

# **“Enablers and improvement cycles”: Lessons learned from the What Works in SEND effective local practice case studies**

Isos Partnership

July 2024



## Contents

What Works in SEND .....	3
Why we are focusing on "enablers" of improvement in local SEND systems .....	3
Part 1: The enablers of improvement in local SEND systems .....	5
Enabler 1: Co-production and relationships between children and young people, families and practitioners .....	5
Enabler 2: Shared vision and evidence-informed priorities .....	7
Enabler 3: Stable and knowledgeable leadership and governance .....	9
Enabler 4: A focus on high-quality delivery of the essentials.....	10
Enabler 5: A well-organised, skilled and supported workforce.....	11
Part 2: The improvement cycle of local SEND systems .....	14
"Putting down roots" .....	15
"Green shoots" .....	16
"Flourishing" .....	17
Part 3: A self-evaluation framework .....	19

# Introduction

## What Works in SEND

The What Works in SEND programme is an ambitious learning and innovation programme designed to generate high-quality evidence of what works in improving practice, support and outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England. The programme is led by the RISE (Research and Improvement for SEND Excellence) Partnership, which is made up of four partners – the Council for Disabled Children, Isos Partnership, the National Development Team for Inclusion, and the University of Warwick.

Alongside capturing insights about what works in SEND from published and primary research – which is being led by the University of Warwick, and which will inform the overall findings of the What Works in SEND programme – we also want to capture evidence of what works in SEND through examples of effective practice in individual local SEND systems. This is the aim of the “effective practice” strand of What Works in SEND. We have developed a framework for capturing, validating and sharing examples of effective practice about what works in establishing and sustaining effective approaches within local SEND systems drawn from the practice of individual local SEND systems. The What Works in SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework and published case studies can be found [here](#).

## Why we are focusing on “enablers” of improvement in local SEND systems

There are three reasons why we have focused on “enablers” of improvement in local SEND systems. First, Isos Partnership carried out research in [2016](#) and [2023](#) on the “enablers” of improvement and the phases of improvement journeys within local children's services “systems” (arrangements relating to children's services in local authority areas). As part of our work on What Works in SEND, we have focused on learning from effective practice in local SEND “systems” (arrangements relating to support for children and young people with SEND in local authority areas). Within this, we have sought to draw together the learning from individual case studies and explored whether it is possible to identify a set of “enablers” and map out the “improvement journeys” of local SEND systems. We recognise that, while there are enablers and phases of improvement that are common in any system, the context in which local SEND systems are working is distinctive and different from that of local children's services systems. As such, we wanted to capture the enablers of improvement specific to local SEND systems.

Second, as we began developing the What Works in SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework, leaders of local SEND systems cautioned against treating examples of good practice in isolation. They emphasised the mutually reinforcing relationship between the “enablers” and foundations of an effective local SEND system and new initiatives designed to improve practice and outcomes.

Effective practice initiatives rely on there being strong foundations in place for those initiatives to be effective and to be sustained, while using new initiatives to reflect on and strengthen core practices is crucial to maintaining the foundations of a local SEND system.

Third, while we cannot ignore the challenges and need for reform at a national level, there remain ongoing, day-to-day activities in which all local SEND systems are engaged. We are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge relating to support for children and young people with SEND at a national level. We consider, however, that whatever the national context might be there remains value in distilling and sharing the fundamentals of good practice in these areas of common and ongoing activity. For example, leaders in local SEND systems will continue to need to find ways to engage young people and parents / carers co-productively, at both individual and strategic levels. Leaders in local SEND systems will continue to need to engage partners, shape a shared vision and strategy, implement effective practices and support, and track the difference that makes to the experiences of children, young people and families.

For those reasons, this document attempts to capture both the foundations or "enablers" that need to be in place – and that leaders of local SEND systems (officers, politicians and partners) need to be tending to constantly – when engaging with examples of effective practice, as well as the learning from What Works in SEND effective practice examples that can help to strengthen those foundations.

When we use the term "enablers", we mean –

- ✦ the non-negotiable essential "foundations" of an effective local SEND system that need to be in place to support broader practice improvement initiatives and maximise their impact; and
- ✦ a summary of the evidence from the What Works in SEND effective practice case studies.

This first iteration of the document has been published in summer 2024. It is based on the first batch of What Works in SEND effective local practice case studies, alongside initial scoping interviews with senior officers from 11 local SEND systems (all of whom had been through cycles of improvement) and five national bodies representing constituencies within the SEND system. The findings have been shared with the What Works in SEND Strategic Oversight Board. It is intended that this document will be updated periodically to reflect the latest case studies captured as What Works in SEND effective practice examples, as well as drawing in wider learning from the other research strands of the What Works in SEND programme.

## Part 1: The enablers of improvement in local SEND systems

Through our work on capturing effective local practice, we have identified five broad enablers of improvement. As noted in the introduction, we have used the concept of "enablers" to synthesise the learning from effective local practice case studies because –

- ✦ examples of effective practice do not exist in isolation – initiatives that seek to incorporate learning from effective practice examples will only be effective if there are already solid foundations and "enablers" of improvement in place in a local SEND system; and
- ✦ well-chosen engagement with effective practice initiatives can help to strengthen and reinforce the foundations of effective practice, and maintain cycles of improvement in local SEND systems.

The five enablers are summarised in the graphic below, and expanded upon in the remainder of this section.

*Figure 1: The five enablers of improvement in local SEND systems*

1	<b>Co-production and relationships at the heart of the system</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-production with young people and parents / carers is at the heart of the system.</li> <li>• Strong focus on the lived experiences of young people and families.</li> <li>• Effective strategic co-production with young people's and parent / carer groups.</li> <li>• Strategic co-production between partner organisations, education settings, services.</li> </ul>
2	<b>Shared vision and evidence-informed priorities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared vision, informed by a shared understanding of evidence and intelligence – triangulation of performance data, qualitative feedback, intelligence on trends.</li> <li>• Shared ethos, agreed across all partners in the local system. Speak "same language". Shared responsibility and accountability for delivering the vision and priorities.</li> <li>• Targeted and judicious use of resources, aligned to strategic priorities.</li> </ul>
3	<b>Stable and knowledgeable leadership and governance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective buy-in from leaders across all partners who understand the SEND system.</li> <li>• Leadership is broad and distributed – buy-in from leaders across the system.</li> <li>• Robust quality-assurance, impact reporting and systemic feedback routines.</li> <li>• Effective partnership governance structures, aligned to wider boards.</li> <li>• Effective communications routines to all parts of the local SEND system.</li> </ul>
4	<b>A focus on high-quality delivery of the essentials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robust understanding of the statutory framework across all partners and roles.</li> <li>• Bedrock of consistently high-quality delivery against statutory duties.</li> <li>• Wider focus on enabling consistently high-quality inclusive practice that delivers sustainable outcomes and improves lived experiences.</li> <li>• Good practice and innovative initiatives built on this foundation.</li> </ul>
5	<b>A well-organised, skilled and supported workforce</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networks, communications channels and routines for engaging the wider SEND workforce across the local system (beyond any one organisation).</li> <li>• A workforce that is well-trained, regularly upskilled, appropriately supported and supervised (decision-making, quality of casework, handling difficult conversations).</li> <li>• Lived experiences incorporated into professional development for the workforce.</li> </ul>

### Enabler 1: Co-production and relationships between children and young people, families and practitioners

#### Co-production with children, young people and families

A local SEND system is, fundamentally, a collective endeavour involving multiple organisations, agencies and settings, built on multiple interactions between practitioners and families that seeks to improve the lived experiences and outcomes of children and

young people with SEND. The theme of co-production and fostering strong relationships with families – both children / young people and parents / carers – has been central to our discussions with local SEND system leaders and through the development of the What Works in SEND effective practice case studies. This is not to say, however, that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to co-production or that all families want to be “involved” and “engaged” in the same way. This theme comes through strongly in the case studies on strategic co-production with parents and carers ([Wiltshire](#)) and children and young people ([Lincolnshire](#)). It is the central insight behind the “[participation pyramid](#)” developed by Islington’s SEND partnership, which recognises that there are a range of ways in which parents and carers may want to feel engaged, which can range from being in touch with and informed about what is happening in the local SEND system through to sharing their views and being part of strategic co-production initiatives.

Leaders of local SEND systems argued that, rather than having a single mode of co-productive working, it was important that the lived experiences of children, young people and families were at the heart of the local SEND system, informing the vision, strategy, day-to-day decision-making, governance and scrutiny of performance. Similarly, in the University of Warwick strand of research, it was found that varying models to co-production had been taken according to local contexts and needs. In the Delivering Better Outcomes (DBOT) deliverable for example it was found that where co-production was strong, this was embedded early in a young person’s ‘journey’ with meaningful engagement at every stage of service development, including service design and evaluation and at both operational and strategic level ([Currie et al, 2024](#)).

Leaders described the importance of putting themselves in a position where they could focus on lived experiences, both to inform priorities and as a touchstone when thinking about impact. Leaders reflected on the value of working co-productively, both in terms of the perspectives those with lived experience could bring to a seemingly intractable issue, but also in terms of the way a new initiative may be received if it is seen to have been informed by those with lived experience. As one senior leader put it, ‘it is amazing how differently a practice or initiative can be received if it has parental engagement from the start’.

### Strategic co-production between partner organisations

As well as fostering relationships and co-production between practitioners and families, the importance of co-production applies equally to relationships between practitioners and strategic partners – council members and senior officials, health service leaders, education setting leaders, community sector leaders, leaders of parent carer fora and leaders of young people’s organisations. A common question in our discussions about What Works in SEND effective practice case studies has been how local SEND systems foster, but avoid over-reliance on, relationships. While acknowledging that all partnership working relies to some extent on the people involved, leaders of local SEND systems described how they sought to formalise relationships within governance structures and routines, so that relationships continue even when individuals move on. Local SEND system leaders described the importance of establishing a shared set of values and commitments, including the recognition that support for children and young people with SEND was “everybody’s business”. They argued that it was vital that SEND was not seen

as a separate topic that could be considered in isolation, but that leaders of strategic partner organisations needed to grasp that *all* services for children and young people across education, health and care were *also* services for children and young people with SEND.

SEND system leaders considered that it was vital to cultivate this sense of wider collective responsibility for all children and young people, including those with SEND, and to translate this into a shared vision and strategy, commitment to outcomes, practices and resources. This shared vision needs to be extended to education settings – schools, early years settings and colleges – in local areas, with shared responsibility meaning “all teachers are teachers of children with SEND” and not solely the responsibility of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs). This was echoed strongly in the research strand of the What Works in SEND programme, in a forthcoming research report.

Local SEND system leaders described the importance of agreeing a definition of co-production and creating a set of “ground rules” for working together in a way that is genuinely co-productive (as opposed to co-production in name only, which is often just old-fashioned consultation). SEND system leaders described the importance of having an agreed definition and ground rules in that it allowed partners to explore complex and sensitive topics, and to agree to disagree, in a constructive manner. The case studies from [Wiltshire](#) and [Lincolnshire](#) illustrate the ways in which leaders within local SEND systems have built both the capacity of organisations like the Wiltshire Parent Carer Council or Lincolnshire Young Voices to act as effective strategic partners in the local SEND system, including being able to share intelligence, feedback and constructive challenge to inform strategic decision-making. The [Islington case study](#) highlights the importance of developing and sustaining effective relationships between partners and practitioners.

## **Enabler 2: Shared vision and evidence-informed priorities**

### **Shared vision**

Because local SEND systems involve convening multiple partners and aligning parallel (and sometimes competing) agendas, it is vital that there is a shared vision that has broad support and recognition across the local SEND system. The vision is crucial in drawing together a range of inter-related activity, statutory and non-statutory, covering different services and settings. It is also a pre-requisite for providing an overall direction to the local SEND system. The research strand of What Works in SEND has found, similarly, that the vision for a local SEND system should be focused on promoting the inclusion of children and young people with SEND, with inclusion as the ‘golden thread’ running throughout all the work of the SEND and alternative provision (AP) partnership (Currie et al, forthcoming).

### **Grounding the vision in a shared, evidence-based understanding of the local system**

It is even more important, therefore, that the vision for the local SEND system is grounded in a shared understanding of evidence about what is going on within the local system. Leaders of local SEND systems emphasised – and the effective practice case studies

reiterated – the importance of local SEND systems “knowing themselves”. It may seem obvious to say that a key enabler of improvement in local SEND systems is effective collective self-analysis. Increasing pressure on local services and reduced capacity, however, means that having the capacity to collate and synthesise evidence and intelligence to allow partners to build up a collective view of trends, pressures, strengths and challenges is often at a premium. Leaders of local SEND systems described how developing a collective view of local evidence requires an approach to use data and intelligence that encompasses –

- ✦ performance (a core data dashboard updated real time as well as annually);
- ✦ qualitative feedback (systematically collected from children, young people, families, practitioners and strategic leaders); and
- ✦ data and intelligence on long-term trends in needs (including a joint strategic needs assessment).

SEND system leaders described that this should not rely solely on quantitative data, although having a robust and regularly updated data dashboard that showed activity and performance in real time was seen as vital. They also argued that it was important that quantitative data was regularly complemented by, and triangulated with, systematically captured qualitative intelligence and feedback, including quality assurance and feedback about the lived experiences of children, young people and families.

Local SEND system leaders argued that this was crucial to understand if a local SEND system's vision and strategy were making a positive difference to the quality of practice and the lived experiences of families.

### Every partner organisation recognising the centrality of SEND to their work

Furthermore, local SEND system leaders considered that buy-in to the vision of the local SEND system should not just be a short-term, tactical commitment – for example, to avoid an adverse inspection or to exit central government intervention. Leaders of local SEND systems emphasised the need for partners and leaders at all levels not to see SEND as a “bolt-on”, but instead to recognise that children with SEND will be in every classroom, every setting and every service's caseload. They argued that it was crucial that leaders of individual agencies and organisations recognised not only the centrality of children with SEND to their organisations' own work, but their organisations' role in having an effective local SEND system. The case studies from [Shropshire](#) and [Northumbria Healthcare Trust](#) are premised on the importance of having champions – the Designated Social Care Officer and a SEND Strategic Lead respectively – who have ownership for and can champion SEND, lead workforce development, and drive the quality and consistency of practice within their organisations. Having dedicated leadership responsibilities for SEND within partner organisations is also crucial in terms of grounding the vision in specific shared priorities, a shared commitment to achieving outcomes, and agreement on the collective use of resources.

The importance of designated leads, including the Designated Clinical Officer, DSCO and SEND Strategic Lead is also evidenced in the University of Warwick research on the role



of middle leadership. This research found that these "designated lead" roles were often a conduit between agencies in local SEND systems, a focal point of SEND expertise, and a means of raising the profile of SEND (Currie et al, forthcoming).

### Targeted and judicious use of resources, aligned to strategic priorities

While it is important that there is an inspiring long-term vision, this also needs to be grounded in reality and seen to be achievable. Specifically, this means showing how an aspirational vision aligns with challenges around the availability and effective use of resources. Leaders of local SEND systems were under no illusions about the scale of the challenge relating to resources. By the same token, many of the What Works in SEND effective practice case studies that we have published show how small-scale, targeted and judicious investment can yield improvements in practice and outcomes. Leaders reflected that it was crucial to focus on value for money and equity when considering the use of resources, and to be transparent with partners about how money is used to support strategic partnerships. They acknowledged that, if leaders wanted to signal that something was a priority, putting resources of some kind behind the priority was an important signifier of its importance.

### Enabler 3: Stable and knowledgeable leadership and governance

Leadership and governance are often included in lists of enablers of improvement, yet it can be difficult to be specific about the leadership and governance *practices* that drive improvement.

#### Leadership

In relation to leadership, leaders of local SEND systems highlighted the importance of –

- ✦ buy-in from senior leaders (including both senior officials and political leaders) within key organisations – a council's Director of Children's Services, Chief Executive, Lead Member, the Chair of the Integrated Care Board (ICB), school, trust and college leaders;
- ✦ leaders in key positions responsible for SEND who have a strong understanding of the SEND system, and the collective and individual responsibilities of all partners;
- ✦ leaders across key organisations who understand one another's priorities and pressures, and shared understanding and language when talking about SEND; and
- ✦ a core cadre of leaders of key organisations who share and uphold the vision of the SEND system, and can act as advocates and spokespeople for that vision.

These points were echoed in research carried out by the University of Warwick for the research strand of What Works in SEND. For example, research on DBOT highlighted the vital role of senior leaders within local SEND systems creating a culture that enabled and fostered ongoing engagement from partners ([Currie et al, 2024](#)). More recently, the University of Warwick's research on leadership explored how leaders from partner agencies had overcome differences in their professional languages and attitudes to focus on shared solutions, values and trust (Tyldesley-Marshall et al, forthcoming).

## Governance

In terms of governance, while there is not necessarily a single "ideal" governance model, leaders highlighted several important aspects of effective governance –

- ✦ a central SEND partnership board or similar, on which key organisations are represented by people with the right level of decision-making responsibilities;
- ✦ a clear and widely-understood governance structure of the local system, so that the SEND partnership board is recognised as *the* key place where strategic, system-wide issues are considered and decisions taken, with clear links to other key governance fora (Schools Forum, the Local Education Partnership, Children & Young People Partnership, ICB);
- ✦ links with key groups representing children / young people and parents / carers, so that there are opportunities for those with lived experiences to share their perspectives with senior partnership leaders, and for those groups to be part of strategic partnership governance – this echoed findings from the University of Warwick's research into leadership, which found that parent/carer representation was pivotal for learning from the people that receive the services (Tyldesley-Marshall et al, forthcoming);
- ✦ a small number of defined, evidence-based, shared priorities, with the right flows of information, intelligence and data to enable the SEND partnership board to track progress, capture impact, and refine action plans if necessary;
- ✦ dedicating time to analysing risks, challenges and complaints, and using these to test the efficacy of strategic initiatives against the day-to-day experience of children/young people, parents/carers and practitioners; and
- ✦ regular communications so that there is a connection between frontline practice and strategic decision-making – practice is guided by strategic priorities, and strategic priorities are informed by intelligence about practice.

These are illustrated in the case study from [Islington](#).

## Enabler 4: A focus on high-quality delivery of the essentials

### Delivering key responsibilities consistently and to a high standard

A crucial foundation for any improvement initiative is delivering consistently and to a high standard on key responsibilities (including statutory responsibilities). This, in turn, requires leaders, managers and a workforce who have a strong understanding of the statutory framework and the responsibilities this confers, both on their own organisation and the reciprocal responsibilities on partner organisations. Delivery of statutory responsibilities alone is not sufficient to drive improvement in a local SEND system, but failure to deliver on statutory responsibilities will undermine any attempt to improve the local SEND system before it has begun. Failure to deliver on statutory responsibilities will cause conflict and breed mistrust between partners, practitioners and families. Relationships will be strained and practice compromised if decision-making and practice relating to statutory decisions is inconsistent and untimely.

Delivering consistently can build confidence and capacity across the local SEND system. This is a key theme in the case studies from [Shropshire](#) (on the Designated Social Care Officer role, including the impact of social care contributions to statutory assessments), [Gateshead](#) (on the take-up of learning disability annual health checks) and [Northumbria](#) (on the SEND Strategic Lead role within a healthcare trust, including the impact on health service contributions to statutory assessments). Leaders of local SEND systems emphasised that sustaining improvement required practitioners not only to deliver for the sake of compliance, but to believe that delivering robust assessments or completing annual reviews on time was beneficial to the lived experiences of children and young people and their families.

These were key themes in the University of Warwick research into middle leadership roles, which found that designated roles across agencies were, in effect, the lynchpins for ensuring compliance with legal duties as well as being of value to families using those services (Currie et al, forthcoming).

### **Delivering a broad offer for all children and young people with SEND (beyond solely statutory responsibilities) that enables inclusive practice across the system**

What leaders of local SEND systems defined as "the essentials" was, however, broader than delivering on their statutory responsibilities. They recognised that the majority of children and young people with additional needs and SEND in local areas do not have statutory plans, and those that do will often have their needs identified and initial (non-statutory) support provided in mainstream education settings. As such, leaders of local SEND systems argued that delivering high-quality "essentials" included ensuring that there was a clear offer of universal and targeted support, before the level of statutory support, that is clearly communicated and understood by practitioners and families. This involves seeking, insofar as possible, to create an inclusive local SEND system, with a focus from all services and settings on identifying and meeting needs early. This, in turn, requires building inclusive capacity in mainstream education settings and providing access to targeted support services. It also involves being clear about what should be ordinarily available in mainstream education settings across the local system, so that this is consistent for practitioners and transparent for families. This is reflected in the University of Warwick's research and case studies on inclusive schools (Currie et al, forthcoming). This idea is reflected in the case study on the development of the ordinarily-available provision offer in [Portsmouth](#).

## **Enabler 5: A well-organised, skilled and supported workforce**

### **Regular and pro-active communications with the local SEND system's workforce**

The workforce within the SEND system is dispersed across multiple organisations, settings, and disciplines. This makes the task of organising, developing and supporting the workforce all the more complex. Nevertheless, success in building and sustaining an effective local SEND system relies on getting key, day-to-day interactions between practitioners and families right. This, in turn, requires there to be a workforce with the

knowledge, skills and practice to manage those interactions effectively. First and foremost, there is the need for a pro-active and regular approach to communications with the local SEND system's workforce. This can involve creating regular opportunities to bring practitioners together – in their existing teams/roles and across different professional disciplines – to share and develop practice, provide intelligence, and receive important updates.

### **Pro-active shaping of training and development of all practitioners in the local SEND system**

Second, leaders of the local SEND system described the need to take a pro-active approach to induction, initial training and continuing professional development, including supervision, for all practitioners who are part of the local SEND system. This should complement, rather than duplicate, induction and training that staff receive within their own organisations. Where the local SEND system can maximise its impact in terms of professional development is –

- ✦ at the point of inducting new staff into the local SEND system (where they can provide crucial information to enable practitioners to understand and navigate within the local SEND system);
- ✦ in terms of professional development linked to the local SEND system's shared strategic priorities (for example, to reflect emerging trends, common gaps in knowledge, new initiatives); and
- ✦ by developing supervision and quality assurance arrangements that provide practitioners with the time to reflect on and develop their practice, both within their own discipline and with practitioners from other disciplines.

This idea of a regularly refreshed and strategically shaped approach to professional development features in the case studies from [Portsmouth](#) (the role of SENCO networks in the development, roll-out and update of ordinarily-available provision), [Shropshire](#) (in children's social care), [Northumbria](#) and [Gateshead](#) (relating to support from local health services). This chimes with the University of Warwick's research, particularly the forthcoming research on inclusive schools, which highlighted the importance of a strategic, pro-active and regularly updated approach to training, development and guidance for mainstream education settings in order that the offer of ordinarily-available provision reflected changes in children and young people's needs (Currie et al, forthcoming).

### **Incorporating lived experiences into practitioners' professional development**

Third, leaders of local SEND systems emphasised the importance of incorporating children and young people's and families' lived experiences into practitioners' professional development. In some cases, there will be opportunities for children/young people or parents/carers to take on specific roles within the local SEND system. The case studies from [Lincolnshire Young Voices](#) and the [Wiltshire Parent Carer Council](#) include examples where formal roles have been created for children/young people and parents/carers to

play strategic roles within the local SEND system. At other times, there may be opportunities for children/young people and parents/carers to influence and shape the professional development available to a wider range of practitioners – again, the case studies from [Lincolnshire Young Voices](#) and the [Wiltshire Parent Carer Council](#) contain examples of young people and parents/carers developing training based on their own lived experience to inform a wider range of practitioners within their local SEND systems and beyond. The importance of those with lived experience, including children and young people, delivering training to parents/carers and practitioners was also highlighted in the forthcoming University of Warwick research into inclusive schools (Currie et al, forthcoming).

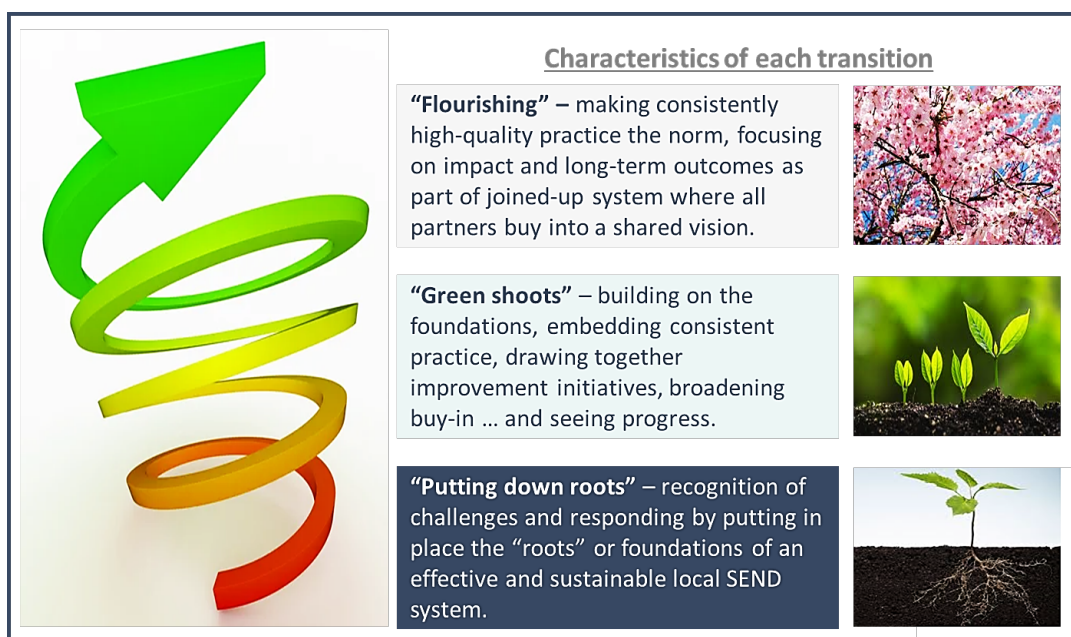
## Part 2: The improvement cycle of local SEND systems

In discussing improvement in local SEND systems, leaders preferred to talk about improvement as an ongoing *cycle*, rather than a *journey* with definitive start and end points. They argued that the task of establishing and sustaining an effective local SEND system was a continuous process, requiring constant adaptation and refinement. They argued that this work did not have a destination that they were trying to reach. Instead, the aim was to maintain the "health" and sustain the development of the local SEND system, in response to changing conditions both in the local and wider national context.

As with other people-based services, local SEND system leaders underscored the constant need to maintain consistent practices. They argued that the high volume of cases and decisions made on a daily basis, and the challenges in the national context, meant the risk of "slipping back" and practice becoming inconsistent was ever present. Local SEND system leaders also noted that the work to establish and sustain an effective local SEND system, or any system seeking improvement, is cumulative. Activity does not reach an end point. Instead, activity that has characterised one phase of an improvement cycle must be continued and built upon in the next, and may need to be revisited and reinforced. For these reasons, local SEND system leaders preferred to think about improvement in local SEND systems as part of a cycle of improvement.

Within the "improvement cycle" for local SEND systems, local SEND system leaders identified three clear phases, each with their own characteristics and foci. These are captured in the graphic below. Leaders of local SEND systems saw the improvement cycle in terms of moving from a system characterised, in the initial phase, by a focus on compliance, seeking improvement in specific "mission critical" areas, and driven by a small group of key leaders, to a system characterised, in subsequent phases, by a focus on quality of practice and impact on lived experiences, with a clear system-wide strategy and broad buy-in across all partners.

**Figure 2: The three phases of the improvement cycle of a local SEND system**



We should underscore that our intention is not to provide a framework with descriptors of different levels of performance to judge a local SEND system at a point in time. Instead, our aim is to capture the key *transitions* that local SEND systems are seeking to make as part of their improvement cycles. In this section, we describe three broad transitions that local SEND systems may be going through as part of their improvement cycle. Reflecting what local SEND system leaders described as the need for ongoing tending to maintain good health, and adaptation in different conditions, we have used the language of "putting down roots", "green shoots" and "flourishing" to describe the three phases/transitions.

## **"Putting down roots"**

Most improvement cycles will begin with a "moment of realisation". This can be instigated internally, through an internal review or routine scrutiny by partners, or externally, through a peer review or an inspection. The moment of realisation comes when partners confront what is happening in the local SEND system or an aspect of its work and accept that all is not as it should be. The key to getting to the starting point of a cycle of improvement is the shared honesty about the nature and scale of the challenge and the need to act to address it. All of the What Works in SEND effective practice case studies begin with this moment of realisation. The moment of realisation may involve confronting evidence that outcomes ([Portsmouth](#)), performance ([Gateshead](#)), relationships ([Wiltshire](#)) or lived experiences ([Lincolnshire](#)) are not as they should be, or that demand is increasing suggesting needs are not being met early or effectively enough ([Herefordshire](#)).

In this first phase of an improvement cycle, local SEND system leaders described two broad and interconnected aims. The first aim is to put in place the foundational practices of the local system, so that there is a consistent level of activity or service provision happening most of the time. In system-wide improvement work, at this stage there is often a focus on delivering statutory responsibilities and ensuring that services are fully compliant with these requirements. Leaders reflected that this can, at times, feel like "fire-fighting". The work to stabilise the workforce and establish "the roots" is vital not only for its own sake, but also to rebuild confidence in the local SEND system. On a smaller scale, the need to ensure consistent delivery of statutory responsibilities comes across strongly in the [Shropshire case study](#) on the implementation of the Designated Social Care Officer role, which was introduced in part to strengthen social care contributions to statutory assessments and plans, which had been highlighted in a local area SEND inspection.

Leaders of local SEND systems stressed, however, that while *necessary*, a focus on foundational practices is not *sufficient* to sustain an improvement cycle. A focus compliance with key responsibilities, while necessary, is often unseen and unlikely to create buy-in and inspire partners. For that reason, leaders of local SEND systems described a second, parallel aim in this stage of an improvement cycle, which is to situate the immediate, short-term and necessary improvements within an inspiring long-term vision.

Leaders acknowledged that the start of an improvement cycle is likely to be led by a small band of key leaders. They recognised, however, that those leaders should represent and reflect the make-up of the broader local SEND system, and should be grounded in co-production. In other words, while that initial group of leaders who agree to start a piece of improvement work may be necessarily small, they should include key partners, including those representing children/young people and parent carers. Co-productive working with families, through involving the Parent Carer Forum and key fora for children and young people, should be central to this process. This is reflected in the University of Warwick's research on leadership, which found that an initial "concentrated" form of leadership focused on external accountability needed to be balanced by the empowerment of those nearer the frontline, including practitioners and families, to create a broader, shared leadership endeavour (Tyldesley-Marshall et al, forthcoming).

Put simply, while it may be necessary to focus on getting foundational day-to-day practices right in this first stage of an improvement cycle, it is essential, in parallel to be putting down the roots of partnership working, co-production and a focus on improving lived experiences for families. As improvement work develops, these roots will sustain effective and long-term relationships and can develop into robust, formal governance structures that will sustain the local SEND system. As the [Islington case study](#) demonstrates, however, it is crucial to put down the roots of partnership working by fostering honest, co-productive relationships in the first place.

To add one final point, the What Works in SEND effective practice case studies with the strongest evidence base were often those where leaders identified at the outset of their work not only what they wanted to achieve, but the evidence that they would collect and the baselines they would set to know if they were making progress. It is vital, therefore, that at the start of an improvement cycle local SEND system leaders have a shared understanding about the overall vision and how progress towards achieving it will be captured and impact evidenced.

## **"Green shoots"**

The second transition of an improvement cycle in a local SEND system is defined by three further shifts. These shifts build upon, rather than replace, the roots laid down in the first stage of the improvement cycle. The first shift is from *compliance* and ensuring foundational practices are taking place to a focus on *consistency* and *quality*. In practice, this means leaders and managers putting in place mechanisms and time not only to track activity, but to ensure that there is consistency in the quality of practice. For example, this means not just completing EHC needs assessments within timescales (although doing so remains important), but putting in place quality assurance routines so that leaders and managers have oversight of the quality of practice in relation to assessments, plans and reviews. The focus on quality comes across strongly in the case studies from [Shropshire](#) (the implementation of the Designated Social Care Officer role) and [Northumbria Healthcare Trust](#) (the creation of the Strategic Lead for SEND within the local healthcare provider trust).



This is also the reason why we designed the "breadth of impact" signal strength indicator in the Effective Practice Evidence Framework to reflect four broad types of impact. From the case studies, we recognised that the stronger case studies could demonstrate impact not only in terms of measurable activity, but also in terms of broader impact on lived experiences of children, young people and their families.

The second shift in the "green shoots" stage is a shift in the perspective of leaders. At this stage, leaders' focus is no longer dominated largely by "mission-critical" areas of the local SEND system's day-to-day foundational practices, but is now broader, connecting these key foundational practices to the overarching vision of the local SEND system. It is necessary to have this system-wide vision at the start of an improvement cycle. In the "green shoots" phase, however, the understanding of how individual elements of improvement work fit together becomes more explicit, tangible and recognisable to those outside the cadre of key leaders who are driving the work. As such, the vision now exerts a greater and broader influence across the local SEND system, and helps to orientate activity more explicitly at this stage of the improvement cycle.

This links to the third shift in the "green shoots" stage of the improvement cycle, which is that the leadership of the improvement cycle or project becomes broader. This stage is characterised not by the leadership of a small "band of believers", although those original leaders may remain in place as part of the partnership governance of the local SEND system. Rather than being largely reliant on that cadre of leaders, the locus of leadership becomes broader, with key champions, allies and advocates within key organisations, settings and teams throughout the local SEND system. The idea of creating champions and broadening the leadership capacity of the local SEND system comes through strongly from the [Northumbria Healthcare Trust case study](#), for example. A consequence of this is that the vision for the local SEND system and tenets of the improvement work become embedded within workforce development and induction. This is a central feature of, for example, the [Shropshire](#), [Gateshead](#) and [Herefordshire](#) case studies.

## **"Flourishing"**

The defining features of the final stage in the improvement cycle of local SEND systems are the hardest to capture. Many of the local areas with which we have worked to develop effective practice case studies have described the culture of co-production and the strength of relationships within their local system. In different ways, this is a common feature of the case studies from [Manchester](#), [Wiltshire](#), [Lincolnshire](#) and [Islington](#), for example. The ingredients that contribute to and maintain the culture of a local SEND system can be difficult to identify. The hallmark of many local SEND systems that have sustained cycles of improvement are that the practices upon which they rely have become the norm, "how we do things around here" so to speak.

From the case studies, however, we can detect some key elements –

- ✦ robust, purposeful governance that foster strong partnership working and relationships;
- ✦ a stable and skilled workforce, with practitioners networked, supervised and supported effectively;
- ✦ regular communication so that there is a two-way connection between frontline work and strategic decision-making; and
- ✦ a focus on SEND being central to and aligned with broader local area priorities that affect children and young people (education, health, employment) and families.




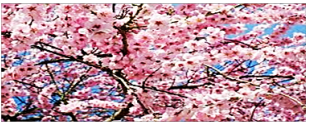
In addition, leaders of local SEND systems reflected that there was an element of success breeding success. It helps to get and keep partners on board with an improvement initiative or cycle if they can see that their efforts are leading to tangible change. This is the second key characteristic of the "flourishing" stage, namely the shift from focusing on compliance ("putting down roots") and quality ("green shoots") to focusing on improving the lived experiences of children and young people and their families. Leaders of local SEND systems described how, at this stage of an improvement cycle, leaders and managers across the local SEND system have established processes that allow them to ask themselves routinely whether what they are doing was having a positive impact on lived experiences, and would use feedback from children, young people and families to inform strategic decision-making.

We should note that none of the leaders within local SEND systems to whom we spoke considered that they had reached this stage of the improvement cycle, notwithstanding the areas of effective practice described in their case studies. They reflected that the pressures on and within local SEND systems, and the need to reform national policy, meant navigating this final stage of the improvement cycle was an aspiration but very difficult to achieve fully.

### Part 3: A self-evaluation framework

In this final section, we have drawn together our discussion of the five enablers and the three stages of the improvement cycle of local SEND systems. This is summarised in the graphic below, which offers a description of each enabler at each stage of a local SEND system's improvement cycle.

**Figure 3: Summary of how each of the five enablers is manifested at each stage of a local SEND system's improvement cycle**

		 <b>"Putting down roots"</b>	 <b>"Green shoots"</b>	 <b>"Flourishing"</b>
1	<b>Co-production and relationships at the heart of the system</b>	Establishing relationships, routines, definitions and practices of co-production.	Embedding approaches to co-productive working in key areas of the SEND system.	Co-production is the <u>norm</u> and lived experiences is <u>at the heart of strategic and day-to-day decision-making</u> .
2	<b>Shared vision and evidence-informed priorities</b>	Shared <u>honesty</u> about challenges. Developing the vision. Focus on " <u>fire-fighting</u> " to improve specific areas of support and practice.	Reinforcing the vision in practice to make <u>links</u> across key parts of the SEND system.	<u>Living</u> the vision. System-wide priorities <u>linking SEND</u> to wider priorities for the local area.
3	<b>Stable and knowledgeable leadership and governance</b>	<u>Cadre</u> of key system leaders lead on work to co-produce vision, strategies and plans. Developing governance.	Increasing <u>recognition</u> of vision, strategies and plans across wider system leaders. Governance structures embedding.	Broad <u>buy-in</u> to the ethos and vision across all parts of the system. Leaders live the values. <u>Effective, impactful governance</u> .
4	<b>A focus on high-quality delivery of the essentials</b>	Focus on <u>compliance</u> – statutory responsibilities and other foundational practices.	Focus on <u>consistency and quality</u> of practice in statutory and non-statutory support.	Focus on the evidence of <u>impact</u> on lived experiences and <u>long-term outcomes</u> .
5	<b>A well-organised, skilled and supported workforce</b>	Focus on <u>stabilising</u> the workforce in key areas (structure, capacity, turnover), and building <u>wider networks</u> to ensure consistent practice.	Using <u>wider networks</u> of practitioners to communicate, inform, induct, build capacity, share skills and shape practice.	Building a <u>highly-effective, skilled, well-supported workforce</u> across the wider SEND system.

As well as showing how practice for each enabler defines and contributes to each stage of the improvement cycle, we have also included this graphic as a simple self-evaluation framework. In our previous research on children's services improvement, and in this work, local system leaders have described the value of having a simple summary of what works in establishing and sustaining effective local SEND systems that leaders and partners can use to reflect on where they are in their improvement cycle, their relative strengths and areas to strengthen.



## About What Works in SEND

The What Works in SEND programme is part of a programme of work led by the RISE Partnership bringing together thought leaders from the SEND system who have the necessary understanding of system change and specialist knowledge of SEND.

The RISE (Research and Improvement for SEND Excellence) Partnership is led by the Council for Disabled Children in partnership with ISOS Partnership, the National Development Team for inclusion (NDTi) and the University of Warwick. The What Works in SEND programme is led by the University of Warwick research team encompassing three departments relevant to service improvement in SEND: Warwick Business School; Warwick Medical School (Warwick Evidence); and Centre for Research in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (CIDD), and delivered in collaboration with colleagues in the RISE Partnership, specifically Isos Partnership and CDC.

### **Warwick Business School**

Warwick Business School has considerable expertise and experience in applied research focused upon public services improvement, encompassing health care, social care and education.

### **Warwick Medical School**

Warwick Medical School has considerable expertise in systematic reviews through Warwick Evidence, which constitutes the second institutional component of the University of Warwick research team. Warwick Evidence (2011–2022) is an established, successful, multidisciplinary, academic technology assessment review team.

### **Centre for Research in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (CIDD)**

CIDD is a specialist research-only department in the University of Warwick. CIDD is focused on applied educational and psychological research in the field of special educational needs and disability (SEND) across the lifespan and has a 30+ year history of contribution in this field.

### **Council for Disabled Children**

The Council for Disabled Children (CDC), hosted by the National Children's Bureau (NCB), are sector leaders with an expert senior management team, experienced in working across Government to support decision makers in Education, Health and Care. Our practice teams deliver wide reaching programmes of bespoke intervention in local areas enabling service improvements and system change.

### **Isos Partnership**

Isos Partnership led widely-recognised national research that has explored the enablers of system-wide improvement in local children's services, in the development of local early help offers, the development of effective support for school inclusion, and the development of effective whole-system approaches to SEND.