ACTION RESEARCH INTO IMPROVEMENT IN LOCAL CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Practical implications for lead members and senior leaders

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Foreword by Councillor David Simmonds CBE, Chairman of the Local Government Association Improvement and Innovation Board

Keeping children safe is one of the most important things councils do and it is right that our children's services come under significant scrutiny from Ofsted, the Department for Education (DfE) and the media. Ofsted have sought to "raise the bar" with the introduction of the more challenging single inspection framework in 2013, but the sector has responded to the challenge, with 75% of councils that have been inspected under the single inspection framework being judged requires improvement or better.

There has already been significant debate around the value of the current inspection arrangements and their role in driving improvement; this report does not seek to repeat these arguments. Instead, it looks at the practical question of what drives continued, sustainable improvement in children's services, with examples of practical steps that all councils – irrespective of Ofsted rating – can take.

It is clear that, collectively, we have the knowledge and experience of what "good" looks like, so the importance of sector-led support to improve children's services should not be underestimated. We do not work in isolation, however, so the contribution of both Ofsted and the DfE to this report is valuable. The Local Government Association (LGA), alongside the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), has been working with both organisations to look at how we can work together to drive improvement in children's services. We all have a role to play, both in supporting councils to prevent build and maintain standards in their children's services, and in providing support to those that need it.

The evidence in this report makes clear that children's services should not be seen in isolation. It will be down to you, whether you are a councillor or officer, and whatever your level in the organisation, to play your part to make sure your council's children's services continually improve to meet the needs of children who need our help most.

Introduction: Aims of the research

In 2012, Ofsted introduced a new single inspection framework for children's services. At the time this action research began (January 2016), 78 local children's services had been inspected, of which 20 had been found inadequate, 41 were deemed to require improvement, and 17 were judged good. During the time this research was carried out, further inspections have taken place, with two members of the tri-borough authority – Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster – becoming the first local children's services departments to receive outstanding judgements under the current framework. The new single inspection framework has not been without controversy. Nevertheless, the profile of inspection outcomes suggests that there is a need for system-wide improvement in children's services. Understanding how best to enable and support that improvement has been the focus of this research.

This project was commissioned by the LGA, and has sought to answer two central questions.

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

This has been done by working in depth with a small sample of nine local areas, at different points on their improvement journeys, as well as a range of national stakeholders and senior leaders from other local children's services departments.

Purpose of this document

The findings from this research project, as well as detailed case studies based on the improvement activities of some of the participating local areas, are set out in our final report, published by the LGA. The report is necessarily comprehensive, and sets out the evidence we gathered about how local areas have brought about and sustained improvement, as well as our recommendations about how the national system can support local children's services to improve. Alongside our report, therefore, we have developed a short summary that draws out the important practical implications for lead members and senior leaders involved in leading improvement in local children's services departments.

Structure of the document

The document is made of five sections. **Part 1** describes the phases of the improvement journey of local children's services, and the specific emphases and risks at each phase. **Part 2** continues this theme, and highlights the timescales involved in achieving and sustaining improvement. **Part 3** outlines the seven crucial enablers of improvement that we identified through the research. **Part 4** focuses on the vital initial steps leaders might take when starting out on an improvement journey. In the final section, **Part 5**, we explain briefly how the different components of the children's services system as a whole might work in tandem to support local children's services to improve, and the system leadership role that individual local areas can play within that.
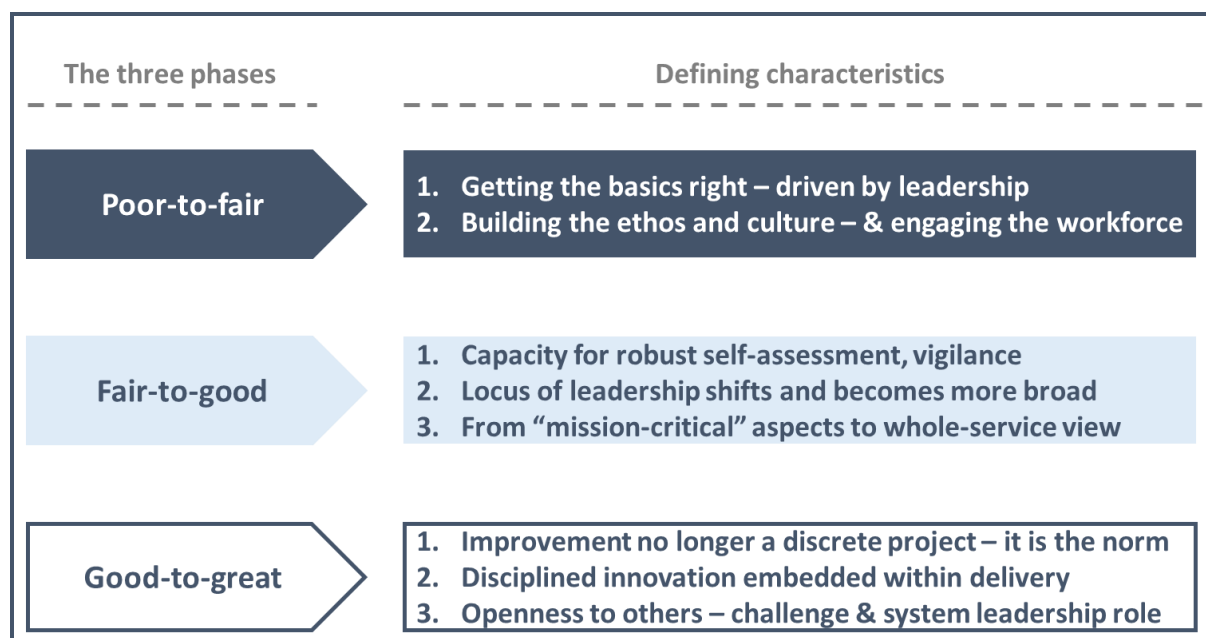
Part 1: The improvement journey

All of the local areas with which we worked saw themselves as being on a journey of improvement, with key milestones they were seeking to reach and pitfalls they needed to avoid. To capture this concept of an improvement journey, we have deliberately not used language linked to the Ofsted framework: our intention is not to second-guess what it might take to achieve a particular inspection judgement. Instead, we have borrowed the terminology of *poor*, *fair*, *good* and *great*.[1]

A key finding of our research has been that the improvement activities in which local areas are engaged are both consistent at each stage of the journey and are continuous. In other words, local areas at the good-to-great stage of the journey have not stopped doing what got them from poor to fair. Instead, they have continued, embedded and built upon these activities. For example, building the vision, values and culture of the organisation and robust self-assessment are both vital activities in the initial stage of the improvement journey, which must be continued and sustained if improvement is to be embedded.

What we did find, however, was that there are distinct emphases associated with each stage of the improvement journey. These are summarised in the figure below. As described to us by the participating local areas, the improvement journey is not automatic, and progression from phase to phase is not guaranteed to be smooth. At each stage, as well as defining characteristics of improvement activity, there are also specific risks of "slipping back" that need to be avoided.

Defining characteristics at each stage of the improvement journey

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

Poor-to-fair

This stage of the improvement journey has two key characteristics. The first is the emphasis on putting core systems and processes in place, reasserting control over the system, accurately assessing risk,

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[1] Mona Mourshed, Chinezi Chijioke and Michael Barber, 2010, *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better*.

making sure cases were allocated, clearing backlogs and bringing caseloads down to manageable levels through recruitment and redistribution. The second, however, is rebuilding the culture and ethos of the organisation. This involves engaging frontline staff and drawing on their ideas to develop a long-term vision and a strategic plan for delivering high-quality front-line practice. The first of these activities focuses on reasserting management grip, the second on constructing something that staff can buy into.

The pitfalls to be avoiding during this phase are failing to get to a genuine understanding of why the service has been failing and its current weaknesses and strengths – "getting to a baseline" – and rushing into an ill-thought-out restructure. The premium, during this initial stage of the improvement journey, is on accurate diagnosis and in-depth engagement with the workforce.

Fair-to-good

For local areas that have improved from poor to fair to sustain their improvement and avoid the risk of "slipping back", it is vital that they see improvement as a long-term process that requires the consistent application of a long-term strategic plan. Complacency and short-termism are the risks to be avoided. This is achieved in three ways. First, local areas should seek to develop their capacity for robust *self*-assessment. This is vital once any external oversight – for example through an externally-chaired improvement board – has been removed. Second, middle managers within children's services and partner agencies begin to play a more important role in owning the improvement agenda, embedding improvement, and ensuring greater consistency of frontline practice. Third, local areas can begin to shift the focus from certain "mission-critical" aspects of their service (such as the front door and thresholds for referrals) to see children's services as a more interdependent system. This means focusing on ensuring that high-quality practice is embedded consistently across all teams, and a greater emphasis is placed specifically on preventative and early help services.

The Continuous Service Improvement Framework: Barnsley

Having been issued with an improvement notice in 2012, Barnsley had a positive experience of working with an improvement board and an independent chairperson. The challenge, for Barnsley, was how to maintain pace and embed improvements after the improvement notice was lifted. To this end, Barnsley developed the Continuous Service Improvement Framework. This aims to align key elements of improvement so that they are working in tandem to improve services and outcomes. These include:

- a plan for continuous service improvement delivered by partners working together;
- robust and clear system governance – through the children's trust board, scrutiny from elected members, and the Barnsley Safeguarding Children Board; and
- developing a culture of respectful challenge and making the voice of the child part of business-as-usual for all services and agencies.

Working within the framework, partners have been able to drill down into priority areas in order to embed and spread improvements in frontline practice. The front door has been a key area of focus, and improvement work has resulted in a decrease in the volume of referrals to the service. There have also been reductions in the numbers of child protection plans in the last two years, and improved permanency planning for children in care.

Good-to-great

For local areas seeking to improve from good to great, or sustain excellent performance, the emphasis was on maintaining consistently high-quality frontline practice and managing risk effectively. In this stage of the journey, improvement activities are no longer something discrete and separate from the day-to-day operations of children's services. Instead, they have become the norm, or "what we do". There are robust routines in place to ensure oversight of key service areas, but these are so embedded as to be able to embrace disciplined innovation – clear planning, precise implementation, and rigorous evaluation of its effectiveness – to drive ongoing improvement.

Improving outcomes for children on the edge of care: North Yorkshire

North Yorkshire has achieved significant improvements in children's services since 2009, recently being named as one of the DfE *partners in practice*. Key to this success has been a long-term whole-service strategic plan for embedding effective and consistent frontline practice, and on shifting the focus of support over time from statutory services to prevention and early help. This has three elements. First, North Yorkshire has focused on strengthening routes into children's services and ensuring consistent decision-making by means of a multi-agency customer contact centre. Second, it adopted a strategic approach to placements and permanency, with weekly routines to ensure oversight of those entering and in care, and the innovative *no wrong door* approach to provide tailored early support for young people on the edge of care or entering care late in their lives. Third, performance improvement groups enable leaders and managers to exercise ongoing forensic scrutiny of practice. As a result, between 2012 and 2016, there has been a significant reduction in referrals, and conversion of referrals to assessments has risen (from 64.9% to 97%). Child protection plans have reduced (by 36%), as has the number of looked-after children (by 15%). Financially, £3million is no longer being spent on the looked-after children budget, enabling further investment in prevention and early help.

At this stage in the journey, there may be opportunities for senior leaders to act as "system leaders", supporting other local areas that are experiencing difficulties. This can bring benefits to the supporting organisation, as well as the supported, in the form of exposure to new ideas and development opportunities for staff. Nevertheless, local areas need to be mindful of the risk of becoming overstretched and "taking their eye off the ball". The speed at which cases come into children's services and the number of decisions needed on a daily basis can mean that even ostensibly high-performing local children's services can be vulnerable to rapid decline if staff in key roles leave or too much of their time is diverted onto other projects.

Part 2: Timescales of improvement

All of the local areas that took part in the research were agreed that genuinely sustained improvement was a long-term endeavour. There are a number of factors that can determine how quickly a local area can progress along the improvement journey. These include:

- **the depth and duration of service failure** – long-term underperformance by children's services can have a compounding effect on the needs of children and families who need support;
- **the level of frank recognition and acceptance by leaders of the nature of failure** – rather than investing time in disputing whether this is the case; and
- **the effectiveness of the initial response** – specifically avoiding false starts on ill-thought-out restructures or innovations, leading to staff turbulence.

Once these barriers, which can thwart improvement before it has even got going, have been cleared out of the way, local areas estimated that it took around two years to move from poor to fair, to move from full and frank recognition of weakness to having a safe and effective core service. Doing so required:

- around six months of rigorous diagnostic to get to a baseline position on the organisation's capacity and competency;
- a further six months to stabilise the service by strengthening core systems, ensuring the right thresholds for entry into children's services are in place, and clearing backlogs;
- a further year of iterative implementation, checking quality, and problem-solving; and
- all the while, engaging and communicating with the workforce and key partners.

Estimated timescales for each phase of the improvement journey
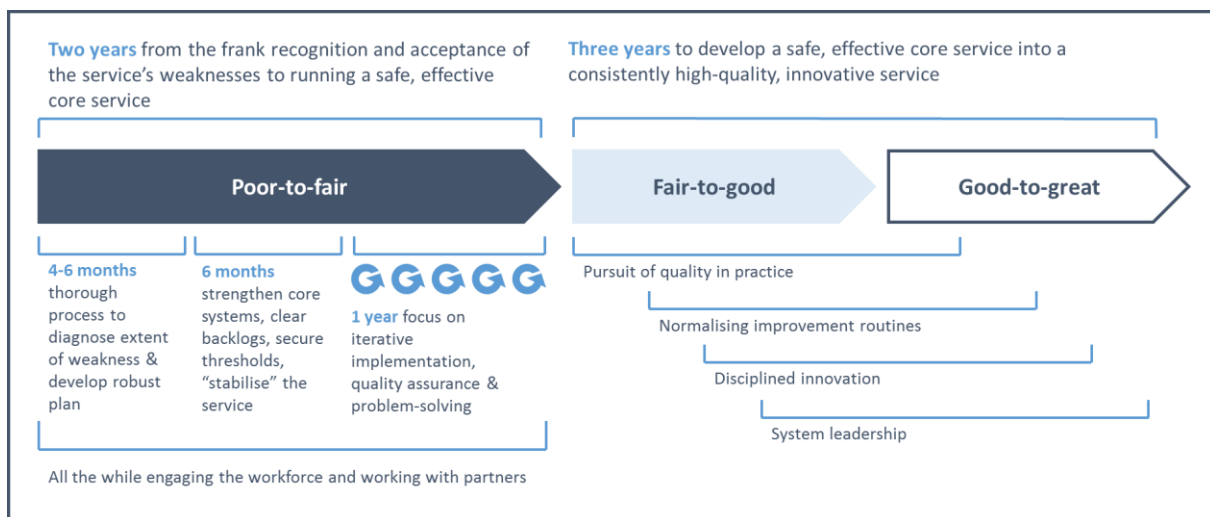
Those local areas that had made the transition right the way through all of the phases of the improvement journey reflected that to move from fair to good and great required around a further three years. This period was characterised by the relentless pursuit of quality and consistency of practice, embedding and normalising of improvement routines, disciplined innovation, and eventually looking to reach out beyond the service to provide more system-wide leadership.

We have included these timescales in our research not because we think this is a one-size-fits-all model: the context for each local area will be different, and there is a risk for all of slipping back at each stage of the journey. Instead, we hope that setting out the stages and timescales of improvement, based on our research, may provide a useful means of orientating how local areas plan to improve and sustain effective children's services.

Seven enablers of improvement in children's services

1 Strategic approach
- **Rigorous and forensic self-assessment** of the organisation's strengths and weaknesses
- **Honest and open response to any external feedback or inspections** – focus on improvement, avoid denial
- **Develop a vision & strategic plan that is right for the organisation** – not to "tick a box" or be seen to be acting

2 Leadership & governance
- **Maintain the right, stable, focused leadership at all levels** – political, senior leaders & middle managers
- **Don't rush into a restructure** – engage staff and develop structures that will best support improving practice
- **Effective, professional governance** – with key decision-makers from partner agencies to enable swift action

3 Engaging & supporting the workforce
- **Change the rhetoric** – avoid the "blame game" and ensuing turbulence in staffing
- **Articulate high expectations & ambitious goals** – provide a clear description of what good practice looks like
- **Stabilise the workforce** – and support frontline professionals through manageable caseloads and supervision
- **Develop staff from within** – through a pro-active recruitment and a robust staff development strategy

4 Engaging partners
- **Engage senior partners** – for example, through well-run, effective LSCBs, to create a mandate to collaborate
- **Align thresholds** – to ensure consistent decision-making about referrals to the service
- **Review practices through multi-agency audits** – to drive improvements across all services and agencies
- **Remain outward-facing** – to avoid the risk of "group-think" or slipping into denial about performance

5 Building the supporting apparatus
- **Maintain a secure front door** – to ensure the right cases are dealt with in the right way, at the right time
- **Ensure the flow of cases reflects a child's journey** – to ensure decisions are taken in the child's best interests
- **Know the business** – ensure regular flows of robust evidence that can be used by members, leaders & staff
- **Develop routines** to track progress, audit quality, monitor improvements and hear from children themselves

6 Fostering innovation
- **Create a learning culture** – one in which new ideas and initiatives to improve practice are openly encouraged
- **Test and pilot new ideas carefully** – adopt a measured approach to find out what works in the local context
- **Evaluate rigorously** – to learn from and respond to innovative practice – and know when to "hold your nerve"

7 Judicious use of resources
- **Ensure strategic & financial planning are aligned** – to enable and sustain short- and long-term improvements
- **Invest where it is needed** – deploy additional resources to unblock back-logs or develop critical new processes
- **Sustain investment** – avoid the risk of diverting resources elsewhere before improvement is embedded
- **Focus on long-term priorities** – investing in prevention services to reduce demand on other services

Part 3: Seven enablers of improvement in children's services

Through our research, we identified seven important enablers of improvement. These are summarised in the diagram on the previous page.

Put briefly, the first four describe the importance of getting key people in a range of roles and organisations lined up behind a single, coherent strategy for improvement, and the importance of building the organisation culture, ethos and values to sustain improvement. In preceding sections, we have described the risk of rushing into a poorly-thought-out restructure or new initiative. Instead, our research suggests that the key to rapid and sustained improvement is frank acceptance of past failure, stable and consistent leadership, and open engagement with the workforce and key partners, in order to develop a shared vision and strategic plan that is right for the service. Political, corporate and service leaders can play a crucial role in catalysing a speedy and effective response to serious weaknesses in children's services, sustaining improvement through effective long-term planning and scrutiny, and embedding effective frontline practice through, for example, effective corporate parenting arrangements. Political, corporate and service leaders, and an engaged workforce and committed partners, who know what good children's services look like and are signed up to effective long-term plans for improvement, are vital in driving and sustaining improvement.

Once this is in place, building high-quality social care practice through effective support and development for the workforce, maintaining momentum through effective governance arrangements, and using rapid feedback on frontline practice to address key service areas are vital.

Stabilising the workforce: Achieving for Children, Kingston-upon-Thames

Kingston found that, counter to their expectations, the turnover in social work staff increased after they were judged to be good. To address this issue, and to recreate the essential stability in their workforce and team management structure, they instituted a programme of assessing, through staff surveys and exit interviews, what was causing social workers to leave. Based on the findings of this analysis they established a social care workforce board to re-professionalise their approach to recruitment and retention. Crucially, this focused not just on social workers, but also on recruiting permanent team managers – one of the key findings of the initial diagnostic phase was that social workers left when they no longer felt they had consistent team management. The service has now strengthened their 'retention offer' through better training pathways, progression, talent management and oversight by heads of service. This is paying dividends – all team leader posts have now been recruited to and the vacancy rate for social workers is heading back towards 10%.

The fifth enabler – what we have termed "building the supporting apparatus" – describes the need to put in place the foundations or essential "wiring" of effective children's services. The focus here is on ensuring strong core systems and processes are in place, starting with the front door and ensuring that there are consistent thresholds for entry into children's services used by all partners.
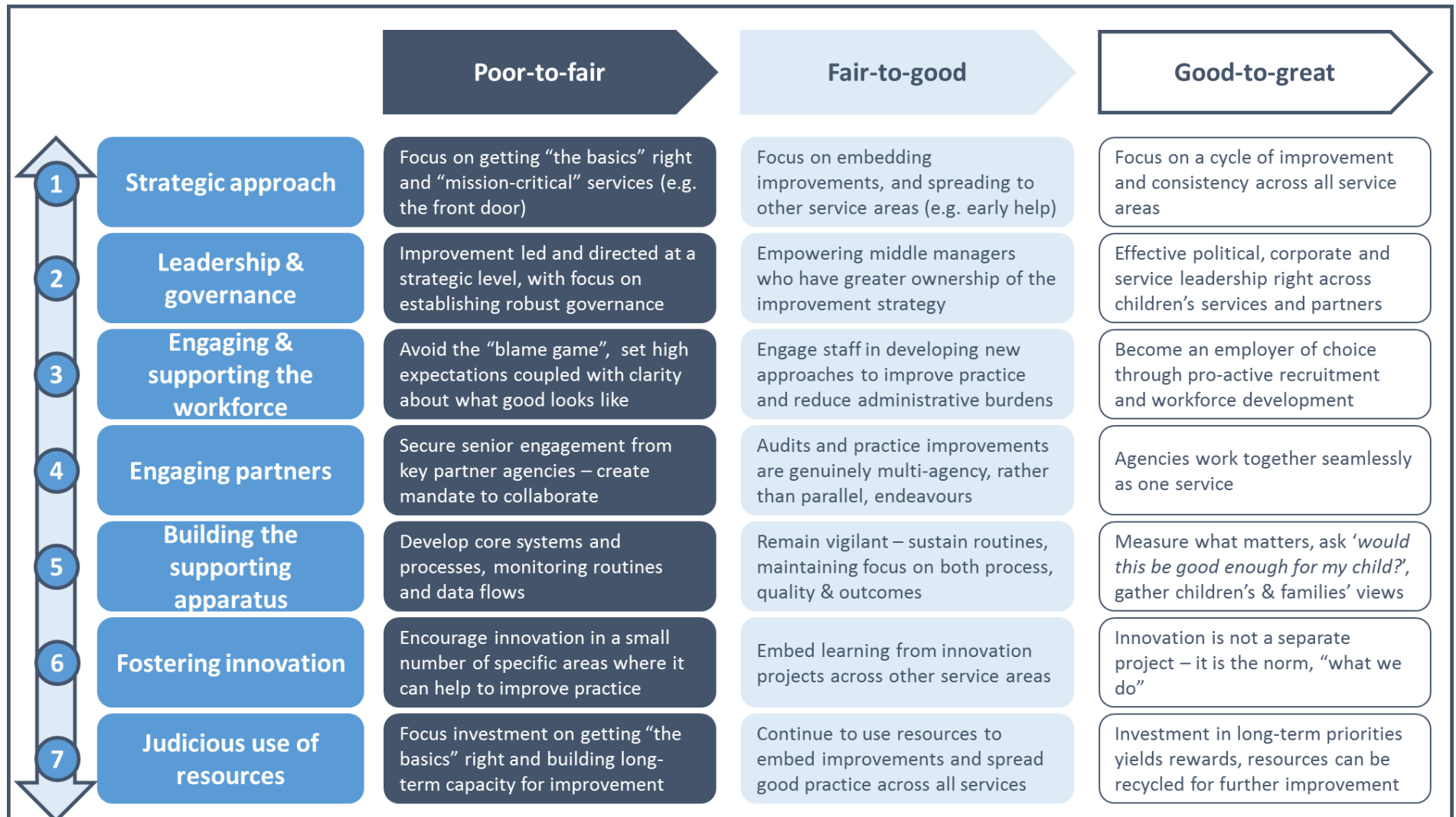
Furthermore, it is essential that leaders and managers "know the business". This requires there to be robust routines for collating and triangulating real-time performance data, the results of audits of frontline practice, and feedback from children and families. These routines enable leaders and managers to identify areas of the service that require attention, to track improvements, and refine or adjust the approach swiftly. The speed of cases coming into the service and the number of decisions required about how they are handled make these real-time feedback loops imperative.

The sixth and seventh of our key enablers – "fostering innovation" and "judicious use of resources" – describe how local areas should think about how they continue to enhance their practice and sustain improvement. Innovation has a vital role to play in improving children's services, but must be disciplined and focused if it is to lead to sustained improvements and avoid diverting energy and resources from core business.

There is a key role that leaders can play in ensuring that the purpose of innovations is planned out in advance, that innovations are tested and piloted on an appropriate scale, and that there is rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness before they are rolled out further. Likewise, leaders can play a crucial role in ensuring that there is clarity about the long-term plans for improvement and the way in which strategy and resources are aligned in order to achieve this. This risk, described to us by many local areas during our research, was that leaders, particularly elected members and corporate leaders, wind down their engagement in children's services improvement after the initial poor-to-fair phase of the journey and seek to withdraw resources prematurely.

As noted above, a key finding of this research was that the activities required to drive and sustain improvement are consistent, continuous and cumulative throughout the improvement journey. As such, we consider that these seven enablers apply right across the phases of the improvement journey. The emphasis of each will, however, be slightly different at each stage, as we have set out in the diagram on the next page. This diagram may serve as a useful tool for political, corporate and service leaders to assess where they are on their improvement journey, which enablers they have in place, and which areas may need strengthening.
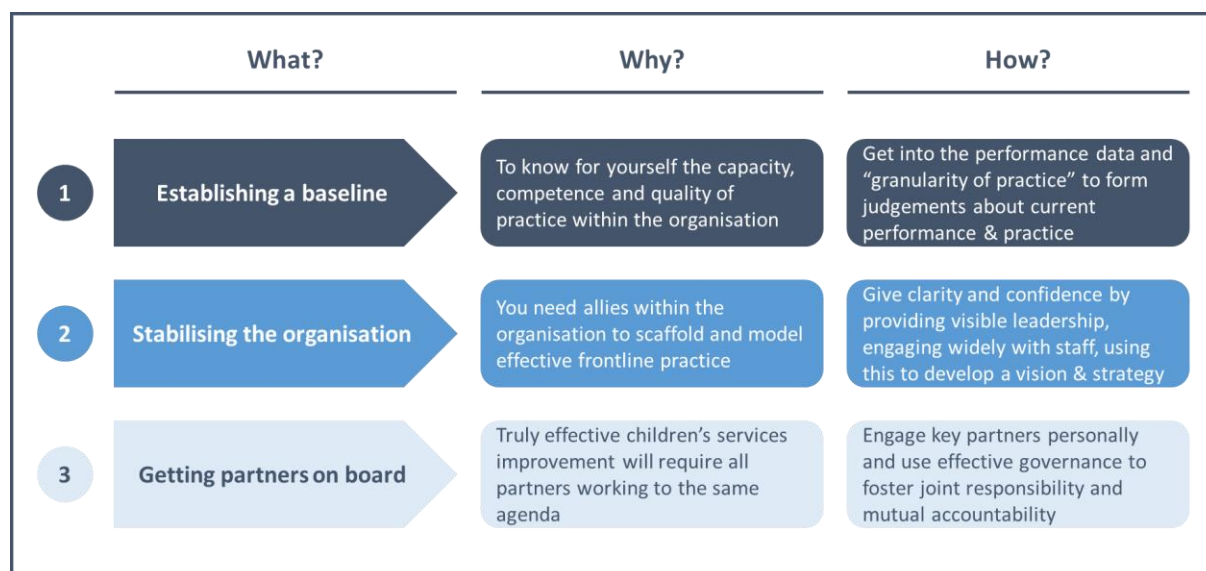
The seven enablers at each stage of the improvement journey

	Poor-to-fair	Fair-to-good	Good-to-great
1 **Strategic approach**	Focus on getting "the basics" right and "mission-critical" services (e.g. the front door)	Focus on embedding improvements, and spreading to other service areas (e.g. early help)	Focus on a cycle of improvement and consistency across all service areas
2 **Leadership & governance**	Improvement led and directed at a strategic level, with focus on establishing robust governance	Empowering middle managers who have greater ownership of the improvement strategy	Effective political, corporate and service leadership right across children's services and partners
3 **Engaging & supporting the workforce**	Avoid the "blame game", set high expectations coupled with clarity about what good looks like	Engage staff in developing new approaches to improve practice and reduce administrative burdens	Become an employer of choice through pro-active recruitment and workforce development
4 **Engaging partners**	Secure senior engagement from key partner agencies – create mandate to collaborate	Audits and practice improvements are genuinely multi-agency, rather than parallel, endeavours	Agencies work together seamlessly as one service
5 **Building the supporting apparatus**	Develop core systems and processes, monitoring routines and data flows	Remain vigilant – sustain routines, maintaining focus on both process, quality & outcomes	Measure what matters, ask 'would this be good enough for my child?', gather children's & families' views
6 **Fostering innovation**	Encourage innovation in a small number of specific areas where it can help to improve practice	Embed learning from innovation projects across other service areas	Innovation is not a separate project – it is the norm, "what we do"
7 **Judicious use of resources**	Focus investment on getting "the basics" right and building long-term capacity for improvement	Continue to use resources to embed improvements and spread good practice across all services	Investment in long-term priorities yields rewards, resources can be recycled for further improvement

Part 4: Starting out on an improvement journey

During the research, one experienced Director of Children's Services reflected that they would have found it invaluable to have a summary of some very simple practical steps to take when setting out on their improvement journey. The diagram below captures three important steps identified by some of the children's services leaders who took part in the research. This is, in essence, another way of describing the activities that characterise the first six to 12 months of the improvement journey for a local children's social care service.

Three key steps when embarking on an improvement journey

	What?	Why?	How?
1	Establishing a baseline	To know for yourself the capacity, competence and quality of practice within the organisation	Get into the performance data and "granularity of practice" to form judgements about current performance & practice
2	Stabilising the organisation	You need allies within the organisation to scaffold and model effective frontline practice	Give clarity and confidence by providing visible leadership, engaging widely with staff, using this to develop a vision & strategy
3	Getting partners on board	Truly effective children's services improvement will require all partners working to the same agenda	Engage key partners personally and use effective governance to foster joint responsibility and mutual accountability

The importance of **establishing a baseline** – getting to an accurate judgement of the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation – was a central theme in our research. There are three key steps leaders should take during this stage:

- **interrogate the data for yourself**, looking particularly at benchmarks (neighbouring and similar local authorities, national averages, and past performance) and "having a fine eye for detail";
- **getting into the granularity of frontline practice** and decision-making – going out to see frontline practice, and shadowing team managers and social workers; and
- **assessing the competence of the workforce** – to judge where there are pockets of good practice that can be built upon, what the overall development needs are, and looking at vacancy rates across teams to understand workforce needs.

Done sensitively and with clear communications about why establishing a baseline is important, staff need not feel threatened or patronised; indeed, some local areas described how staff had welcomed the opportunity to be open about areas where they would welcome further support.

There are good reasons for local areas to seek to avoid high rates of staff turnover, since turbulence in the workforce can make it difficult to embed and sustain improvement. This is why experienced children's services leaders also described the importance of **stabilising the organisation**. This meant providing visible leadership and engaging staff openly, and avoiding staff feeling vilified and "done to". Furthermore, it meant using engagement with staff to listen to their concerns, draw on their ideas for

improvement, develop a shared vision and strategy, and utilise potential allies to support staff and embed effective practice. Leaders also talked about "setting out your stall" to staff about standards and expectations. Managers might need to be supported actively in addressing areas of poor performance.

As well as establishing a baseline and stabilising the organisation, the leaders we engaged stressed that a third set of initial activities at the outset of an improvement journey was **getting partners on board**. The children's services leaders we engaged argued that this should include:

- **building personal relationships with counterparts in partner agencies** – through open and honest discussion about their priorities, current challenges within children's services, and how they can support improvement;
- **building rapport and commitment to an improvement agenda** – engaging them and their staff in developing a long-term vision and strategy for improvement;
- **testing this through some early forms of collaboration** – developing agreement around consistent thresholds for referrals, and testing their implementation, was seen as an important initial area of focus for partners from which further collaboration could be built; and
- **developing effective multi-agency governance** – with senior leaders engaged to enable swift decision-making, and foster joint responsibility and mutual accountability for implementing the improvement strategy.

Part 5: Acting as a system leader

In the final two chapters of our report, we turn to the ways in which the system as a whole *currently* supports local children's services to improve and how these might be made more effective.

The core components of a self-improving children's services system
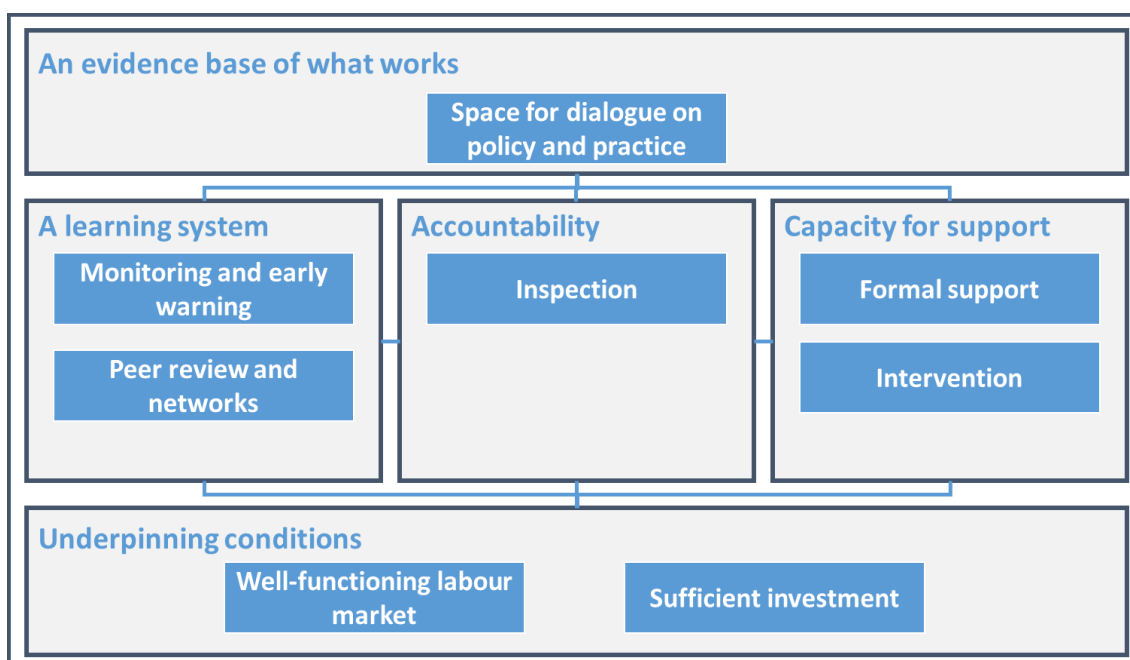
We have done this by developing a schematic that captures the core components of a self-improving system. This requires (a) a robust and frequently added-to evidence base, (b) coherent mechanisms for identifying weaknesses and providing support, informally and formally as appropriate, and (c) the right resources, both human and financial, for services to be stable and to be able to improve.

These are issues for national policy-makers, representative bodies and opinion-formers to consider. Nevertheless, leaders of local children's services have a crucial role to play in developing and sustaining a self-improving children's services system. We suggest that there are three key ways in which leaders can do this.

a. **Being outward-facing and engaging in regional and national networks** – engaging in national policy discussions, taking part in peer reviews, and working on joint projects with other local areas can help to disseminate effective practice, build capacity and identify weaknesses early across the system. It can also help leaders to keep pace with new developments, respond to strategic challenges, and benchmark their services against others.

b. **Collaborating with neighbouring local areas** – there are certain challenges that all of the local areas we engaged for this research were facing. Chief among these was the difficulty of maintaining a stable, highly-trained and motivated workforce, particularly in light of some of the ways in which the agency market can encourage social workers and managers to move between local areas. Working with neighbouring local areas to agree and uphold shared approaches, such as consistent regional rates of pay for agency workers, or on cross-cutting priorities such as child sexual exploitation, can be beneficial.

c. **Taking responsibility for the health of the system** – identifying children's services that are at risk of slipping into serious decline before service failure reaches crisis point relies heavily on leaders in neighbouring local areas pooling their intelligence and being prepared to have tough conversations with the peers. As we describe in the report, this requires that there are the right mechanisms for such issues to be flagged up and clarity about how such concerns will be acted upon. It also requires, however, leaders of children's services to be prepared to raise those concerns clearly and firmly in the first place, and to be prepared to provide support where it is needed.