Enabling improvement

Research into the role and models of external improvement support for local children's services

Acknowledgements

Foreword

Since the publication of the last Isos action research into improvement in children's services, the landscape of children's services has continued to change. Ofsted is developing a new inspection regime that will aim to reduce the burden of inspection on authorities while catching struggling children's services departments before they fail. More councils have moved, or are considering, alternative delivery arrangements, while others have shown clear signs of improvement. In addition, the Department for Education (DfE) has been investing in children's services improvement via the Innovation Fund and Partners in Practice. We look forward to seeing the results and the learning from these initiatives soon.

This report looks at the role of improvement support, and how councils can identify what would work best for them. It is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to children's services improvement – each council will have different strengths and weaknesses, and face different improvement challenges, regardless of whether they are going from poor to good, or good to great. It is down to councillors and officers to look honestly at their own service and decide the extent of support required to deliver improvements – and to bring in external, independent help to do that analysis where it is needed.

There is a wide range of support out there for councils. The Local Government Association (LGA), Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), Ofsted and the DfE are all willing improvement partners, offering many kinds of support to help councils at all stages of their improvement journeys. This breadth of support reflects the fact that no single model works in every set of circumstances, and this research should help to inform evidence-based decisions about the type of support needed, to ensure the quickest, most effective and most sustainable improvements.

There is so much fantastic work going on across the country to help the most vulnerable children in our society, but it is our responsibility to make sure that every child gets the help and protection they deserve. We cannot be complacent, and we cannot accept services that are not up to scratch. I hope this research will support councillors and officers to make the – sometimes tough – decisions they need to drive improvement and deliver excellent children's services.

Councillor David Simmonds
Deputy Chairman, Local Government Association (LGA)

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Executive summary

Aims of the research

Research into the role and models of improvement support is timely for two reasons. First, there is a significant and ongoing improvement challenge for the children's services sector. Just over seven in 10 local councils inspected under the current single inspection framework (SIF) are judged 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate', with other local areas requiring support to sustain their improvement journeys. Second, particularly in local areas facing systemic difficulties, the DfE and individual local areas are increasingly considering alternative models of delivering children's services as one of a range of options for putting in place the conditions for sustained improvement in local children's services.

This research, which builds on our previous action research into the enablers of improvement in local children's services carried out on behalf of the LGA, focused on two central questions.

a. What is the role of improvement support and how can it be effective in supporting the improvement journey of a local area's children's services?

b. What are the relative strengths and key ingredients of different models of improvement, and what are the circumstances in which each model is most likely to be effective?

The work was carried out between September 2016 and January 2017. During this time, councillors, senior leaders, staff and partners from 51 local areas contributed to the research, either through in-depth visits or one-to-one interviews, or through a series of regional seminars we facilitated during October and November 2016. In addition to this, we have also gathered views from a range of colleagues involved in providing improvement support, such as independent chairpersons of improvement boards or children's services commissioners.

The role and characteristics of effective improvement support

Councillors, leaders, practitioners and partners from the local areas we engaged argued strongly that the role of improvement support is to facilitate and enable improvement. Improvement support is not, nor should it seek to be, a substitute for effective leadership and the day-to-day practice of children's services improvement. This message chimed strongly with those from our original action research. Put simply, the role of improvement support is to help local leaders put in place the conditions for long-term, sustained improvement to take root.

Through the research, we identified three characteristics that councillors, leaders, practitioners and partners agreed were necessary for any form of improvement support to be effective.

• **Demonstrate credibility** – being able to use expertise and experience to diagnose issues and advise on specific aspects of day-to-day practice, as well as earn the trust of staff so as to work with them to embed improvements.

• **Enhance capacity** – support must enhance the capacity of the organisation through, for example, working alongside leaders and staff to develop and embed new practices,

or mediate between external partners to ensure local leaders and staff have sufficient time and space to get on with the job of improving local children's services.

- **Not treat children's services in isolation** – this reflected the need to recognise the links between children's services and the wider corporate, political and partnership landscape. Being in a position to ask the question 'What are you doing to support children's services to improve?' was seen a crucial aspect of the role of external support.

Ensuring local areas can access improvement support and use it effectively depends partly on understanding what makes for effective improvement support, but also on being able to identify and work with the form of improvement support most appropriate to a given set of circumstances.

Three forms of improvement support

There is a wide range of external children's services improvement support that local areas may access. For the purposes of our research, we have focused on three broad forms of support.

- **Sector-led improvement** – we have defined this as support that seeks to strengthen practice and existing leadership provided by peers from within the sector. This includes formal strategic partnerships, peer reviews, joint practice work between local areas, and networking.

- **External scrutiny and formal intervention** – we have defined this as support that brings a level of formal, external scrutiny and monitoring of children's services improvement overall, with formal external reporting to central government, and a focus on embedding robust governance around children's services improvement. This includes working with independently-chaired improvement boards and children's services commissioners.

- **Alternative delivery models** – by this, we mean ways of delivering children's services other than through traditional in-house council services. While there are many different alternative delivery models, we have focused specifically on (a) bringing together services from more than one local area under combined executive leadership or (b) creating a new organisation that will take operational responsibility for delivering children's services.

Potential benefits and key success factors of these three forms of improvement support, and circumstances in which they might be considered

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

These three broad forms of improvement support are not mutually exclusive – local children's services can and do access packages of support that combine different elements of each. Nevertheless, our research suggests that each has a specific focus, potential benefits and circumstances in which it might be considered.

The local areas were strongly of the view that there was no single model of improvement support that would work in all contexts. Indeed, we heard of several examples of local areas that had had very different experiences of the same forms of support. We have, therefore, set out our findings in the form of a framework that seeks to capture the potential benefits, key factors for making a success of a specific form of support, and circumstances in which each might be considered. The framework is included in section 3 of this report, and reproduced above.

In terms of **sector-led improvement**, colleagues identified three main benefits. These included building capacity through being able to work alongside and learn with professional peers who have done or are doing similar jobs; combining rigour with a more formative, developmental focus; and providing an external sense-check to avoid the risk of insularity and poor practices setting in.

For this form of support to be effective, however, it was necessary that it was provided by high-calibre, credible people who could go about their role with an appropriate level of rigour and focus.

Cosy relationships, superficial scrutiny and 'pulling punches' do not make for an accurate and forensic sense-check that many local areas said they needed. Likewise, the value of joint practice development and networking is likely to be enhanced if there is a clear 'project focus' – treating the work as a formal project, with clear aims and success criteria and bringing an appropriate degree of project management to it.

This can help to ensure that the benefits to day-to-day practice are defined, evaluated and embedded or adapted. Ensuring support was tailored to their local context and co-developed with local leaders and staff, rather than imposing an 'off-the-shelf' model, was also seen as important.

This form of support is likely to be particularly effective if it is engaged at certain well-chosen times during a local area's improvement journey. Specifically, colleagues argued that an effective peer review or form of partnership working could be particularly beneficial at the start of an improvement journey, to provide a baseline of current strengths and areas for improvement, or during the journey at a key transition point to provide some external validation that improvement remains on track. Working with external partners may also be beneficial when there is the need to bolster capacity or draw on external expertise to support a specific area of practice, for example to develop an effective early help offer or strengthen support for care-leavers.

In terms of **external scrutiny and formal intervention**, colleagues identified a distinct set of benefits associated with this form of support. Given the specific focus on putting in place governance around children's services improvement, colleagues argued that, if done well, this form of support could help to create robust and effective governance that may have been lacking hitherto. They were keen not to overstate the role of formal reporting and monitoring – important though this is, in the words of leaders in one local area, 'it is not the job' – but many recognised the value of having formal, external support to tighten up data analysis, reporting, self-assessment and prioritisation. They also argued that this form of support could help to create both the need and the structures for partners to come together at a strategic level to focus on children's services improvement. Lastly, if delivered effectively, this form of support was also seen as beneficial in helping to mediate between external stakeholders and local leaders, giving reassurance to the former and time to the latter to get on with the day-to-day work of securing improvements.

The colleagues we engaged identified four factors that they had found to be crucial in determining the success of this form of improvement support. Those who described less effective experiences of this form of support agreed with their counterparts who had had more positive experiences about what needs to be present – and, in their specific cases, had not been – for this form of support to be effective. First, colleagues highlighted the importance of the independence of the person or people providing the support, particularly the capacity to act as an honest broker and facilitator. Second, colleagues argued that it was crucial that engagements with this form of support were pitched at the right, strategic level and were informed by, but did not become bogged down in, of operational detail. Third, colleagues argued that, to be truly effective, the people involved needed to have the time and skills to gather intelligence for themselves and use this to triangulate, probe and challenge the evidence that was being presented to them through existing mechanisms. Fourth, given that external scrutiny is likely to involve formal, board-style meetings, colleagues highlighted that the basics of good governance were vital in ensuring that these meetings were seen as important to the business of securing improvement rather than a distraction.

This form of support is likely to be appropriate in circumstances where a local area has the right leadership capacity to drive improvement, but where there has been a loss of focus on a key service area or issues in political, corporate and/or partnership oversight of children's services.

Colleagues working within or involved in exploring **alternative delivery models** were keen to emphasise that they did not think the establishment of an alternative delivery model would lead automatically to improvement. Likewise, they did not make claims for the benefits of alternative delivery models per se – instead, their claims were for the specific benefits they had reaped or were hoping to achieve in their own, local context.

These colleagues argued that establishing an alternative delivery model had helped or would help them to create afresh the stability of leadership, workforce and vision that they had not been able to achieve hitherto. Furthermore, they identified benefits in terms of a new focus on children's services that would enable swifter decision-making and action. How these benefits were achieved was slightly different in the context of newly-created organisations compared with models of executive leadership across more than one local area.

Nevertheless, they were identified as overall benefits in both cases. This is not to say, however, that swift decision-making and an effective focus on children's services are exclusive to alternative delivery models – indeed we came across examples where these were very much in evidence within council children's services departments. Instead, it is to recognise that, in certain local areas, the establishment of alternative delivery models has helped to put these conditions in place where this had not been possible hitherto.

Creating an alternative delivery model is not a substitute for the hard work of putting in place the key enablers of improvement. As such, the key factors for making a success of an alternative delivery model are the same as those for making a success of any long-term improvement journey. Nevertheless, colleagues identified two key factors in the successful establishment of an alternative delivery model. First, it is vital that staff, partners, service-users and other stakeholders are engaged meaningfully in shaping the overall vision for improvement and determining how the creation of an alternative delivery model will help to achieve that vision. Second, it is crucial that there is absolute clarity about the way in which the relationship between the body delivering children's services – whether this is a newly-created, independent organisation or a partnership with another local authority – and the council will function.

Specifically, this includes matters such as governance and accountability, the interface and transition between services (eg between children's services and education, or between children's and adult services), and the interface with corporate, back-office support functions.

Alternative delivery models are likely to be considered in instances where local areas are facing systemic and/or persistent challenges. Our research suggests that what needs to be determined in these instances is whether the leadership of the local area – political, corporate, service-level and partnership – has the capacity to self-assess accurately, to develop a strategic approach based on that self-assessment that is likely to lead to long-term improvements, and to implement that approach effectively. Our research suggests that, if these characteristics are not in place, then the question arises as to how these conditions for improvement could be put in place, including whether an alternative delivery model could help in this task. This is not because creating an alternative delivery model would be an automatic solution to these issues. Nor it is meant to imply that some local areas may not also wish to consider alternative delivery models in order to sustain their existing improvements and shape the next stage of their improvement journey. Rather, it is simply to identify the circumstances in which the question arises as to whether alternative means for securing the conditions for improvement might be considered.

Given the scale of the improvement challenge for the children's services sector and current policy context, it is all the more important that both national and local decision-makers can take evidence-informed decisions about the most appropriate form of improvement support. Furthermore, it is vital that national and local leaders work collaboratively to ensure that there is access to the right range of effective improvement support, not just when local areas are at crisis point, but at all stages of a local area's improvement journey, in order to build capacity across the sector. We hope that the findings set out in this report help to contribute to a more evidence-informed approach to the use of external improvement support to enable local areas to drive and embed improvements in their children's services.

Introduction

Profile of inspection judgements – January 2016 vs. December 2016

January	22%	53%	26%
December	2% / 26%	49%	23%

■ Outstanding ■ Good ■ Requires improvement ■ Inadequate
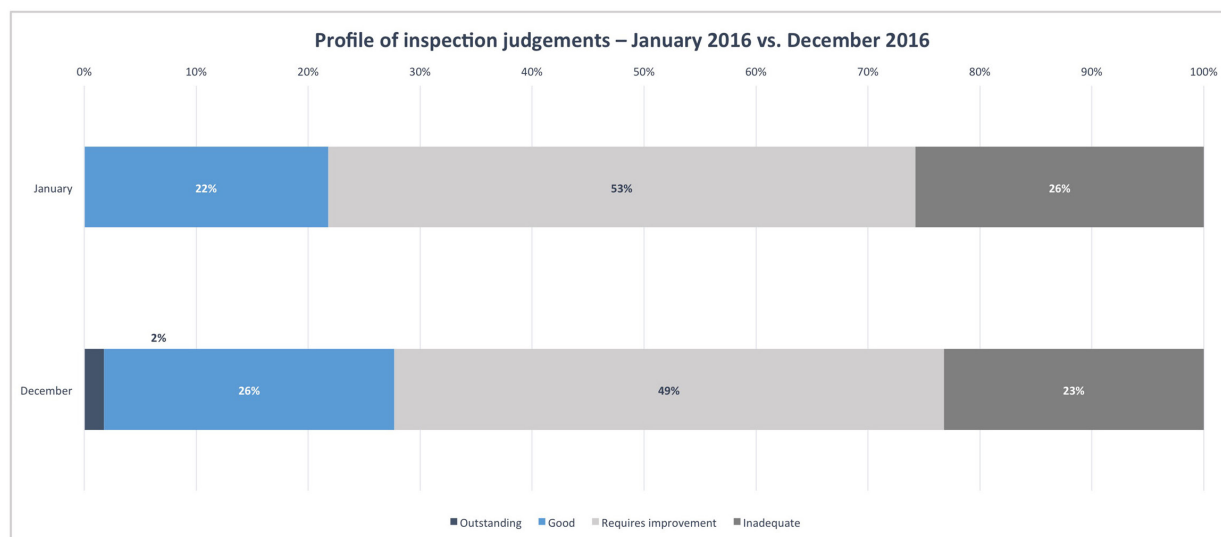
The context of the research

There are two reasons why research into models of children's services improvement support is both timely and pressing. First, the local children's services sector is one where there is a significant improvement challenge. When we started our original action research into the enablers of children's services improvement in January 2016, children's services in 78 per cent of the 78 local authorities that had been inspected under Ofsted's SIF since 2012 were judged to be less than good.[1] Since then, while the proportion of those judged good or better has risen by 6 per cent , it is still the case that over seven in 10 of the 112 inspected local areas were judged to require improvement (49 per cent) or to be inadequate (23 per cent).

Second, this profile demonstrates not only the scale of the improvement challenge, but also the mismatch between the level of need for improvement support and the system leadership and support capacity within the sector itself. Only 28 per cent, or 31 individual councils, have been inspected under the SIF and judged to be good or better. Each of these 31 councils would have to support between two and three other local areas each if they were to provide coverage of all local areas not yet good, to say nothing of their own ongoing support needs.

Added to this picture, there are growing numbers of so-called 'alternative delivery models', meaning different structures for delivering local children's services other than through in-house council services. These alternative delivery models include independent not-for-profit trusts, charitable companies, councils combining their children's services or bringing together local children's services under a single, executive leadership model.

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1   Isos Partnership, 2016, Action Research into improvement in local children's services, published by the LGA. Throughout the present document, when we refer to 'our previous action research', this is the study to which we are referring.

The recent DfE policy document published in July 2016, 'Putting Children First', makes clear that due to greater regional collaboration (through devolution deals or regional adoption agencies), local strategic decisions and swifter intervention from central government, there will be a growth in such alternative models. The DfE document envisages that by 2020 one in three local areas will be exploring or will have moved to one of these alternative models for delivering children's services. Specifically, the DfE document states that there will be a presumption that children's services will be removed from direct operational council control and transferred to a different organisation, usually a trust, in cases of systemic and/or persistent failure. Alternative models of delivering children's services will, therefore, be increasingly prominent within both the DfE's intervention approach and local areas' considerations of how to shape their own improvement journeys.

There is, however, a lack of evaluative or research evidence that focuses specifically on the relative strengths of different models of improvement support and the circumstances in which these are likely to be effective. This was a point we highlighted in our original action research, and has also been made in the recent National Audit Office (NAO) report, 'Children in need of help or protection'.[2] There are several studies of specific forms of improvement support, particularly examples of sector-led improvement.[3] There is a wealth of intelligence about the experience and effectiveness of models of central intervention in local children's services, such as improvement boards or the deployment of children's services advisers, but no research or evaluative studies that capture this. Some recent studies have focused specifically on the role of Ofsted in supporting improvement in local children's services.[4]

There are significant evaluations underway that are looking at the work of the first children's services trusts. At present, however, the main studies that deal specifically with alternative models are the reports written by Professor Julian Le Grand about the historical challenges faced in areas such as Doncaster.[5]

There is, therefore, a strong need to build the improvement capacity in the sector, to understand more clearly what makes external improvement support effective, and to maximise the impact of the external improvement support that local children's services receive.

Aims of the research

Our previous action research focused on the enablers of improvement that councillors, leaders, staff and partners in individual local areas had put in place to drive sustained improvement. The present research builds on this, but has a specific focus on the role of improvement support and on different forms of external support and intervention. The two reports are intended to complement one another: taken together, they attempt to describe how local areas can drive and sustain improvement and how they can best use external improvement support to help them during their improvement journey. This present research, on models of improvement support, explores two main questions.

a. What is the role of improvement support and how can it be effective in supporting the improvement journey of a local area's children's services?

b. What are the relative strengths and key ingredients of different models of improvement, and what are the circumstances in which each model is most likely to be effective?

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2   NAO, 2016, Children in need of help or protection.
3   See, for example, two reports published by the LGA: Self, sector or centre?, a 2014 report compiled by UK Research & Consultancy, and Evaluation of the early adopter sector-led improvement programme pilots, a 2012 report written by the National Foundation for Educational Research.
4   iMPOWER, 2015, Brave New World, published by the LGA.

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5   Julian Le Grand, 2013, Report to the Secretary of State for Education on ways forward for children's services in Doncaster, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212598/Ways_forward_for_children_s_services_in_Doncaster.pdf

The aim of this research project has not, however, been to identify whether one model of improvement support or intervention is the best approach in all circumstances. During the research, we heard about examples of local areas that had improved with the help of different models of improvement support. Likewise, we heard examples of similar models of improvement support working well in one area but not having the same impact in another.

We also found increasing numbers of local children's services that were exploring different models of support and alternative models of delivering children's services in order to sustain and continue their children's services improvement journey. For these reasons, therefore, the aim of this research has been to identify how national decision-makers and local leaders might, in an evidence-informed manner, choose which model of support is most likely to be effective in a specific set of circumstances.

How we have approached the research

We started work on this project in the summer of 2016 by undertaking a rapid review of the available evaluation and research evidence on models of improvement support. The evidence-gathering phase of the project ran from September to December 2016, during which time we gathered evidence in three ways:

a. **in-depth fieldwork visits to seven local areas** – including one-to-one and small group interviews with councillors, senior officers, leaders from key partner agencies, middle managers and frontline staff

b. **one-to-one engagements with a further eight local areas** – via telephone interviews with the Director of Children's Services or equivalent

c. **a series of four regional workshops** – these workshops, which were attended by elected members and senior officers from 40 local areas (including some who had engaged through the visits or interviews), had a specific focus on exploring the improvement journeys of the local areas represented, but also explored colleagues' experiences of external support and its role in assisting their improvement journeys.

Colleagues including councillors, senior officers, partners and frontline staff from 51 local areas, have played an important role in supporting this research. The project has benefitted significantly from their inputs, ideas and experiences, and we are grateful to all colleagues for their support for this important piece of work.

1 The role of improvement support

The enabling role of improvement support

There was a very strong view expressed by all the colleagues from the local children's services that we engaged – councillors, leaders, practitioners and partners – about how the role of external improvement support should be understood.

This was that the role of external improvement is an enabling one – its function is to facilitate and enable improvement. Its role is not to seek to drive improvement itself, and it cannot, nor should it seek to, substitute for effective local leadership and relentless day-to-day implementation of a robust improvement strategy. This message chimes strongly with our original action research.

During the present research, we heard a strong message from councillors, children's services leaders, partners and frontline managers and practitioners about the importance of leadership in initiating and sustaining improvement. Several of the local areas we engaged described 'false starts' in their improvement journey, where they felt that the council's leadership and workforce had lacked the knowledge to shape and implement the right vision and priorities for improvement.

As children's services leaders in more than one local area put it, without leaders having this strategic know-how, external scrutiny on its own will not help the local area to drive improvement.

If the role of external improvement support is understood as an enabling one, two important points follow. First, packages of external support, whether chosen locally or underpinned by formal intervention, need to have a clear focus on creating the conditions in which strong, stable leadership can put in place the right strategic approach to improvement, bring stability to the workforce and embed consistently high-quality frontline practice. Leaders, in this sense, include not only those involved in direct leadership of children's services, but also councillors, corporate leaders, middle leaders, and leaders within partner agencies. If external support detracts from this, or takes the focus of leadership away from the quality of frontline practice, there is a risk that it will be counterproductive. As both elected members and children's services leaders in one local area put it, 'the external support and the monitoring, though important, is not the job.'

The second implication is that, insofar as it is possible, local children's services need to own their improvement journey and the external support that they receive. This is vital if leaders, staff and partners are going to be able to embed long-term improvements. It is also important in ensuring that there remains a clear connection between leadership and frontline practice. Forms of external support and scrutiny need to be able to ascertain whether leaders of local children's services have a strong grip on the quality of frontline practice. We heard examples where those providing external support had sought to do the job of local leaders, and this had, as a consequence, exacerbated the gap between strategic leadership and frontline practice.

Three characteristics of effective improvement support

In addition to benefits of specific forms of improvement support, the local areas we engaged also identified three overarching features of effective support. These are summarised below.

Three characteristics of effective improvement support

1

Demonstrate credibility, knowledge and an effective track record

- **Expertise, knowledge and a proven track record** – so as to add value, win trust and build rapport with leaders, staff and partners
- **Able to diagnose issues and challenge rigorously** – can spot and hone in on gaps and issues
- **Act as individuals, not an organising committee** – get relationships right, tailor to local context
- **Importance of continuity** – same people, not having to re-tell the story

2

Must enhance – not detract from – the capacity of the organisation

- **Work alongside leaders and staff** – build capacity and skills, provide formative feedback
- **Bring "project discipline"** – maximise value by planning support, identifying aims, evaluating progress and impact, and drawing out and disseminating key lessons
- **Tailored to the local context** – rather than bringing a "one-size-fits-all", "off-the-shelf" solution
- **Create time and space for improvement** – act as "honest broker" and intermediary with external stakeholders to give them confidence and give local leaders space to embed improvements

3

Must not treat children's services in isolation

- **Recognise links with issues beyond children's services** – issues in children's services are rarely unconnected with issues in corporate, political and/or partnership governance and practices
- **Find mechanisms for asking the question** *'What are you doing to support children's services to improve?'* – range of ways in which this can be done, but this is the key question
- **Precise focus will depend on local context** – may include some or all of HR, legal, finance, IT, corporate leadership, political oversight, partnership engagement and practices

1. Demonstrate credibility, knowledge and an effective track-record

All the local areas we engaged emphasised the need for improvement support to be provided by people with credibility in relation to children's services improvement. Most forms of improvement support for local children's services will require in-depth understanding of the day-to-day operations of a children's services department and what works to embed improvement.

Colleagues saw this knowledge as vital to being able to diagnose issues and provide effective, evidence-informed challenge and advice. As one local children's services leader put it when describing how their local area approached a peer review, 'we wanted to be given a really forensic going over'.

Equally, colleagues argued that embedding improvements required more than having the right answer or having developed a similar model elsewhere. Providing effective and credible external support required rapport, trust and ownership to be built with staff, working with them to adapt ideas to the local context and giving them the confidence to do things differently. Likewise, building trust required continuity – local areas valued being able to work with the same people over a sustained period of time, rather than having to tell their story to new people and adapt to different ways of working.

2. Enhance the capacity of the organisation

The local areas we engaged gave a very strong message that, to be effective, improvement support had to enhance, and must not detract from, the capacity of the council and its partners to drive improvement. In part, they described the value of being able to work alongside their peers on practical activities, sharing skills and experiences, providing formative, developmental feedback, and ultimately focusing on improving, rather than only monitoring, practice. To maximise the value of these activities, colleagues argued they must be purposeful and have a project discipline – proportionate routines to identify expected outcomes, check progress, evaluate impact and roll out or adapt as appropriate. Colleagues highlighted the importance of this formative process of co-developing local solutions rather than being expected to adopt an 'off-the-shelf' model developed elsewhere.

Colleagues also described the important role that external improvement support could play in terms of creating the time and space necessary to implement, embed and track the impact of improvement work. As an 'honest broker', providers of external support were in a position to take an objective, impartial view of a local area's improvement capacity, planning and trajectory. Those providing external support could, therefore, challenge both local leaders on the ambition and pace of their improvement planning as well as national decision-makers on the demands they may be placing on local areas. Effective external support can help to give national decision-makers confidence about plans for and the pace of improvement, while at the same time protecting the capacity of local children's services to deliver these improvements.

3. Not treating children's services in isolation

Many local areas that had experienced difficulties in their children's services said that, where this had happened, it was often connected to wider issues within corporate leadership, political oversight and partnership governance. These may relate to a lack of political oversight of children's services, or corporate policies that impede aspects of children's services or compound the difficulties children's services are experiencing, or a lack of join-up between partner agencies. As one children's services leader put it, "it is very rare to find a council in which children's services are broken that is not also, in some aspect, also a broken council".

The local areas we engaged described different ways in which these issues had been addressed – through effectively chaired independent improvement boards, strategic partnership arrangements, and formal stocktake routines. They also described different areas of corporate services or partnership working that they had focused on – legal services, HR, finance, IT, referrals and thresholds. What all had in common was that they created a regular opportunity where corporate leaders and partners had to answer the question, 'What are you doing to support children's services to improve?'.

2. Three broad forms of improvement support

During the research, we sought to engage a wide range of local children's services that had accessed different forms of external improvement support. For the purposes of planning which local children's services we would engage and for collating our findings, we have considered three broad forms of improvement support.

It is important to say at the outset that these three broad forms of external improvement support are not mutually exclusive. They form a continuum of support, and indeed many of the local areas that we engaged had accessed a combination of these forms of support. Nevertheless, during the research we found that each had a distinctive focus, as well as specific potential benefits, key success factors and circumstances in which they may be considered. In order to draw out those distinctive features, we have set out our findings in terms of these three broad forms of improvement support.

Three broad forms of improvement support

A tool for national decision-makers and local leaders to consider the most appropriate forms of support

Conditions for improvement	Descriptors		Type of support that might be considered
Capacity to self-assess accurately	• **Able to self-assess accurately** – evidence and articulate strengths and weaknesses of the organisation. • **Able to identify the improvement support needed** – to address areas of weakness, and marshal support to maximise its value. • **Accepts latest Ofsted inspection judgement** – not in denial, disputing the judgement, everything is "all fine".	If none …	**Alternative delivery models**
Capacity to develop strategic priorities that will address weaknesses	• **Able to develop a set of strategic priorities for improvement** – shared by the workforce and partners. • **Able to develop a robust set of actions to achieve the priorities** – with engagement of workforce, partners. • **Have leaders with a strong understanding of what works in children's services improvement** – this has been used to inform the improvement strategy.	If only two …	**External scrutiny and formal intervention**
Capacity to implement these strategic priorities swiftly and effectively	• **Has the requisite capacity in place to implement the strategy** – including resources, workforce, governance. • **Has the support of political and corporate leaders, and partners** – local area and council plans (and finances) aligned with children's services improvement strategy. • **Able to demonstrate progress** – against a clear, evidence-based trajectory of improvement.	If all three in place …	**Sector-led improvement**

By **sector-led improvement support**, we mean a form of support that seeks to strengthen practice and existing leadership. This can encompass formal support (eg peer review facilitated by the LGA or ADCS) and more informal forms of support (joint practice development with peers, working in regional networks) provided by professionals working in the children's services sector. It might include support from peers in other local children's services, work with voluntary and community sector organisations, or work facilitated by national agencies, such as the casework audits offered by Ofsted.

We distinguish this from **external scrutiny and formal intervention**, by which we mean a form of improvement support that brings a level of formal, external scrutiny and monitoring of children's services improvement overall.

This can often entail putting in place robust governance arrangements around children's services improvement and formal reporting to central government, which may be underpinned by an improvement notice or statutory direction issued by the DfE. It may include working with an independently-chaired improvement board or a children's services commissioner, and/or six-monthly formal monitoring from DfE.

Lastly, we engaged a small number of local areas that have developed, are establishing or are in the process of exploring so-called **alternative delivery models**. By this, we mean ways of delivering children's services other than through traditional in-house local authority services.

This will involve creating new structures or organisations that take on responsibility for day-to-day operational delivery of children's services, with the council's role becoming one of commissioner. Despite the fact that alternative delivery models in children's services are a relatively recent development, and the numbers are small, there are several different forms they can and do take.

In this report, we have focused on two forms of alternative delivery model:

- creating executive leadership of children's services across more than one council (such as the formal partnership between Hampshire and the Isle of Wight)

- creating new organisations to deliver children's services, such as independent, not-for-profit trusts (Doncaster, Slough) or publicly-owned companies (Achieving for Children, which operates on behalf of Richmond-upon-Thames and Kingston-upon-Thames).

Between and within these broad types of alternative delivery model, there are key differences. These include features such as scope (the services that come within the responsibility of the new model), the ongoing relationship with the commissioning council or councils (how accountability, governance and commissioning will operate), scale, statutory underpinning, and institutional structure.

Table showing the two categories of alternative delivery model on which we have focused

Type of model	Defining characteristics	Variables
Creating executive leadership across more than one council	**Creates a single leadership function** across more than one council children's services department. **Council role** – council retains responsibility for day-to-day oversight of children's services, and remains responsible for funding. **Status of staff** – staff remain employed by their 'home' council – they do not TUPE across to another organisation. (TUPE stands for 'Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)'.)	**Relationship with the council** – interface between services, corporate systems, accountability and scrutiny mechanisms. **Scale** – number of council commissioners it serves. **Statutory underpinning** – whether mandated via statutory direction. **Institutional structure** – whether this is a merger of children's services departments or purely an executive leadership model.
Creating a new organisation to deliver children's services	**Creates a new organisation** responsible for delivering children's services. **Council role** – changes to be become one of commissioning children's services. **Status of staff** – staff TUPE across to the new organisation.	**Scope** – whether this includes children's social care or wider children's services. **Relationship with the council** – interface between services, corporate systems, accountability and scrutiny mechanisms. **Scale** – number of councils served. **Statutory underpinning** – whether mandated via statutory direction. **Institutional structure** – whether it is a wholly independent entity (eg company limited by guarantee, mutual) or council-owned (eg wholly or joint venture).

3. Consideration of three forms of improvement support

Three overarching findings

During the research, we heard three strong overarching messages from councillors, leaders, and staff in local areas about considering different forms of improvement support. First, we heard a very strong message from the local areas we engaged that, among the existing models of improvement support, there is no panacea.

Many highlighted examples of the impact different models of improvement support had had on their improvement journeys, but none claimed that the support in question would have had the same effect in all instances. Put simply, we saw examples of the impact of all three forms of external improvement support that we considered. Second, building on this point, we heard about examples of similar forms of improvement support operating with varying degrees of effectiveness in different local areas.

Third, we encountered several local areas which, recognising that alternative delivery models were 'on the table', were considering pro-actively the right form of support to enable them to respond to the challenges they were facing and pursue their improvement journeys.

Ensuring local areas can access improvement support and use it effectively depends partly on understanding what makes for effective improvement support, but also on being able to identify and work with the form of improvement support most appropriate to a given set of circumstances. For these reasons, this research has explored the potential benefits (recognising that, for some newer forms of support, such as alternative delivery models, the evidence base is small but growing) and key success factors of each form of support, and the circumstances in which each might be considered.

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

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

Sector-led improvement

Potential benefits

Many of the local areas we engaged had accessed some form of sector-led improvement support. In terms of formal support, this often included participating in peer reviews, both as reviewee and reviewer, and working with another local children's services in a strategic partnership. Local areas that had accessed this form of support identified three distinct potential benefits.

First, they argued that there were strong benefits of being able to work alongside professional counterparts who had worked in similar roles, service areas and contexts. Several of the local areas we engaged described how they had been able to visit another local area or have counterparts from other areas visit and work alongside them on a regular basis to work on specific areas of practice. The opportunity to work alongside colleagues was seen as crucial – having the benefit of peers' expertise and being able to learn from models developed elsewhere and adapt them to the local context. One senior local leader described their experience of a formal strategic partnership with another council as 'probably the most effective model we will have'. Middle leaders in the same local area compared this form of support positively with the experience of working under an improvement board: 'It felt like we were feeding the improvement board. With the strategic partner, it feels like we are engaging and being improved.' Some lead members we engaged commented positively on the sector-led support they had received through training and mentoring. They emphasised, however, the need to ensure all councillors, not just the lead member, are able to access support and training around children's services improvement.

Second, colleagues argued that sector-led improvement support, if done well, could achieve a unique balance between being both rigorously challenging and developmental. Several local children's services leaders described instances when they had sought out some form of peer challenge, and had specified that this should be as rigorous as a full Ofsted inspection. In the words of one local children's services leader, peer review was 'a powerful process and we treated it like an Ofsted inspection'. For these leaders, it was not the lack of rigorous challenge, but the formative, developmental and less high-stakes way it was delivered that was distinctive about effective sector-led support. Colleagues argued that this powerful combination could help to create the time and space that local children's services leaders, staff and partners needed to implement and embed improvements.

Third, sector-led improvement can provide an external perspective from which to test a local area's progress, thus helping to avoid complacency – 'the trap of believing your own hype', as one local leader put it – at key points during an improvement journey, particularly between inspections. This is important in being able to identify areas in need of further improvement, but also in recognising progress, maintaining engagement and building the confidence of staff, and demonstrating progress to partners and external stakeholders. Practitioners spoke positively about being able to engage in practice-focused peer networking activities in similar terms – being able to benchmark progress, gain recognition for innovative practice and overcome the stigma of being a local area in difficulty.

The potential contribution of a robust peer review: **Cornwall**

Cornwall's children's services were judged inadequate in 2009 and again in 2011. At the time of the second inspection, new leadership of children's services was being put in place. Colleagues in Cornwall see the establishment of stable, expert leadership as a critical factor in their improvement journey, creating a coherent vision and ensuring a forensic understanding and a relentless grip on the quality of practice, which have in turn enabled improvements to be embedded and sustained. Shortly after the new leadership was in place and had undertaken an analysis of the causes of failure, Cornwall commissioned an external peer review from the LGA. They described this as 'seminal' in that it helped new leaders to establish a clear, comprehensive and objective baseline from which to take forward the improvement work. Specifically, Cornwall colleagues highlighted the importance of setting the rigour of the peer review ('as close to the new Ofsted inspection framework as possible'), of determining the timing and allowing a degree of flexibility to identify trusted colleagues with the expertise to undertake the peer review. Equally importantly, Cornwall was able to work subsequently with colleagues from Hertfordshire who had been involved in the peer review and, later, in a 'virtual strategic partnership' with Essex to explore the issues identified in the peer review and embed practice improvements further. This combination of a robust peer review and ongoing strategic work with trusted councils is seen by Cornwall colleagues as having played a key role in supporting leaders, staff and partners in Cornwall to make sustained improvements in children's services. Cornwall led an equally robust peer review of Herefordshire in 2014. Cornwall was judged adequate under the child protection inspection framework in 2013 and good under the SIF in 2016.

Key success factors

Most of the instances of sector-led improvement we encountered during the research, particularly formal peer reviews and strategic partnerships, were described positively. There were, however, instances where colleagues considered that the support they had received had lacked rigour, focus and impact, or where those providing support considered that the receiving local area had not been willing to listen to and act on some challenging messages. What, then, are the key factors that help to ensure sector-led improvement is delivered and engaged with effectively? The colleagues we engaged through the research highlighted three key factors.

First, they identified the importance of rigour in any form of sector-led, peer-to-peer improvement support. Local children's services leaders argued strongly that, for activities like peer review or peer-led stocktakes, the level of challenge had to be that of an Ofsted inspection. To be effective, these forms of sector-led support should recognise success, but also be relentless in uncovering weaknesses and risks, and help the organisation to understand the underlying issues. For less formal activities such as peer networks or collaborative, regional projects, rigour was also needed to ensure that there was a clear focus, expected aims, actions and outcomes related to day-to-day practice.

Second, councillors, leaders and staff highlighted the importance of being able to access credible, high-calibre people, who can provide expertise and build trust with staff in order to embed improvements. This is true of all forms of improvement support, but particularly important in the case of the more practice-focused aspects of sector-led support. Colleagues recognised that, when a local area is in difficulty, there is a risk of multiple external people becoming involved in providing support. Local areas that had been through the poor-to-fair phase of their improvement journey argued that what had been most helpful to them was being able to draw on people with genuine practical expertise, from whom they could learn, with whom they could test ideas,

and who could 'inject some realism'. Support of this form also had to focus on building capacity, rather than creating dependency.

Third, local areas argued that sector-led improvement support needed to be flexible and bespoke, in terms of what support was going to be most useful to a local children's service and when. Local areas in which councillors, leaders and staff highlighted positive and effective engagements with sector-led improvement described the degree of flexibility they had been given to identify the right time and, in some instances, the best-placed people to provide forensic challenge at a key point in their improvement journey. It was seen to be valuable to be able to engage peers who had experience of working in and improving children's services in similar local contexts.

Circumstances when this is likely to be effective

Colleagues argued that sector-led improvement support could be beneficial at any point during an improvement journey. They highlighted three specific points when it was likely to be most effective. First, they argued that some form of peer review or peer challenge could have real value at the start of an improvement journey. This could either be to delve into greater detail in a specific priority area, following an Ofsted inspection, or when a new leader had joined a local area. In both instances, the purpose of commissioning some sector-led support in the form of a peer review would be to 'get to a baseline'.

As we described in the previous action research, several experienced children's services leaders argued that, however critical an Ofsted inspection report was, the true extent of the issues in children's services and beyond was likely to be far greater. In the present research, several children's services leaders described the way in which a well-timed peer review, in the intervening years between inspections, had been instrumental in enabling them to give some tough messages to their corporate colleagues and staff and to build the case for a new strategic approach to driving improvement.

The role of robust peer review: Rochdale

Rochdale's children's services were judged inadequate in 2012 and placed in intervention. In 2014, upon re-inspection, improvements were recognised and Rochdale's children's services were judged to require improvement. In 2013, a year after the Ofsted inspection, a new director of children's services and assistant director took up post. Rochdale colleagues highlight the stability of leadership, clarity of vision and culture within children's services as three of the key factors that helped to stabilise the workforce and create the conditions for improvement to take place. In terms of external support, Rochdale received a LGA peer review in 2013, which new leaders argued was crucial in providing a baseline for them to construct a vision and plan for improvement. The timing was crucial, coming, as it did, as new leaders were taking up their roles and providing a current picture of children's services, a year after the latest Ofsted report. The peer review also helped leaders to prioritise and focus their improvement work, and enabled them to demonstrate progress and distance travelled when they were re-inspected in 2014. It also helped them to secure buy-in and engagement from corporate colleagues, since the peer review had been able to show how children's services could not improve without the engagement of the council's corporate centre. Rochdale colleagues also highlight the importance of being outward-facing, taking advantage not only of opportunities such as peer review, but also of practice-based networks to showcase innovation, learn from others, and rebuild the morale of staff.

Second, colleagues argued that another timely opportunity for accessing sector-led improvement support was when making the transition from one phase of an improvement journey to the next. This could help to guard against complacency, and to test, validate and evidence progress and ensure the focus of improvement activity remained correct.

Third, colleagues argued that local children's services could benefit from a formal partnership or collaboration focused on a specific priority area of their children's services. Several local areas spoke about the benefits of working with counterparts in other local areas or organisations from the voluntary and community sector on areas such as developing an early help offer, putting in place earlier and more flexible support for adolescents on the edge of care, or improving planning for care-leavers.

The role of strategic partnerships: Torbay

Torbay's children's services were judged to be inadequate by Ofsted in their inspection at the end of 2015. A new director of children's services was subsequently appointed, and joined in July 2016. At the time, according to the incoming director of children's services, there was an inward-looking culture that regarded the failure as somehow unique to Torbay as a place rather than organisational factors that are common to many other areas. During 2016, Torbay have been working with colleagues from Hampshire County Council to help to embed and sustain improvements. John Coughlan, Chief Executive in Hampshire, has acted as the Children's Services Commissioner, and has more recently chaired Torbay's Children's Improvement Board. The improvement board has enabled Torbay to engage positively with partners, share their narrative of improvement and test this against meaningful comparisons with other local areas, with the independent chairperson ensuring that these discussions are 'situated in best practice with objectivity'.

As a strategic partner, Hampshire have also brought capacity, expertise and what Torbay's director of children's services calls their 'sustained experience of excellence'. Working with Hampshire has brought 'both access to excellence and capacity to improve, a realism about resources and outcomes, and a combined view about strategy and the detail, because they

understand the thread between them – too often the rhetoric of improvement is not backed up by attention to detail, but they are able to get under the skin of what we are doing'. This has been enabled through a rich dialogue between staff and multiple monthly visits between individuals and teams – either in Torbay or Hampshire – sharing of materials, and a focus on detailed issues. The formality of this relationship – what Hampshire have called 'an assertive, arm's-length relationship' – has been crucial to providing the structure for this way of working. Torbay's director of children's services sees the support from Hampshire, which has included the seconding of an assistant director, as having been 'critical to our journey'.

Overall, however, sector-led improvement support is likely to be effective when it is selected by local children's services leaders, members, staff and partners, who can self-assess robustly, commission effectively the support that they need, and are open to and able to act on external feedback. We know, however, that there are instances where local areas have not been able or willing to do one or all of these things. For sector-led improvement support to be truly effective, it is vital that there are systematic mechanisms for identifying, escalating and addressing issues early. This is one of the reasons why, in our previous action research, we argued for a systematic approach to peer review. The need for such an approach was underscored by the local areas that we engaged through the present research.

External scrutiny and formal intervention

Potential benefits

We have defined this form of improvement support in terms of its focus on the governance around children's services improvement. External scrutiny may, of course, be part of a larger package of support that also includes support for frontline practice. Local areas described three main benefits of this form of improvement support.

First, it can help to put in place robust governance and effective scrutiny arrangements around children's services that may have previously been lacking. As we noted earlier, local areas emphasised that formal monitoring was 'not the job' when it came to embedding improvements. They did recognise, however, the important role that systematic, intelligent, evidence-informed scrutiny could play in shaping priorities and tracking progress, if there was the correct balance between practical support and monitoring.

Some local areas that had worked with, for example, an independently-chaired improvement board, described the benefits of this form of support in helping them to develop effective systems for scrutinising data and evidence about practice, and using this to shape their improvement priorities. These local areas emphasised the need to prioritise and take control of one's own improvement journey at the start, when a local children's services department may be subject to manifold forms of advice and requests for reports, and how an effective improvement board could assist with this. In one local area that had worked with an improvement board, the lead member stated, 'if the improvement board had not happened, we would not be in the place we are now with our partners… it brought focus and pace'. A senior leader in the same local area said the board had 'definitely had an impact on our journey'. Senior leaders in another area described the improvement board as 'the most important part of our improvement'.

Second, the creation of a formal, independently-chaired governance mechanism can help to bring partners together to focus on how they can collectively support children's services improvement. Where there may have been tensions in partnership working in the past, an improvement board can act as a formal forum within which a more constructive, and less defensive, dialogue between partners can be facilitated. Equally, it can also create the necessity for partners to come together, given that it is often accompanied by more intensive public scrutiny.

Of course, creating a governance structure in and of itself cannot create effective partnership working. In the next section, on key success factors, we describe some of the ways that such formal governance structures need to be used if they are to be effective in facilitating partners to collaborate. The structure can, however, help to ensure appropriate focus and attention is given to children's services improvement by partners.

Third, external scrutiny and formal intervention can also help to mediate between all the relevant parties with an interest in improvement in a local area. The external perspective of an independent improvement board chairperson or a children's services commissioner can act as a buffer against unhelpful external demands while also providing external validation and assurance about a local area's improvement activities. This can, in turn, help to mitigate the risk that multiple, overlapping offers of support, monitoring visits and reporting requirements will distract local children's services leaders and staff and diminish their capacity to do the day-to-day work of improvement.

The role of Improvement Boards: **Devon** and **Dudley**

Devon's children's services were judged to be inadequate 2013, and had improved to be judged requires improvement in 2015. In Dudley, a new director of people took up position in early 2015 and quickly identified serious weaknesses within Dudley's children's services. Dudley were pro-active in seeking out support and establishing an independently-chaired improvement board, rather than waiting to be inspected. When Dudley was inspected in early 2016, Ofsted's judgement matched that of Dudley's leadership, and children's services were judged to be inadequate.

Devon and Dudley both worked with an independently-chaired improvement board, and describe similar benefits of the experience. These include working with an independent chairperson who can gather feedback and triangulate with a local area's

self-assessment, bring partners together, and put in place the rhythm of effective governance. Furthermore, they both describe the way in which an independently-chaired improvement board can help to moderate with national decision-makers, giving an objective view of a local area's capacity to improve and providing local leaders with the time and space to carry out the necessary improvement work.

They both highlighted the importance of the stages and sequencing in the work of an improvement board. They described three phases. The first phase involves enabling the council, including political and corporate leaders, to confront tough messages about the issues they are facing, using robust data and the voice of children to ensure accurate, evidence-informed self-assessment. As the council starts to act on these improvements, the second phase then involves broadening the focus to partner agencies and asking them how they can support these improvement efforts. The third and final phase, then, is preparing the council and partners to take over ownership of these governance arrangements, ensuring they are sustained and the capacity to support and hold one another to account is sustained.

Key success factors

Councillors, leaders and staff in local areas that have received this form of external improvement support identified four key factors that they considered were crucial to its effectiveness. First, they highlighted the fact that the person providing this form of external scrutiny was independent of the council and its partners, and thus was able to act as an honest broker, facilitator and impartial challenger.

Furthermore, they welcomed the fact that individuals in these roles could bring a degree of independence to how they interpreted their role. The majority of colleagues welcomed the fact that improvement board chairpersons and children's services commissioners were, within certain parameters, able to tailor their approach to what they deemed was most needed in a local area.

Those areas that had worked with a children's services commissioner gave the DfE credit for not imposing a specific approach, but giving those who fulfilled the role of commissioner an appropriate degree of professional autonomy. There were, however, some comments on the different ways in which local areas working with commissioners were expected to report to their commissioner and to the DfE. Those who had worked with improvement boards were likewise concerned about the different ways in which independent chairpersons had approached the role, as well as differences in their capacity and expertise to carry out aspects of the role.

Second, colleagues highlighted the importance of ensuring that formal discussions to scrutinise improvements were pitched at a strategic level – looking at priorities, tracking progress and impact, and being challenged and held to account. They argued that it was important to avoid the risk of conflating important operational matters with these strategic conversations. As several examples described to us attested, trying cover both could overwhelm an improvement board and limit its effectiveness. Some local areas had addressed this by establishing operational sub-committees or task-and-finish groups to focus on operational matters, reporting to the main improvement board.

Managing the business of an improvement board: **Rochdale**

During Rochdale's improvement journey, they worked with an independently-chaired improvement board. After a formative period establishing the arrangements, focus and rhythm of engagements, the improvement board became an important means through which effective partnership governance of children's services improvement was put in place. Crucial to the effectiveness was having the right strategic framework (plan, performance indicators, quality assurance and accountability), the right membership (key senior leaders from the council and partners), and the right timing (colleagues

moved from meeting monthly to meeting every six weeks). Likewise, the role of the independent chairperson was also crucial – Rochdale colleagues argued that the chairperson brought the right expertise and ability to challenge effectively, and had the capacity to gather feedback and triangulate it with the evidence presented at the improvement board.

A further reason for the board's effectiveness was that it developed a structure to enable it to balance both the strategic and operational aspects of improvement. Specifically, Rochdale colleagues borrowed from another area the idea of having an operational practitioners board (OPB), sitting below the main improvement board. This idea was adapted so that the OPB became a multi-agency body, chaired by a manager from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The OPB was an important forum in which operational decisions could be taken and the implications of broader strategies explored. It provided vital feedback – a 'temperature check' – to the improvement board, and ensured effective coordination across partners of key improvement activities, such as early help pathways. Rochdale has now come out of intervention, but the OPB continues to operate, reporting to the Children and Young People's Partnership. In this way, the improvement board and OPB have helped to lay the foundations for effective governance and partnership working that have contributed to Rochdale's improvement journey.

Getting the pitch of these conversations right is only partly determined by their focus and content: it is also related to the tone of the conversations that the improvement board chairperson or children's services commissioner facilitates. The role of improvement boards or commissioners, particularly in their early work, will inevitably involve confronting some hard facts and delivering some tough messages about past inadequacies and present challenges.

If not handled carefully, these discussions could become overly critical, accusatory and defensive – not a sound basis for informed, sustainable and collaborative work to drive improvement. Where this had been handled effectively, local children's services leaders described how the independent chairperson or commissioner had sought to create an honest, evidence-based and solutions-focused tone, fostering collective and collaborative work and avoiding an us-and-them dynamic developing. They also described the careful sequencing of discussions planned by improvement board chairpersons, to help political and corporate leaders from the council confront some difficult messages, bringing partners on board, and later planning for these governance arrangements to become more self-sustaining.

Third, councillors, leaders and staff highlighted that the person playing the role of chairperson or commissioner must have the skills, capacity and time in the role to gather evidence and intelligence for themselves and triangulate this with what is being reported to the improvement board or similar. They need to be able to visit frontline practitioners and children and families who have used local children's services, and use information gathered from these visits to test the accuracy of what is being reported through official mechanisms.

Local areas argued that this was crucial in terms of helping them to self-assess accurately, but also in terms of the chairperson or commissioner being able to challenge effectively from an informed perspective. As we wrote in section 1, one of the key roles of external improvement support is to foster a close connection between frontline practice and strategic decision-making. A key role of an improvement board chairperson or children's services commissioner is to ensure that conversations about children's services improvement are anchored in robust evidence about the quality and effectiveness of current practice.

Fourth, local leaders argued that any mechanism for providing improvement support must adhere to the basics of good governance. This may seem a trivial or obvious point. It was noteworthy, however, that local areas that had had positive experiences of working with improvement boards or commissioners described these 'basics' as an important part of why this form of support was effective. Likewise, those whose experience had been less positive described the absence of these features as a reason why this form of support had not been effective in their cases.

These 'basics' included keeping meetings to time, focusing on the right questions, ensuring that papers were read in advance, and having an expectation that colleagues would not miss meetings or send deputies who were not empowered to take decisions. Local areas argued that these were essential if engagement with a formal governance mechanism was to be seen as an important means of making swift, collective decisions and making progress on improvement, rather than a time-consuming distraction.

The role of improvement boards: **Northamptonshire**

Northamptonshire's children's services were judged to be inadequate in 2013. Northamptonshire's children's services leaders hold to the central belief in the importance of effective leadership, management and partnership-working, and the role of external support to enable, not take the place of, these features. This has shaped how Northamptonshire have engaged with the external support available to them, including working with an independently-chaired improvement board. Northamptonshire chose to see this not as something imposed on them, but as a tool to help drive improvement.

Northamptonshire emphasised that the improvement board had helped them to prioritise and plan their improvement activities, engage senior partners, to have robust and challenging conversations

in a transparent and evidence-informed manner, and to maintain momentum. They also credited the board with helping to moderate between local and national partners, including the DfE and Ofsted, drawing out debates in a climate of mutual confidence.

Northamptonshire colleagues highlighted two key factors in the effective work of the board. First, they described how the independent chairperson brought expertise (including having chaired other improvement boards), a willingness to devote sufficient time to 'get their hands dirty' gathering feedback, and a willingness to have 'courageous conversations'.

The chairperson left them in no doubt about the scale of the challenge, but also that 'things could only get better, but only if people play their part'. Second, colleagues highlighted the importance of the basics of good governance – expectations of papers being read in advance, the right membership with little deputising, meetings kept to time, task-and-finish groups to drive action between meetings, and giving credit for progress. "This public support for progress helped to keep the workforce with us", said one Northamptonshire leader.

Northamptonshire also made use of other forms of support in the same spirt, including a LGA peer review a year after the improvement board was set up and working with Ofsted on external audits of casework practice. Northamptonshire's children's services were re-inspected in 2016 and judged to require improvement.

The role of improvement boards
Overall, of the local areas we engaged, the experiences of working with improvement boards specifically were mixed. Half of the local areas we engaged who had worked with an improvement board described positive experiences, where they perceived that an improvement board had played a key role in supporting their improvement journey. The other half described less positive experiences.

What was noteworthy, however, was that both sets of local areas identified the same key factors for making an improvement board a success. Those who had had less positive experiences highlighted the absence of the success factors we have described above – a lack of capacity to triangulate evidence, getting bogged down in operational detail and losing focus on strategic matters, and lacking the basics of governance. As one councillor, who had had a positive experience of working with an improvement board, admittedly after a tricky start, put it, the improvement board had been "a truly critical friend: there is a difference between being supported critically and being hit with a stick".

The role of children's services commissioners

Fewer of the local areas we engaged had worked with children's services commissioners than had worked with improvement boards. Among those that had, the feedback from councillors, leaders and staff had been very positive. These local areas recognised both the importance of someone external making an initial judgement about the capacity of local areas to improve, and the importance of those decisions being taken by individuals who understood children's services and improvement. Leaders in these local areas gave the DfE credit for having adapted its approach when a council entered intervention, by using experienced sector leaders to work with local areas to support, challenge and assess their initial response and capacity for sustained improvement.

Those local areas also considered, however, that it was important for councils and their partners, across the system, to have a good understanding of the role of children's services commissioners. For this reason, we have included a short summary of the role below, which is based on our conversations with colleagues who have acted as commissioners.

The role of children's services commissioners

Children's services commissioners will work with councils that have entered formal DfE intervention. They will generally work with those councils in the initial stage of their improvement journey, although in some instances commissioners have continued to work with local areas on a longer-term basis. The role involves three elements.

1. **Impartial triangulation role** – being able to gather evidence, test and enhance a local area's understanding of their areas for improvement, and reach an evidence-informed, objective view of their capacity to drive and sustain improvement.

2. **Critical friend role** – being able to offer advice, support and challenge from a position of credibility and expertise. Commissioners were seen and saw themselves as members of a coalition of partners working with a local area to drive improvements.

3. **Mediating role** – helping to facilitate mature conversations and understanding of a local area's approach to and pace of improvement between national decision-makers and local leaders and partners.

Local areas that had worked with children's services commissioners described the important benefits they had reaped from this, including access to credible, expert advice, mature conversations with no surprises, and connections to potential partners and networks.

Commissioners described to us how they reach their judgements and recommendations about how to ensure sustainable, long-term improvements in the local areas with which they work. This involves looking at the local area's understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement, its priorities and approach to improvement (strategic plans, operating models), and its capacity (people, resources, corporate support, effectiveness

of scrutiny). Commissioners emphasised, however, that while part of their role was to consider whether an alternative delivery model was needed in a local area, they recognised that alternative delivery models could be a blunt instrument and would not be the most appropriate solution in all circumstances. We have used these points to inform the framework we have developed through this research for considering the right form of improvement support.

Circumstances when this is likely to be effective

Our evidence suggests that this form of support is likely to be effective in instances where the local children's services have the right leadership – stable leadership with the know-how to identify, initiate and embed an effective approach to improvement – but are lacking one of two things.

First, leadership 'grip' on one key area of practice within children's services may be lacking – thresholds for referrals, support for children on the edge of and in care, and support for care-leavers were common examples reported to us. In such instances, the weaknesses experienced within children's services may be relatively contained, and may have resulted from key members of staff leaving or some weaker practice in areas with a high volume of activity. For this reason, some form of external scrutiny may be necessary to bring together key stakeholders to oversee rapid action to address these specific areas of concern. By contrast, several local areas described to us instances where external scrutiny had been put in place, but leadership 'grip' had been lacking, leading to a scattergun approach that had delayed necessary long-term improvements being put in place.

Second, however, effective governance may be lacking. More precisely, there may be dysfunctional governance and oversight of children's services from political leaders, corporate leaders and/or from partners, which may be impeding the effective operation of children's services.

For this reason, external scrutiny through an improvement board or similar mechanism may be necessary to bring political leaders, corporate leaders and partners together and agree an overall agenda for children's services improvement.

The role of the Department of Education

Lead members, leaders and staff in councils that were subject to intervention recognised that the DfE was one of their key stakeholders and partners in their improvement journey. They reflected that there were benefits that the DfE could bring that could support a local area's children services improvement journey. Chief among these was the public scrutiny that the DfE could bring to bear on councils and their partners. Colleagues reflected that this could provide a significant and much-needed spur to action, placing a council's reputation on the line, and providing some leverage to get the support of political leaders, corporate leaders and/or partner agencies.

Local areas also reflected on what they considered had been, in the past, a lack of clarity about the distinctive role of the DfE among other partners working to support improvement in a local children's services department. They argued that the DfE's role should not be about providing specific practical advice on children's services improvement – this was the role of strategic partners and colleagues from the sector. Councillors and leaders also argued, however, that neither should the DfE's role be solely about providing challenge and scrutiny. Instead, local areas argued that the DfE's role should be to mediate between national and local decision-makers, coordinate improvement support, and act as a critical friend by providing regular feedback, appropriate challenge and a sense of distance travelled during the improvement journey.

For the DfE to be an effective partner in a local area's improvement journey, local areas highlighted not only clarity about their role, but also the need for greater consistency of personnel.

We highlighted the importance of continuity and consistency among the key characteristics of effective improvement support in section 1. The majority of local areas described how they had experienced a high turnover of DfE officials who had been their main point-of-contact, some of whom had attended no more than one or two visits or meetings before being replaced by someone else. This made it more difficult to build rapport and for local areas to get meaningful feedback, a sense of distance travelled, and the right level of challenge grounded in a deep understanding of their local context and improvement journey.

Alternative delivery models

Potential benefits

At the outset of this section on the potential benefits of alternative delivery models, we wish to note two important caveats. First, we want to emphasise the fact that what we describe here are potential benefits. The number of alternative delivery models in existence is small, and, while evaluations are taking place, the aim of our research is not to duplicate those studies. Furthermore, we engaged several local areas that were in the process of exploring and establishing alternative delivery models, and, in this section, we have included details about the benefits they were aiming to achieve. Second, leaders in local areas that had established or were exploring alternative delivery models were themselves keen to emphasise that an alternative delivery model was not in and of itself a driver of improvement. They argued strongly that it would be a mistake to consider that creating an alternative delivery model would automatically lead to improvement. Rather, those leaders and staff saw the role of an alternative delivery model as one of helping to create the conditions for improvement and to get to the starting point of an improvement journey.

Leaders in those local areas then went on to highlight two important sets of potential benefits that they had achieved or were hoping to achieve by establishing an alternative delivery model.

The first relates to creating afresh the stability – of vision, of leadership, of governance and of the workforce – that perhaps had not been achievable for that local area hitherto. Local leaders who had established or were exploring alternative delivery models talked about it as a means of overcoming what had proved to be intractable and systemic issues. Those who had successfully established an alternative delivery model described how they did not think the local area would have been able to overcome these issues and start to achieve improvements without having made the transition to the new model. Indeed, there is some corroboration for this view to be found in the evidence of the depth and persistence of past difficulties and the evidence, drawn from data and sector-led peer reviews, of improvement since the transition to an alternative delivery model.

Doncaster Children's Services Trust

The recent history of children's services in Doncaster is well known. Following Professor Julian Le Grand's 2013 report, in which he described a 'constant cycle of improvement and regression' in Doncaster's children's services, a direction was issued that resulted in the UK's first independent, non-profit children's trust: the Doncaster Children's Services Trust (DCST). The trust began operating in September 2014. When the trust was inspected in 2015, while the overall judgement remained one of inadequate, the Ofsted report stated categorically that 'services for children and young people in Doncaster are improving'.

One year on, in the summer of 2016, DCST received a safeguarding peer review from the LGA, followed shortly by two Ofsted monitoring visits. These describe strong evidence of further improvements in Doncaster. First, both the peer review and Ofsted reports describe greater stability of the workforce, high morale among staff and evidence of cultural change. Our conversations with practitioners in Doncaster in September supported this.

Staff spoke about what attracted them to work for DCST, including the stability of and support for the workforce, and the culture of the organisation, including a reduction in bureaucracy and greater visibility of senior leaders. The concept of a 'new start' has also been attractive to staff, who spoke with pride about being associated with initiatives that were recognised positively as 'the Doncaster model' by peers in other local areas. Second, both reports highlight the improvements in core processes, performance management, quality assurance and challenge, and effective implementation of a comprehensive improvement plan. While the reports, and indeed DCST's leaders and staff, recognise that there is further to go to embed these improvements consistently, the reports recognise that new initiatives, such as the early help hub and work to tackle domestic abuse, are seeing early impact.

Colleagues recognise that working within a rust has brought benefits, not least the speed of decision-making and sole focus on improving children's services. As the peer review states, 'the trust can demonstrate agility and speed of decision-making… which greatly assists the pace of improvement'. DCST leaders and partners recognise the contribution of the new delivery model in driving improvements, enabling staff, managers, partners and leaders to create the culture and conditions to make progress towards improvement that had not been achieved in Doncaster previously. They also recognise that this approach has been effective in response to specific local circumstances and due to the specific model that they have developed in Doncaster.

The creation of an alternative delivery model was not simply seen as a response to past failure, however. One local area that is currently working towards establishing an alternative delivery model described how this move would 'enable us to run towards good, rather than simply running away from an inadequate judgement'.

Leaders in this and other local areas described how creating an alternative delivery model had given them, their staff and their partners the opportunity to shape their improvement journey, what they wanted to sustain, and what they wanted to achieve. Leaders in local areas that had developed alternative delivery models – both executive leadership models and new organisations – argued strongly that what was crucial was being clear about the local area's overall aims for improvement, and designing a solution and model of delivery best suited to achieving those aims. Some local areas we engaged, recognising that alternative delivery models were 'on the table' as a policy option, had sought to engage staff and partners about how they might sustain their improvement journey, and whether and how an alternative delivery model might help to create stable, skilled leadership and workforce, robust governance and a healthy relationship with the local council and partners. As a senior leader in one such authority put it, 'we asked, "If a trust is the answer, what is the question?"'.

Many of the leaders, managers and frontline practitioners in those local areas that had established alternative delivery models said that it was the opportunity to work in a new organisation, with a specific vision and set of values, that had attracted them to work in that local area. Staff in these areas also commented positively on the improvements they had seen in terms of turnover of staff and team managers, improvements in staff development, quality assurance, visible leadership and communications. Partners, likewise, described how they had seen improvements in stability of leadership, and consequently continuity of relationships, as well as a more 'can-do' culture, which had in turn engendered greater confidence in partnership working.

This is not to claim that stabilising the workforce, reducing staff turnover and engaging partners cannot be achieved other than through an alternative delivery model.

Nor is it to claim that these benefits will automatically accrue from any alternative delivery model. The argument put forward by the leaders, staff and partners was that the creation of an alternative delivery model in these specific local areas had helped or was intended to help to create the conditions within which work to secure sustained improvement could take place.

Executive leadership across two local areas: **Hampshire** and **Isle of Wight**

In January 2013, the Isle of Wight's children's services were judged inadequate by Ofsted, while concerns were raised about the quality of local education provision. Following careful consideration, it was decided that rapid improvement could best be secured by creating a formal strategic partnership with Hampshire County Council. At the time, councillors and senior officers from both councils spoke of the potential benefits of the partnership, including sharing practice, training and capacity, and spreading and enhancing the expertise of a high-performing local children's services department.

A model of shared executive leadership was developed, within which the director of children's services of Hampshire assumed day-to-day leadership responsibilities for children's services in the Isle of Wight. The Isle of Wight Council, however, retained full political and funding responsibilities, and Isle of Wight staff remained employed by the Isle of Wight. The five-year partnership was underpinned by a statutory direction from the Secretary of State for Education.

Colleagues from both Hampshire and the Isle of Wight have highlighted the benefits of opportunities for staff to work alongside one another, diagnose issues and strengthen core systems. While initially the focus was on Hampshire leaders and managers establishing a systematic grip on frontline practice in the Isle of Wight, colleagues in both local areas report that the learning has increasingly become two-way, with benefits to both organisations.

Furthermore, colleagues highlight the cost-effectiveness of the model, as there are significant demonstrable savings for the Isle of Wight that have been realised as a result of this improvement model, based on what they would have had to invest in alternative improvement solutions, interim leadership and maintaining a separate management team. The most important benefit highlighted by colleagues has been speed, specifically the fact that, once key governance and contractual arrangements had been agreed, the improvement work could begin right away. In November 2014, the Isle of Wight was re-inspected and judged to require improvement.

Local areas described a second set of benefits that related to the way in which working within an alternative delivery model had enabled a greater focus on children's services improvement. These benefits related specifically to local areas that had established new delivery organisations, such as independent trusts or publicly-owned companies. For example, the published LGA peer review of the Doncaster Children's Services Trust states, 'the trust can demonstrate agility and speed of decision-making… which greatly assists the pace of improvement'.

Leaders and staff described how the design of their alternative delivery models did or would enable swift and effective decision-making. They saw this as a benefit that would accrue in part from the governance and decision-making structures within the new organisation. It would also reflect the fact that they were working with an organisation whose whole focus was on children's services, so the risk of focus, decision-making or resources being diverted due to the political cycle, restructuring, financial pressures or other priorities was minimised. Furthermore, some local areas that have established or are considering alternative delivery models described the potential benefits of having corporate functions, such as HR, finance, legal services and IT, that were focused on the needs of children's services.

Again, this is not to say that swift decision-making or effective back-office support functions are the exclusive preserve of newly-created children's services delivery organisations. Indeed, in this report we have described examples where other forms of improvement support had helped to create these conditions for improvement. Likewise, there are examples of these issues being addressed by bringing together two local children's services under an executive leadership model, as in the example of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. It is also important to recognise that setting up a new organisation and building the capacity required to drive and embed improvement requires a considerable investment of the capacity of senior leaders and staff. One of the benefits described to us by those who had developed executive leadership models is the speed at which the improvement work can be initiated and start making an impact.

The conclusions we draw from this are, first, that there are circumstances where local areas may be faced with systemic impediments to sustained improvement and therefore there is merit in considering whether an alternative means of delivering children's services may help to overcome these barriers. Second, however, there is an equally important point to make about the need to be clear-sighted about the overall aims for improvement when considering the forms of improvement support and alternative delivery models that are most likely to achieve those aims.

We have described two set of benefits that leaders, staff and partners said they had seen or were expecting to see following the transition to an alternative delivery model. We did not hear any messages about how these benefits might be different depending on whether the alternative delivery model was 'imposed' or developed 'voluntarily'. Instead, as we describe in the following section, local leaders argued that the extent to which those benefits would be realised would depend on the way in which the alternative delivery model was designed and developed within its local context. Clearly, however, relevant to this context will be whether an alternative

delivery model is developed as a result of DfE intervention or is developed voluntarily. This may have a bearing on, for example, the range of partners involved, whether the model is underpinned by a statutory direction, and whether financial support and resources are provided to support the intervention.

Key success factors
Throughout this report, we have emphasised the point about the enabling role of improvement support in general and about alternative delivery models specifically. One important implication of this is that what is required to drive and sustain improvement in the context of an alternative delivery model is no different from what is required to do so in a local authority context. Establishing an alternative delivery model is not a substitute for diagnosing underlying weaknesses, developing an overarching strategy for improvement, building stable leadership and a skilled, settled workforce, engaging partners, and relentlessly pursuing consistently high-quality practice.

There are, however, two sets of factors that we have identified through our research that are crucial to the successful establishment of an alternative delivery model. While there are multiple types of alternative delivery model, these factors apply consistently to all the different alternative delivery models we have come across, including newly-formed organisations and executive leadership models. Our research suggests that getting these two sets of factors in place will not of themselves automatically drive improvements. Getting them wrong, however, is likely to create barriers for leaders and staff working within a new set of delivery arrangements.

First, it is vital that staff, partners, service-users and other stakeholders are engaged meaningfully in shaping the overall vision for improvement and how creating an alternative delivery model will help to achieve that vision. Leaders involved with alternative delivery models described how they had sought to avoid the risk that staff would feel that moving to a new model of delivery was something being imposed on them

that would adversely affect their working conditions, professional development and career progression. Leaders also identified the risk of the transition to a new delivery model being seen by partners as something that would diminish their involvement with children's services. The risk, in the words of one local children's services leader, was that partners would perceive 'the council putting walls around children's services'. This point was made in the context of the establishment of a new delivery body, but this risk is also present for local areas moving to executive leadership. In both instances, partners will be concerned about how they maintain effective working relationships within new structures. Regardless of the form of delivery model, all local leaders argued that establishing an alternative delivery model effectively required this form of broad and in-depth engagement with the full range of local stakeholders.

Second, it is crucial that there is absolute clarity about the way in which the relationship between the body delivering children's services, whether this is a newly-created, independent organisation or a partnership with another local authority, and the council will function. There are three separate aspects to this.

a. **Governance and accountability** – it is vital that there is clarity about how the body delivering children's services will continue to be accountable to the local community and the council. Local leaders argued for the importance of putting in place formal routines for reporting to cabinet committees, regular discussions between the council chief executive and the person with overall executive responsibility for children's services, and clarity about what the council could, and equally what they could not, request.

b. **The interface with and transition between services** – it equally important that it is clear about the interface between services to be delivered through a new organisation or executive leadership and those that will remain within the council. This will also depend on the range of services that will be delivered through the alternative delivery model – children's social care, a broader set of children's services (including early help and disabled children's services), or the full range of a council's education functions. There was a strong view among those we engaged that a broader scope was preferable since it meant fewer points of transition and handover between one body and another. Ensuring these links are clear will be crucial, not only in terms of the interfaces between different parts of children's services, but also in terms of the link with education services and the transition from children's services to adult services.

c. **The interface with corporate functions** – leaders who were involved with alternative delivery models argued strongly for the need to think through the ongoing support from or interface with corporate functions within the council, such as finance, IT and HR. The principle of ensuring there is clarity about how these systems will work with one another is crucial, whether a whole new set of corporate functions are being created or existing functions from a council are continuing to be used on a service-level agreement basis.

During the research, a council chief executive asked whether and how work to design alternative delivery models had sought to take account of the role of partner agencies. The local leaders we engaged emphasised that the process of establishing an alternative delivery model provided an opportunity to reset and reform relationships between the council and partners.

Furthermore, they argued that the engagement of partner agencies and the development of improved ways of working with partners should be a crucial part of the improvement strategy, and should inform the design of any alternative delivery models being considered. Both leaders within councils and partner agencies saw opportunities to explore more integrated ways of working, as confidence in partnership working developed.

Overall, leaders emphasised the need to engage partner agencies at every stage of the process of planning and establishing an alternative delivery model. We did not, however, come across any examples of local areas that were exploring formally incorporating the functions of partner agencies, such as the local police and health services, into their new delivery models. Several local leaders to whom we put this question, while not ruling this out as a future option, considered that this would add unnecessary complexity to the initial work of establishing an alternative delivery model.

Circumstances when this is likely to be effective

Many senior children's services leaders we engaged agreed that, in certain circumstances, where issues have become endemic and/or have proved resistant to previous efforts to address them, there was a case for considering alternative models of delivering children's services. Councillors and frontline practitioners, however, were less likely to agree that there might be benefit in considering alternative delivery models.

Alternative delivery models are likely to be considered in instances where local areas are facing systemic and/or persistent challenges. During our research, we engaged local areas that had fallen into difficulty due to relatively contained issues in one part of their children's services system. With the right form of support, either to enhance practice in a specific area to put in place robust governance, these local areas have been able to make rapid progress. For these local areas, the question of an alternative delivery model was not relevant. Councillors, senior leaders and staff in several local areas asked the rhetorical question, "what would creating a trust have enabled us to do that we have not done anyway?".

We also found, however, other local areas where the issues faced by children's services – and indeed by the council and its partners more broadly – were more systemic and persistent. Either due to the severity of the issues, or the fact that the local area has

not been able to overcome them over time, there was the need to consider whether an alternative model of delivery might help to create conditions for long-term improvement to take place.

Our research suggests that what needs to be determined in these instances is whether the leadership of the local area – political, corporate, service-level and partnership – has the capacity to lead rapid and sustained improvement. Our discussions with councillors, senior leaders, staff and children's services commissioners suggest that this relates specifically to whether local leaders – at political, corporate and service levels – have the necessary 'grip' of children's services in three key areas.

1. **The capacity to self-assess accurately** – colleagues argued that being able to self-assess accurately and identify underlying issues were crucial to determining whether local leadership had the grip to initiate, let alone drive and sustain, improvement in children's services. As one experienced director of children's services put it, there is a simple test: "Are the leadership listening and are they able to listen? Do they get it?"

2. **The capacity to set priorities and develop a strategic approach to improvement** – colleagues argued that it was equally important to determine whether local leadership could use the outcomes of their self-assessment to develop a strategic approach likely to lead to rapid and sustained improvement. This entails being able to identify a set of strategic priorities and develop these with staff and partners to shape an effective strategic approach. In other words, does the local leadership know what is required to secure the necessary improvements? During the research, we heard several examples where an improvement journey had stalled due, in part, to a lack of knowledge about what was required to secure improvement within the organisation.

3. **The capacity to implement this strategic approach** – the third consideration identified by colleagues is whether, having self-assessed accurately and developed a robust strategic approach, the council and partners have the capacity to implement this effectively. Capacity in this sense includes having the right resources, structures and caseloads to deliver improved frontline practice within children's services. It also includes having the right project management capacity and feedback routines to maintain a strong grip on improvement work. In addition, capacity in this context also includes there being the right strategic and operational support for children's services improvement from political leaders, corporate leaders, core corporate functions and from partner agencies.
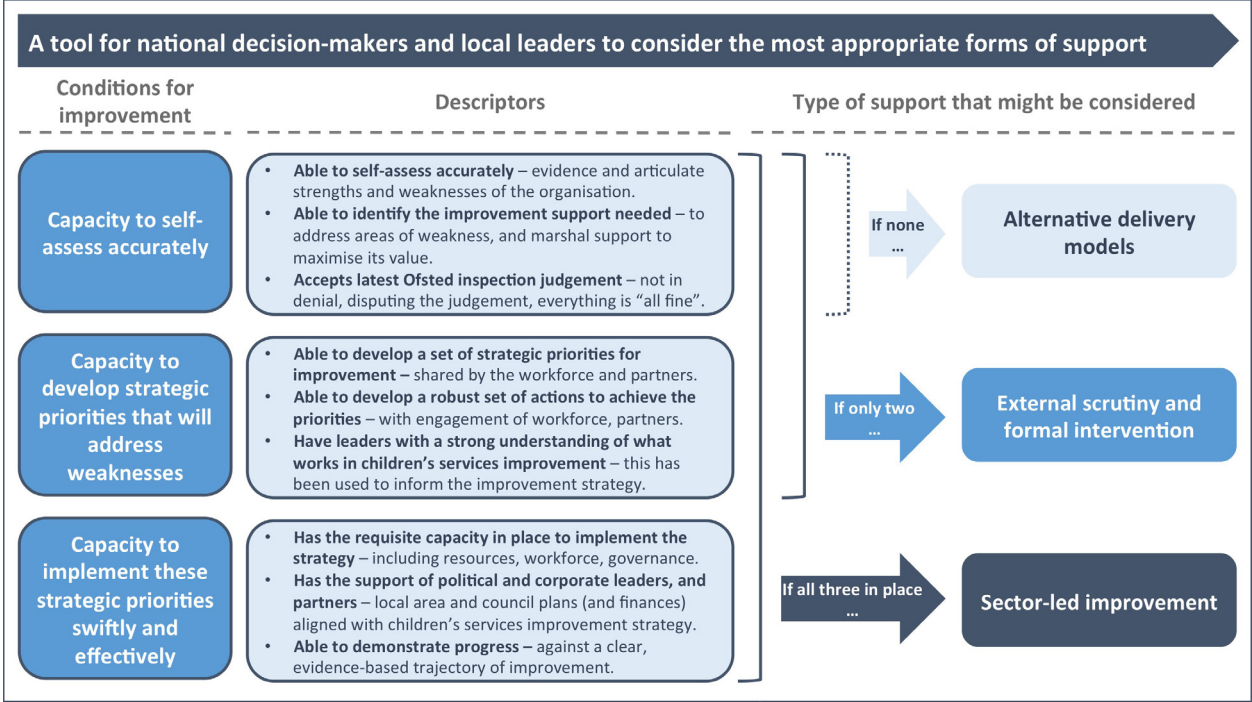
An experienced children's services leader, who has fulfilled the role of children's services commissioner, summed up these three sets of considerations in the following way. They said, "I ask, 'Are they climbing the right ladder, do they have a reasonable grip on the rungs, and have they got the right footwear to continue the climb?' ". These findings suggest that, where a local area is experiencing systemic and/or persistent difficulties, and where there is a lack of capacity in the three areas identified above – to self-assess, to develop a strategic approach, and to deliver – then an alternative delivery model might be considered. This is not because creating an alternative delivery model would be an automatic solution to these issues, but rather because this combination of circumstances raises the question of whether alternative means for securing the conditions for improvement might be required.

Consideration of models

As we have described in the preceding section, alternative delivery models are a form of improvement support that is only likely to be considered in a very specific set of circumstances. In most cases, this will be when local areas are faced with systemic issues and do not have the capacity to overcome them, although there are also instances where local areas may decide to join together in an executive leadership model to protect and sustain what are already good services. In instances where issues have been identified through an Ofsted inspection, these local areas will be subject to formal DfE intervention. Subsequently, national decision-makers will consider what form of intervention and support is needed to secure sustainable, long-term improvement, and, working with children's services commissioners, whether an alternative delivery model should be established. At the same time, councillors and leaders in these local areas will be considering how to respond and work with the DfE and the children's services commissioner. In order to inform clear-sighted consideration of the right forms of improvement support, therefore, it is vital that national and local decision-makers have a good understanding of the available models of improvement support and of how to decide on the most appropriate form of support in any given set of circumstances.

For this reason, we have sought to summarise the key considerations described in this section in the figure below. While we cannot hope to do justice to the myriad factors that need to be considered when deciding on how best to secure rapid and sustained improvement, we hope that this provides a useful, practical summary of key considerations for national and local decision-makers.

A tool for national decision-makers and local leaders to consider the most appropriate forms of support

Conditions for improvement	Descriptors	Type of support that might be considered
Capacity to self-assess accurately	• **Able to self-assess accurately** – evidence and articulate strengths and weaknesses of the organisation. • **Able to identify the improvement support needed** – to address areas of weakness, and marshal support to maximise its value. • **Accepts latest Ofsted inspection judgement** – not in denial, disputing the judgement, everything is "all fine".	**If none …** → **Alternative delivery models**
Capacity to develop strategic priorities that will address weaknesses	• **Able to develop a set of strategic priorities for improvement** – shared by the workforce and partners. • **Able to develop a robust set of actions to achieve the priorities** – with engagement of workforce, partners. • **Have leaders with a strong understanding of what works in children's services improvement** – this has been used to inform the improvement strategy.	**If only two …** → **External scrutiny and formal intervention**
Capacity to implement these strategic priorities swiftly and effectively	• **Has the requisite capacity in place to implement the strategy** – including resources, workforce, governance. • **Has the support of political and corporate leaders, and partners** – local area and council plans (and finances) aligned with children's services improvement strategy. • **Able to demonstrate progress** – against a clear, evidence-based trajectory of improvement.	**If all three in place …** → **Sector-led improvement**

Put briefly, this figure suggests the following:

• Where a local area has the capacity to self-assess accurately, to develop a strategic approach informed by that self-assessment, and the capacity to implement that, and where issues are not systemic and persistent, well-chosen and high-quality sector-led improvement support at key points during its improvement journey is likely to help it sustain improvement.

• Where a local area has both the capacity to self-assess and the know-how to develop strategic priorities, but may face obstacles in implementing these, focused external scrutiny may help to bring leaders and partners together to overcome those obstacles.

• Where all three of these conditions are absent, the question arises as to whether an alternative means of delivering children's services may assist in putting in place the conditions necessary to secure improvement.

Throughout our discussion of alternative delivery models, we have sought to describe the circumstances in which this specific form of support may be considered.

We have suggested that there are certain circumstances in which national decision-makers and local leaders might consider an alternative delivery model. The precise form of alternative delivery model, whether an executive leadership model or a new organisation, and how that is to be designed will necessarily be different in every context.

It will depend on, for example, whether there is a strong local area willing to be part of an executive leadership model or whether a new organisation is seen as necessary to break the cycle of past difficulties. It must also, crucially, be informed by a clear-sighted view of the overall vision for improvement.

This is not to say, however, that it is only in circumstances where local areas are facing systemic difficulties that an alternative delivery model could be considered. As we noted at the outset of this report, we have come across a small number of local areas that were pro-actively considering alternative delivery models as a means of shaping the next stage of their improvement journeys.

This assumes, however, that councillors, leaders, staff and partners have a good understanding of the different models of improvement support, specifically alternative delivery models. We found that, while there was a degree of clarity about alternative delivery models among children's services leaders, there was variable understanding and some misconceptions among elected members, practitioners and partners.

For many, alternative delivery models were seen as a threat to frontline practice and working conditions. In local areas that have established or were establishing alternative delivery models, leaders described how they had dealt with misunderstandings among political and corporate leaders and staff about the implications of the transition to an alternative delivery model.

There is an important role, therefore, for national bodies in ensuring that there is greater understanding of different alternative delivery models, potential benefits, success factors, circumstances in which they might be considered and the implications for the ongoing role of the council. This should help to inform local decisions about improvement support, as well as preparing councils that may find themselves in circumstances where the question of alternative delivery models arises.

The question of comparable costs

As well as considering the potential benefits and success factors of different forms of improvement support, local areas and national decision-makers will want to consider the resource implications. We sought to explore this question with the local areas we engaged individually through this research. Councillors and senior leaders in those local areas considered that this was important, but argued that getting to a position where it was possible to compare the costs of improvement support accurately was challenging.

As well as differences in local contexts (need, levels of funding, local strategic decisions), they highlighted three further difficulties that made it less than straightforward to compare costs of different models of improvement support and of delivering children's services.

a. **The legacy of past underperformance** – if a local area is dealing with long-term challenges, there are likely to be higher costs related, for example, to out-of-area placements for children in care, needs that are more complex because they have not been addressed early or effectively enough and/or inheriting poor-quality local provision.

b. **Difficulties establishing a baseline** – is what was spent at the outset of an improvement journey the 'true cost' of delivering a safe, core service? Is additional investment required to stabilise the service, for example by reducing caseloads and management spans?

c. **Difficulties quantifying the cost of previously unsuccessful forms of intervention** – both in terms of improvement support and the costs to the local children's services department (interim and agency staff etc).

Despite these difficulties, colleagues distinguished between three types of cost associated with improvement support. The distinctions between these may be instructive for local areas considering how they resource the next stage of their improvement journey, particularly those exploring alternative delivery models.

a. **Set-up costs** – these are the costs related to setting up a new organisation or structure, which may include moving to a new office space, developing new service infrastructure etc. Colleagues argued that local areas had a degree of flexibility in terms of how extensive these set-up costs were.

b. **Transitional costs** – colleagues also noted the significant transitional costs associated with leading a change in the

way children's services were delivered. These included the costs of due diligence and legal work, but also the investment of leadership and staff time in managing a project of this scale.

c. **Improvement costs** – these were the costs required to achieve a core, safe children's services department, some of which may be investment in innovations and some of which may be reversing the impact of previous resourcing decisions in order to ensure manageable caseloads, effective management supervision and so on.

Some local areas felt that there might be potential for alternative models to help generate savings, either by bringing together children's services across more than one local area or through exploring new ways of delivering services. They noted, however, that the latter was largely untested to date, although there is evidence of savings on the cost of improvement support and service provision in areas that have explored executive leadership models.

Local leaders argued that the main area of expenditure was what we have termed 'improvement costs', which could vary depending on the scale of the issues and the extent of previous underinvestment. Estimates of this ranged from £3 million to £15 million, with £10 million being the average. Leaders in local areas who had established or were exploring new organisations argued strongly that, overall, their running costs were not different to those in other local areas where children's services operated within a council. They argued, instead, that any differences in their spending reflected what was required in order to get back to having a safe, core service.

Overall, there was a strong view among the councillors, leaders and staff we engaged that there needed to be greater transparency and clarity about the costs of different forms of improvement support, including alternative delivery models.

Conclusion

Implications for national and local decision-makers

The context in which local children's services are operating is such that we are likely to see both continuing need for improvement support and an increasing number of alternative delivery models over the next few years. The pressures and challenges facing local children's services were underscored to us by councillors, leaders, staff and partners during the research. Local areas will, therefore, need to continue to be able to access new ideas and opportunities to develop practice jointly with peers, and to access impartial feedback on their work. Due to these external pressures, some local areas, particularly smaller councils, are likely to wish to explore opportunities to combine services through integrated ways of working, executive leadership or new delivery bodies.

At the same time, the DfE's policy document, 'Putting Children First', sets out clearly the process through which decisions about intervention in local children's services will be taken. That document also describes the presumption that, in cases of systemic or persistent failure, services will be transferred to an alternative delivery model. This will place a premium on decision-makers at national, regional and local level being able to make evidence-informed decisions about the improvement support that they commission. There are implications of this for national and local decision-makers in terms of how they select the right forms of improvement support, but also in terms of the right forms of improvement support being available to access.

Selecting the right form of improvement support

In this report, we have detailed the views of councillors, leaders, staff and partners from a range of local areas who have been at different stages of their improvement journeys and have worked with different forms of improvement support. While colleagues were reasonably clear about the potential benefits and most appropriate uses of certain forms of support, there are two reasons why we would suggest that there is a need for leaders at all levels to support greater understanding of how to maximise the impact of external improvement support.

First, during the research we have heard examples of different local areas having vastly different experiences of the same form of improvement support, particularly in relation to formal intervention and independently-chaired improvement boards. Second, we found that, particularly among practitioners but also to some extent among councillors and children's services leaders, there were some misconceptions and a lack of clarity about alternative delivery models.

Given the ongoing improvement challenge for the sector and given that alternative delivery models are likely to play an increasing role in children's services delivery, it is vital that leaders at all levels understand and can access evidence and information about different models of support.

For national decision-makers, this will require three things:

a. **a commitment to continuing to build the evidence base about the practicalities, benefits and resource implications of different forms of improvement support**, and to share this evidence base in an open and transparent manner to inform national and local decision-making

b. **transparent and consultative decision-making, particularly in instances where councils are subject to formal intervention** – several local areas welcomed the fact that the DfE had sought, through 'Putting Children First', to set out a clear decision-making process

c. **working pro-actively with local councils, particularly councillors, to support them in understanding the potential implications of falling into intervention** – specifically, how the nature of their role might change if children's services move to an alternative delivery model, and how to continue to fulfil their duties effectively in this new context.

For local leaders, this will require two things:

a. **taking a strategic and evidence-based approach to selecting the right form of improvement support** – being clear-sighted about the potential benefits and circumstances to draw on specific forms of support, and being willing to ask the question, "Are the conditions for sustained improvement in place currently?"

b. **bringing the focus of a formal project to all improvement activities, including engagements with external support** – maximising the value of external support will require local areas to engage openly and in a spirit of honest self-assessment, and to treat these engagements as a project in their own right so as to define clear aims and to evaluate them rigorously.

Being able to access the right form of improvement support

The colleagues we engaged during this project echoed those to whom we spoke during the original action research in registering their concern with what they saw as the reactive nature of the current system of children's services improvement support. They argued that the current system lacked the mechanisms and capacity to be pro-active and to step in before issues reach crisis point. They argued, likewise, that the resources available for improvement support were heavily skewed towards providing support after a local children's service reached crisis point, rather than preventing this from happening in the first place.

In one local area that we engaged, leaders described how they had diagnosed that their children's services were beset by systemic and serious issues, before they were inspected, and had been pro-active in asking for help in addressing these issues. Their example highlighted the need for a more flexible, pro-active and joined-up approach to inspection, intervention and improvement support at the level of the national system.

In our original action research, we argued that the current system had broadly the right elements in place, but required two things to be truly effective in facilitating system-wide improvement. First, there needed to be greater strategic coherence between the different elements of improvement support – peer networks, sector-led support, inspection and intervention – in order to identify and respond swiftly, pro-actively and effectively to issues in local children's services. Second, there needed to be greater focus on building capacity for system leadership in order to meet the scale of demand for improvement support. This would, in turn, require systemic support for local children's services on the fair-to-good and good-to-great stages of their improvement journeys, rather than solely for those on the poor-to-fair stage.

It will also require three things of councillors, leaders and practitioners in local areas:

a. **committing to and sustaining systematic processes of peer review** – so as to put in place processes to ensure that significant and rapidly declining practice is identified before it reaches crisis point

b. **being willing to have the 'tough conversations' with colleagues in local areas where there is evidence of serious issues taking root** – we note below, as we did in the previous action research, that this requires not just collective commitment among sector leaders, but also a formal escalation route so as to link this local intelligence with the national accountability and inspection in order to inform a more rapid, risk-based response to such issues

c. **system leadership and professional generosity** – although capacity in local areas is stretched (and indeed because of this), there is ever-greater need for local areas to continue to engage in shaping practice and improvements, not only in their own local areas, but also to work with peers in other local areas.

Likewise, of national decision-makers this will also require further two things:

a. **working together as a broad consortium in order to draw together intelligence about and commission support in response to system-wide improvement needs** – this would include ensuring that there is a formal route for local leaders to escalate concerns that they are aware of locally

b. **taking a broader, more pro-active view of improvement support** – ensuring that this is not just focused on those local areas that have fallen into difficulties, but is targeted specifically at key points throughout the children's services improvement journey – for example, ensuring there is appropriate support for local areas on the fair-to-good stage of their journey and avoiding the risk of 'slipping back', or building the capacity and opportunities for system leadership

for those on the good-to-great stage of the journey.

A question posed by some of the local leaders we engaged during the research was whether they would have achieved improvements more quickly if they had used a different form of support or operated within a different model for delivering children's services.

Ultimately, as they noted, there is no way to answer a counterfactual question like this conclusively, and this research has not sought to do so. Instead, our research has suggested that there are insights that can be gleaned from the experience of individual local areas that can help national and local leaders to make decisions about how they access and use improvement support in a more informed way.

We hope that the findings set out in this report help to contribute to a more evidence-informed approach to the use of external improvement support to enable local areas to drive and embed improvements in their children's services.

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