

Improving children's services

The LGA annual conference 2017

Birmingham, 5 July 2017

Research carried out by **Isos Partnership**

Commissioned by the **Local Government Association**



About our work with the LGA

The context

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

Our LGA research

Two research projects, focusing on two key questions.

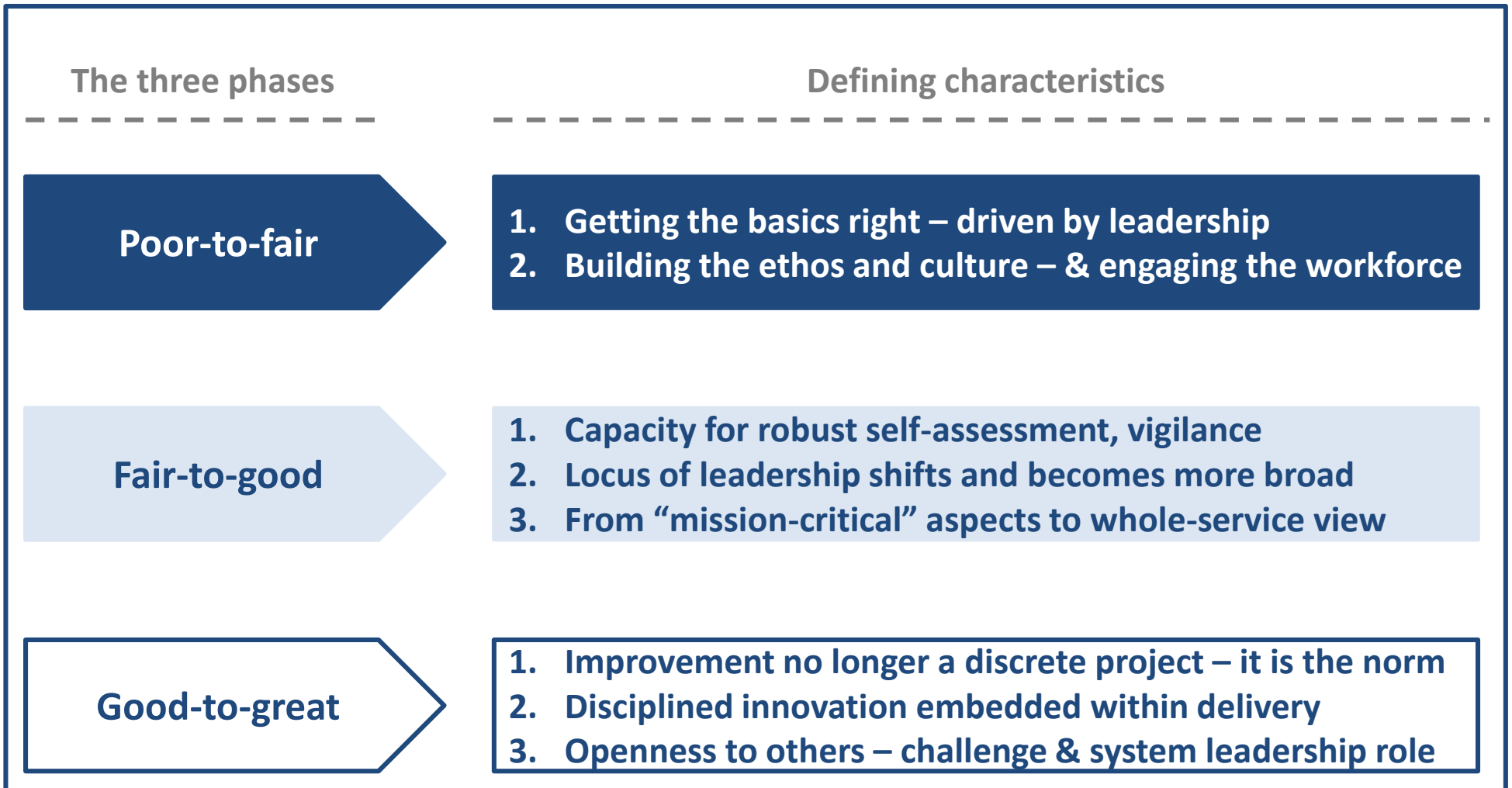
1. What are the enablers of (and barriers to) improvement for local children's services?
2. How can the system as a whole support and facilitate improvement across local children's services?

The local areas with whom we have worked

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



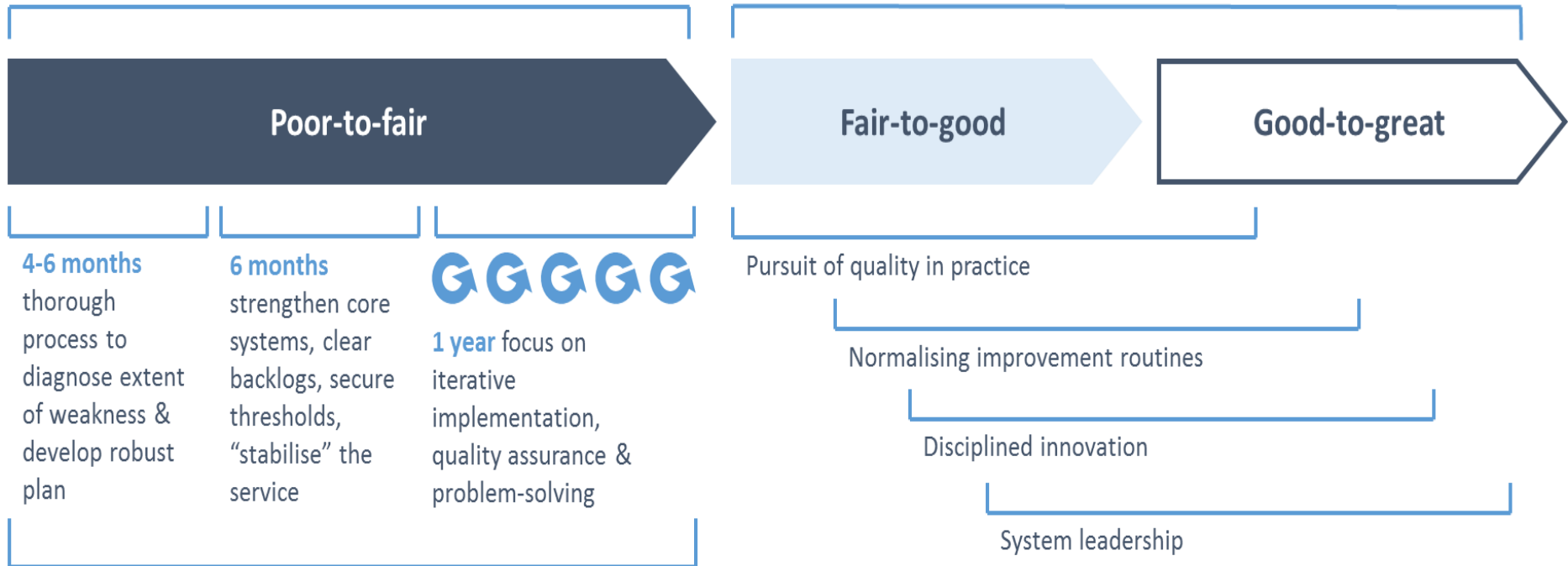
1 Our findings: Phases of the improvement journey



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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



All the while engaging the workforce and working with partners



1 Our findings: Seven enablers of improvement

1

Strategic approach

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

2

Leadership & governance

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

3

Engaging & supporting the workforce

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

4

Engaging partners

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

5

Building the supporting apparatus

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

6

Fostering innovation

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

7

Judicious use of resources

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

2 Support for improvement: Key messages

The role of improvement support

... to facilitate and enable improvement ...

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

Three characteristics of effective improvement support

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

Three broad forms of improvement support

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

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

2 Three forms of improvement support: A framework

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

Type of support	Potential benefits	Key success factors	Circumstances when it is likely to be effective
Sector-led improvement	<p>Builds capacity – working alongside those who have done the job.</p> <p>Rigorous and developmental – challenging, but can create space for improvement, less high-stakes.</p> <p>Helps to avoid insularity – avoid the risk of “believing your own narrative”.</p>	<p>Rigour – whether formal (rigorous challenge) or informal (project focus).</p> <p>Quality and credibility – must bring practical expertise, gain trust.</p> <p>Flexible and tailored – must be grounded in context of that local area, at the right time and with right people.</p>	<p>Start of an improvement journey – to give (new) leaders a baseline.</p> <p>During the journey (perhaps between inspections) – to test, are we on track?</p> <p>To draw on additional expertise or capacity – in a specific area of practice.</p>
External scrutiny and formal intervention	<p>Creates robust governance – brings focus, shapes improvement journey.</p> <p>Brings partners together – creates impetus and can facilitate partnership.</p> <p>Mediates between key players – “honest broker” between national and local partners.</p>	<p>Independence – of the person / body providing external scrutiny.</p> <p>Strategic focus – if not, can become bogged down, critical and defensive.</p> <p>Triangulation – able to triangulate reports with evidence from frontline. ... and the basics of good governance.</p>	<p>Where there is the right children's services leadership capacity, but one of two things may be missing:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “grip” on one key area of practice – “taken their eye off the ball”; or 2. effective governance – political, corporate and/or partnership.
Alternative delivery models	<p>Fresh start, re-focus improvement journey – getting to good, not running away from inadequate. Able to stabilise leadership, workforce.</p> <p>Speed and focus – of decision-making, sole focus on creating environment conducive to strong children's services.</p>	<p>Informed design – clear aims about how this will support improvement.</p> <p>Clarity about relationships with council and partners – governance, services.</p> <p>All other enablers of improvement – an alternative model can enable, but will not on its own drive, improvement.</p>	<p>Where issues are systemic, deep-rooted and/or persistent ... and where leadership “grip” is lacking in three areas – capacity to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. diagnose weaknesses accurately; 2. develop a strategy to address; and 3. implement the strategy effectively.

What are the implications for councils?

Local implications

Putting in place conditions for sustained improvement ...

- **Robust self-assessment** – knowing the “health” of local children’s services
- **Robust strategic priorities** – with partners and staff, shaping the actions that will drive improvement
- **Conditions and capacity to deliver** – resources, workforce, governance, partnerships

System-level implications

Helping to sustain improvement across the system ...

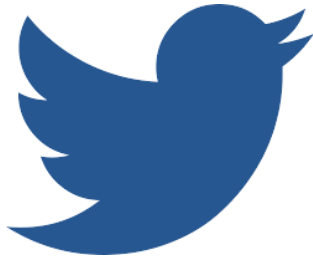
- **Selecting the right form of improvement support** – at the right time, maximising its value
- **Engagement with the system** – open to opportunities to work with and receive challenge from peers
- **“Tough conversations”** – challenging where there are risks of serious decline before crisis-point is reached

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

To find out more ...



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



Website: www.isospartnership.com
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