raised was the short-term nature of much of the funding on which services depend, linked to specific grants, contracts or time-limited pilots. This was particularly an issue when local areas were in the earlier stages of their improvement journey, as they felt that they were frequently unable to access specific grants for innovation or for pilots, and if

they did secure additional funding they had little confidence that follow-on investment would be forthcoming. For those that had been able to build an outstanding reputation the access to additional funding, even on a short-term basis, could help to drive innovation and service improvement, secure in the experience that further opportunities were likely to become available.

The improvement journey

All the areas that we engaged in this research described improvement as an ongoing process that takes time. Everyone was realistic that moving from a position of poor performance to good performance was a multi-year endeavour and that progress would not always be linear. Several local areas commented that the timeline of improvement that we produced in our initial research had been a helpful tool at the outset of their improvement journeys, particularly in helping elected members and the wider children's partnership to understand the timeframes within which demonstrable progress could be expected.

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

The timeline that we produced in 2016, and which is replicated above, deliberately framed the improvement journey in terms that were not the same as those used in Ofsted inspection. It is not designed as a timeline for responding to inspection outcomes, which have their own momentum and in-built structure through the discipline of Ofsted monitoring visits. Instead, it is a description of the time it takes, and the broad activities needed, to move from a service (and partnership) that is poorly performing to one that is fair – doing the basics in a safe and effective way. Then on to good and great. The areas that we engaged in this research all recognised this progression and felt that the timelines remained accurate and representative.

"We have been on a journey. The first couple of years were coping and stabilising. Years 2 and 3 were getting the right people in the right place. Years four and five are right sizing, investing in transformation."

However, there are some interesting ways in which subsequent experience has refined our understanding of the improvement journey, its stages and its timescales.

The first observation made by several local areas is that it is too easy to fail to take account of the time that it can take to get to the start, or point zero, of the timeline. For many areas (though not all) there were false starts and multiple attempts at improvement before real progress started to be realised. In some cases, this "pre-improvement" period lasted many years and was characterised by multiple changes of leadership, strategy, structure and improvement partner before finally arriving

at a solution for the area that could deliver lasting change. In some cases, this was associated with a reluctance to accept the scale and nature of the challenge or not having the right leadership team in place. In other cases, there were structural barriers including size or wider dysfunctionality in the council or partnership that inhibited finding an initial platform for improvement.

The second insight that came through the interviews is that although everyone recognised the broad shape of the improvement journey described above, it was possible to be at very different points on the timeline for individual parts of the wider children's services partnership. Improvement was described as lumpy rather than smooth, and in a complex system some parts of the offer of support to children and families might be only fair (or even poor) while other parts of the offer had accelerated onwards in terms of quality, capacity and reach. This observation underlined the importance of having routines around quality improvement that extend across teams and beyond services, leveraging the power of peer support and challenge to pull all parts of a complex system towards a consistent understanding and execution of 'good' practice.

Thirdly, there were interesting reflections on how the Covid pandemic had influenced improvement timescales. For some areas the message was 'business as usual' – they had a clear improvement plan and were able to continue to deliver that despite the pandemic. Other areas found that, perhaps counterintuitively, delivery of some aspects of their improvement plan actually sped up during the Covid period as enforced innovation and a greater emphasis on regular communication helped to align people around their shared vision. There were also areas, though, which found that some of the ambitious improvement plans they had developed were stalled by Covid, as the focus moved more towards ongoing delivery of the core business. The Covid pandemic is an extreme example, and something we all hope will be a one-off experience. It is, however, a good illustration of how unforeseen external shocks to the system can have an unpredictable impact on the trajectory of improvement.

Finally, senior leaders reflected on how the challenges change as the system moves from poor to fair to good and onwards. Partly this was a recognition of the impact of inspection. A poor Ofsted judgement galvanises action, attention and investment but can also exacerbate issues around poor staff retention, lack of confidence of partners and low morale. It also sets up a framework of monitoring and governance which rewards compliance against an exacting and important set of standards, but also potentially leaves less space for innovation and problem-solving. For those areas looking to sustain good or outstanding practice and continue to improve, the challenges shift. At this point it can be harder to keep everyone focused on the disciplines of continual improvement, indeed staff can be very tired after multiple years engaged in addressing systemic poor performance. There is less external challenge to bring in different ideas, leaders who were instrumental in achieving improvement may move on and expectations of finding efficiency savings may be greater. While there is more freedom and capacity to innovate, it can be harder to retain the absolute clarity of focus that characterises areas where there is a burning platform to improve. Ensuring that the voice of children and young people continues to inform how the partnership learns and develops is critical to sustaining the momentum of improvement.

Systemic challenges

This research describes the inspiring work done by local partnerships to improve their services for children and young people and sustain that strong performance. It is testament to how transformation can be achieved at a local level with the right enabling factors in place. However, it was also clear from the research that some challenges transcend what local partnerships can deliver

alone and require a more systemic response at either a regional or a national level. These reflect many of the challenges described in the context section of this report, and can be summarised as:

- a lack of national policy coherence;
- structural challenges in recruiting and retaining a children's workforce;
- under-supply of placements for young people with the most complex needs;
- under-investment in critical aspects of the offer to children and young people.

In the following section we describe these challenges in greater detail and suggest some ways in which national government could respond to alleviate these issues.

Lack of national policy coherence

The experience of many local areas that have been through an improvement journey for children's services is that the expectations of different parts of government and national agencies are not always aligned. This manifests itself in various ways. For example, with regard to the DfE, there is a perceived disconnect between those who set the policy for children's social care, which tends to be child-centred and trauma informed, and those who set aspects of education policy, such as policies and guidance related to attendance and exclusions, which are more focused on the powers and responsibilities of schools. This disconnect has a real-world impact, for example, when a very vulnerable young person, whom a local partnership is attempting to support to remain with their family, is excluded from school. The disruption and instant withdrawal of protective and stabilising factors that school brings, can be the tipping point which lead to a young person becoming looked after.

Other ways in which a lack of national policy coherence manifests itself is the insufficient alignment between different government departments. Although children's services, police and health are all statutory partners, there is significant evidence that in many areas this does not lead to equality of responsibility in terms of funding or responding to the recommendations of inspection. This relates to the different priorities attached to meeting the needs of vulnerable children by the Department for Education, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Home Office respectively. Mis-aligned priorities and focus across different organisations and differences in language are a real challenge to effective partnership working. A clear single national vision, and accompanying outcomes, for supporting the country's most vulnerable children does not exist anywhere. The lack of a coherent and overarching vision for vulnerable and at-risk children also creates a tendency towards initiative overload emanating from national government. This can be a particular challenge for smaller areas.

"I wonder what the benefits of having a truly national multi-agency approach would be to protecting children… Currently we have different agencies with different criteria."

Further ways in which these issues could be addressed include:

- A clearer child-centred vision for supporting vulnerable and at-risk children that is shared within and across Government departments and informs all new policy development.
- An agreed national indicator set focused on the outcomes that matter to children and young people for example long-term education and employment outcomes, reducing homelessness, stability in where they live and where they are educated, reducing offending and reoffending, reducing criminal and sexual exploitation and reducing numbers of young people going missing. The national framework for children's social care, on which the DfE is currently consulting, is moving in this direction but it is narrowly focused on social care

outcomes.[39] The Supporting Families outcomes framework is much broader, but is very tied to a specific programme and funding regime.[40] A really inclusive outcomes framework would provide a framework for policy on vulnerable children across government and have equal resonance with health, education, police, youth offending, the voluntary and community sector and other partners.

- Clearer statutory expectations for all partners responsible for supporting vulnerable and at-risk children, including expectations around shared funding.

Structural challenges in recruiting and retaining a children's workforce

The difficulties with recruitment and retention across the whole children's workforce are described in detail on pages 17-18 above. These include acute shortages of staff in specific roles, spiralling agency costs and too much competition between local areas for the same people. As this research has shown, there is a great deal that local areas can do to grow their own workforce and put in place the work environment that incentivises staff to stay. At a regional level, many have agreed to memoranda of understanding (MOU) to prevent poaching staff or offering above locally agreed rates to agencies. However, these MOUs have proved fragile in the face of critical staff shortages. DfE are consulting on increasing regulation around the social care agency market, including capping the rates that agencies can charge for social workers and ending the practice of using managed service or project teams.[41] This is a welcome intervention, however there is anxiety that this could have the effect of driving some people out of the profession altogether.

The underlying risk is two-fold. Firstly, that there are not enough trained people in key professional children facing roles (including social work, educational psychology, therapies, school nurses, health visitors and early years education) to fill the vacancies that exist. Secondly that salaries and career progression opportunities in these professional roles are not sufficient to prevent an exodus into equally well-paying and less stressful roles, often outside the public sector. Anecdotally, Covid has accelerated the trend in workers leaving children's services for different career paths. If these two fundamental observations are true at-scale, it means that local attempts to address the issues are likely to only make a small dent in the shortfall and may in the end displace the challenge (for example to another part of the country) but not solve it. There are striking parallels here with the difficulties besetting the early years workforce which are detailed in our recent research for the LGA. Therefore, in addition to a more regulated agency market, national government may consider:

- Carrying out a workforce strategy for the whole children's workforce. This could include detailed estimates for the numbers of key professionals required and support for training and routes into the profession in sufficient volume to fill vacancies.
- Alongside a workforce strategy, reviewing pay and conditions of service for key children's professions with high vacancy levels to consider both the flexibilities within the local government pay-scale and the associated benefits of high-quality training and career progression, to create a more attractive overall offer for hard-to-recruit professional posts. This would require additional funding for local government to make any changes in pay levels affordable at a local level.

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[39] Children's Social Care National Framework and Dashboard, DfE, 2023
[40] National Supporting Families Outcomes Framework, DHLUC, 2022
[41] Child and Family Social Worker Workforce, DfE, 2023

Under supply of placements for young people with the most complex needs

As described on page 15 above, local areas are reporting a cadre of young people who are increasingly hard to place with rapidly escalating individual placement costs. There are also questions about the role of profit-making organisations in children's social care and the way that the unintended consequences of inspection might be shaping the availability of placements. The impact of this is two-fold. First the quality and stability of placements for a very complex and vulnerable subset of at-risk young people is being compromised. Secondly the impact on local budgets is considerable, contributing to both rising spend and increased volatility and unpredictability.

The DfE has announced its intention to create a financial oversight regime for the largest providers of children's homes and pilot regional care cooperatives to plan, commission and deliver care places. It is hoped that these actions will go some way to addressing the structural problems in the market for children's homes identified in the CMA report.[42] However, to address current shortages National Government may need to consider more far-reaching options to reduce the demand for residential placements for adolescents with the most complex needs, encourage more existing providers to open up places to those young people who are hardest to place, and make it easier to open and run new provision. Some of the ways in which this issue might be tackled at a national level include:

- Working with local areas to pilot and fund partnership-based approaches to working with young people at risk of extra-familial harm, revitalising spend and focus on targeted youth services and alternative placement strategies for at-risk adolescents.
- Reviewing the inspection and regulatory framework for children's homes to reward and recognise the positive contribution of those providers who work with adolescents with the most complex needs and better take account of the current practical constraints in the market for residential placements.
- Providing additional capital investment and time-limited revenue funding for local areas proposing to open a new residential facility that fills a recognised gap in the market.

Under investment in critical aspects of the offer to children and young people

Finally, the local areas that we engaged in this research referred to the chronic long-term underinvestment in key parts of the system, in particular support for children and young people's mental health. The lack of funding in this area is compounded by difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified staff which limits capacity even where sufficient financial investment is available.

There is a sense from many of the research projects that we have undertaken, not just this one, that years of austerity, followed by restraint in public sector spending at a time of heightened demand, have hollowed out the support available to vulnerable young people in the system at large, from youth services to pastoral teams in schools. This creates a fragility in the system as a whole, with little strength in depth, and everyone stretched to their maximum to meet needs. This does not feel sustainable in the long term. Too little investment in the supportive architecture for at-risk children and young people is coupled with the fact that investment that does exist is often short term in nature and linked to a bidding process so that not all areas can benefit. Indeed, areas where

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[42] Children's Social Care: Stable homes, built on love, DfE, 2023

performance is poor believe that they are less likely to be successful in bidding for grants yet, arguably, these are the areas that might benefit most from additional resource to improve practice.

In the past, the funding for early help and intervention has felt particularly insecure. Many areas remain almost completely dependent on supporting families grants from DLUHC to fund this activity. The uplift in funding for this programme announced as part of the last spending review, and the commitment to fund until 2025 has been very welcome, and it is hoped that the strong focus on family support work set out in *Stable Homes, built on love,* will help to ensure a clear national message on the importance of early help going forward as well as the ongoing investment required to deliver on these aspirations. In the spirit of joined-up thinking and effective alignment across partnerships, it will be important that initiatives to support the further roll out of family support services are sufficiently joined up with the development of family hubs.

To further support the financial sustainability of wider children's services, national government might consider:

- Putting an end to very short-term pots of funding with a minimum three-year funding window for new initiatives.

- Reviewing funding available for child and adolescent mental health, with a particular focus on funding services that prevent mental health needs from escalating to a point where a CAMHS intervention is necessary.

- Ensure the Family First for Children pathfinders learn from, and in turn inform, local areas that are in the process of establishing Family Hubs, and that in due course funding to support these initiatives is long-term and country-wide.

Conclusion

The seven key enablers that underpin improvement in children's services have stood the test of time. A focus on strategic vision, effective leadership, and genuine engagement with workforce and partners, underpinned by a strong supporting apparatus, innovation and investment are the core ingredients that enable consistent and sustained improvement in services for children.

However, as this research has showed, the context in which children's services are operating is more complex in several ways than it was in 2016. Covid has had an undeniable impact. It has brought new children and families to the attention of children's services who previously may not have needed help, not least those younger children who has missed out on crucial opportunities for wider socialisation; it has intensified calls on mental health services for both children and adults; and it has led to far-reaching changes in how the children's workforce operates – some very positive, and others less so. In addition, we are also seeing the impact of changes which pre-dated Covid, and in some cases have been accelerated by the pandemic, such as the impact of funding pressures on wider public services and the increasing complexity of needs of young people, particularly adolescents, coming to the attention of children's services. The growth in numbers, and more widespread distribution, of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, has further exacerbated this trend.

So how have children's services, and wider children's partnerships responded to these new demands. The answer lies in the three cross-cutting themes that we have found to permeate our seven key enablers. First there is a deeper attention to the well-being of the workforce, to the relationships which underpin an effective workforce, and to the quality of interactions. This focus is

summed up in the phrase 'culture change'. Secondly, there is a greater emphasis based on genuine partnership working – in the words of one DCS "working together rather than alongside". There is a strong perception that the range and complexity of needs exhibited by a growing number of young people can only be supported through a dynamic multi-agency response. As resources and capacity get tighter, it becomes all the more important to find ways to maximise the opportunities to share knowledge, expertise, skills, staff and funding. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, children's partnerships have become more adept and skilled at listening to the voice of children, young people and families, and putting their lived experiences at the heart of the improvement effort. Culture change, partnership and children's voice is a mantra that should not just underpin the improvement efforts of a local area, but might be a useful yardstick for national policy too.

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