



# Learning from the Partners in Practice Programme Review Practice Briefing

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## Practice Briefing

### Introduction

This Practice Briefing has been commissioned to disseminate findings from a research review of the Partners in Practice (PiP) programme<sup>1</sup>. It has been developed for senior leaders in Children's Social Care but is also relevant for colleagues working in a range of leadership positions in these organisations. The briefing will be of particular interest to organisations who are current PiP and is also relevant to any local authority or Trust seeking to improve the quality of practice with children and families.

Part one of this briefing provides information about the aims and scope of the review and presents a summary of findings. Part two discusses implications of some of the findings and provides discussion points for senior leaders to consider when applying this learning within their own organisations.

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1 Partners in Practice: Practice Review 2020. You can access the full report here [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/932330/Partners\\_in\\_Practice\\_PiP\\_Features.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/932330/Partners_in_Practice_PiP_Features.pdf)

## Part one – The Partners in Practice programme

The Partners in Practice (PiP) programme, funded by the Department for education (DfE), commenced in 2016 as a new strand of the Government's improvement agenda for Children's Social Care, located alongside the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (Innovation Programme hereafter). The purpose of the programme was to bring together the best practitioners and leaders in Children's Social Care in order to improve the system. The programme's aims and objectives were three fold:

- > to understand the conditions required for excellence in Children's Social Care to flourish
- > to offer peer support to Children's Social Care colleagues in less successful local authorities, with the aim of widening improvement across the system
- > to support DfE to shape and test policy on wider programmes and reform.

To be designated as a PiP, Children's Social Care services have to meet DfE defined criteria for excellent practice, which included:

- > evidence of sustained high performance;
- > a strong record of continuous improvement;
- > a willingness to share insights and support improvement in the wider sector;
- > an appetite to innovate and engage with new policy;
- > at least a 'good' overall Ofsted judgement and at least a good judgement across all sub-categories (excluding Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs)).<sup>2</sup>

Full details of the individual PiP programmes can be found [here](#).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://innovationcsc.co.uk/partners-in-practice>

## Review study aims and intended outcomes

In 2020 the University of Sussex was commissioned by DfE to produce a practice review of the PiP programme. The main aim of the review was to provide a synthesis of the shared learning arising out of the individual experiences of PiPs undertaking both internal practice innovation and external sector improvement work with less successful local authorities with whom they were partnered. The collective understanding developed through the review process has generated important knowledge to inform future sector-wide developments that seek to promote innovation and improvement.

The review had a two-fold activity plan:

- > Documentary analysis of the regular project progress reports produced by PiPs for the DfE's programme auditing processes
- > Telephone interviews with PiP leads to capture their experiences of the PiP role and activities.

Each of the PiP local authorities included in the review had distinctive internal innovation improvement programmes in progress. The sector improvement responsibilities of each of the PiPs were closely aligned with their internal innovation work. Whilst each local authority had a bespoke overarching improvement programme, often the components of these programmes were the same across several local authorities. For example, Signs of Safety, Restorative Practice and Motivational Interviewing were models informing practice in several of the PiPs. How each bespoke local authority innovation and improvement programme was designed, however, was unique to each local authority.

## Key findings

Nine key factors that promote organisational effectiveness and practice innovation in Children's Social Care are identified in the review.

1. **Timeframes:** adequate time allocation is of crucial importance in sector improvement strategies. Whilst process outcomes may be apparent sooner, a minimum of 5 years is required before impact outcomes can be accurately measured and evaluated.
2. **Leadership:** passionate and visionary leadership is essential and acts as a catalyst for the creation of stable senior management teams and wider workforce stability.
3. **Workforce stability and resourcing:** timely and adequate levels of funding, alongside a positive organisational culture, must be in place in order to create stable staff teams and the appropriate management structures for innovation and improvement to succeed.
4. **Modest and informed goals:** in order to innovate, organisations must ensure they set realistic and achievable goals that build on existing professional expertise and do not overstretch their resource capacity.
5. **Theoretically-informed practice models:** for practice models to be successfully implemented they need to have clear and explicit theoretical frameworks and value bases for change.
6. **Professional relationships:** establishing trustworthy and respectful relationships, both within the organisation and with external stakeholders, is crucial for successful outcomes to be achieved. Similarly, when a PiP partner builds positive, respectful relationships with local authorities they are partnered with, they are more likely to engage in sector improvement work.
7. **Predictable resources:** reliable and predictable sources of funding are necessary in order to reduce temporal uncertainty which in turn can prevent local authorities from allowing adequate time for new initiatives to be embedded, to flourish and to bear fruit (see 1 above).
8. **PiP networks:** the creation of more robust and reliable systems for cross-fertilisation of ideas and experiences between PiPs increases the potential of enhanced levels of impact and support for local authority partners.
9. **Systemic reciprocity:** PiPs report having positive reciprocal experiences when working with local authority partners on sector improvement work, which, in turn, contributed to unexpected positive developments in their own practice context, as well as for their partners.

## Part 2 – Applying Learning from the Partners in Practice Review

In the second part of this briefing three key findings from the research study are explored in more detail:

1. Promoting whole system change in Children's Social Care.
2. The importance of stable and visionary leadership.
3. Allowing sufficient time for change to occur.

Each section contains a summary of key points, reflection prompts and challenge questions for senior leaders to consider when applying learning from the review in their own organisational contexts.

### 1. Promoting whole system change in Children's Social Care

The study identified that many of the factors that promote organisational innovation are closely associated with each other and work in combination to create a virtuous cycle for improvement. For example, stable leadership and a positive organisational culture helps to secure a stable workforce which, in turn, is more likely to engage with innovations and improvements, particularly if senior leaders champion this within the organisation. As a result, many of the PiP partners highlighted the importance of working towards 'whole system change' as part of an improvement journey. This terminology referred to system change in two distinctive ways.

Firstly, it implied whole system change *within* Children's Social Care services. PiPs stressed the importance of a sustained commitment to the adoption of new practices across *all* levels of the organisation in order to achieve this. For example:

- > All staff within the organisation (regardless of role or seniority) attended training in the new system-wide approach they were embedding.
- > Reflective supervision was a golden thread running throughout the service, from the director to frontline practitioners.
- > The organisation created and adopted a common language and modelling of relational working developed from their practice model.
- > Social workers were encouraged by the whole system approach to talk more widely with colleagues. In turn this led to greater fluidity in the system and the seamless stepping up and down of children and families between teams was commented on by Ofsted.

A second, wider interpretation of whole system change extended *across* the professional groups with whom children's social care services interacted e.g. police, health and education. This is an essential aspect of an improvement journey because a whole system approach across all agencies helps to ensure that children, young people and families experience consistent and coherent services from all agencies involved in their lives. For example:

- > One PiP partner identified the delivery of a bespoke 'meaningful' whole system partnership training programme as one of their biggest achievements.
- > Another highlighted that the practice model which had been introduced and embedded across the local authority had percolated through and out into the wider system – into education, health and early help settings. This enabled practitioners across Children's Social Care services to shift from an assessment/re-assessment approach to constructive, multi-agency and evidence based family interventions.

Several of the PiPs focused on harnessing and embedding learning from the adoption of new practices in the organisation when developing whole system change. For example:

- > Initiation of new Centres for Excellence to ensure knowledge transmission of innovations.
- > Providing specialist training in particular approaches and tailored peer challenge and support to help managers identify region-wide areas for development.

Adopting both approaches increases the likelihood of learning from new developments becoming embedded within the organisation. Involving key staff, such as managers is essential, given that training alone is not sufficient to embed new practices and promote organisational change.

#### Key points:

1. Adopting a 'whole system' approach is recommended when undertaking an improvement journey in children's social care.
2. Findings suggest that, when implementing whole system change, senior leaders should:
  - > Ensure that key factors which promote organisational effectiveness and innovation in Children's Social Care are embedded in the organisation.
  - > Understand how each of these factors mutually re-inforce each other at all levels of the organisation.
  - > Harness and embed learning from the adoption of new practices at all levels within the organisation (including learning from practices which have not been successful).

### Reflective prompts: The role of learning and feedback in whole system change

When implementing whole system change, senior leaders need to be adept at understanding the detail of how different parts of the system are interacting with each other as well as seeing the bigger picture. Arguably this task is easier to achieve if reflection, learning and feedback are encouraged throughout the organisation.

The concept of a 'learning organisation' is helpful here:

'A learning organization is defined as an organization that exhibits adaptability, learns from mistakes, explores situations for development, and optimizes the contribution of its personnel' <sup>3</sup>

'In a learning organisation, collective learning is not only encouraged but actively promoted as a core responsibility shared by everyone working in the organisation, partners and the community it serves. This requires the development of a relationship-based, emotionally literate organisational culture which 'tap(s) into people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels.' <sup>4</sup>

Leaders of Children's Social Care organisations, therefore, are key, as they can:

'Encourage a culture of learning and feedback within the organisation. An important element of this learning culture is embedding a constant feedback loop focusing on practice and development.' <sup>5</sup>

Supervision plays a key role in promoting learning and reflection within the organisation. It also provides an opportunity to model relationship behaviours which sustain commitment and motivation during organisational improvements. Senior leaders should set this standard by:

'Ensuring that all staff in the organisation have access to regular and high quality-supervision the organisation supports effective supervisory relationships by modelling such relationships themselves in the staff they supervise and by having the expectation that this is replicated throughout the organisation.' <sup>6</sup>

### Challenge questions:

- > How do you 'tap into people's commitment and capacity to learn' throughout the whole system? And how do you know if your efforts are working?
- > How can you harness learning, feedback and data to understand how the organisation is changing and developing when implementing whole system change? And how do you know if these mechanisms are inclusive, or if some voices are missing?
- > What aspects of organisational culture need to change to give employees at all levels of the organisation permission to share ideas, learning and feedback about how to improve the work of the organisation?
- > How might the roles, tasks and behaviour of the senior leadership team need to change if you focus on whole system change and learning? What do you have in place or need to put in place to enable these changes to happen smoothly?
- > What role does supervision play in promoting a culture of learning and feedback within the organisation? How can you ensure that learning from supervision discussions is harnessed and feeds into organisational innovation and development?

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3 Wilkinson J, Rushmer R, and Davies H (2004). 'Clinical governance and the learning organization'. *Journal of Nursing Management* 12 (2).

4 [infed.org/mobi/peter-senge-and-the-learning-organization/](https://infed.org/mobi/peter-senge-and-the-learning-organization/)

5 [practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP\\_Senior\\_Managers-Briefing\\_talking\\_about\\_practice\\_in\\_supervision.pdf](https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP_Senior_Managers-Briefing_talking_about_practice_in_supervision.pdf)

6 [practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP\\_Senior\\_Managers-Briefing\\_talking\\_about\\_practice\\_in\\_supervision.pdf](https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP_Senior_Managers-Briefing_talking_about_practice_in_supervision.pdf)



## 2. The importance of stable and visionary leadership

A frequently cited condition for excellent practice, in the review, was the existence of stable and visionary leaders who are ‘passionate advocates’ for their vision. This requires a strong leadership team who have a very clear view of what they want to achieve, communicate that message wherever they go and model it in everything they do. In turn, this also acts as a catalyst for the creation of stable senior management teams, the development of a positive organisational culture and wider workforce stability. PiPs stressed that this is vital for institutional memory which, promotes consistency in approach, which helps to create a secure environment for staff, even when there are some changes in personnel.

There was unequivocal clarity among the PiP leads that the absence of a co-operative and collaborative mind-set amongst senior leadership in Children’s Social Care organisations inhibits innovation and organisational change. The absence of stable and visionary leadership in some organisations supported by PiPs was described as ‘palpable’.

PiPs also identified that senior leaders need to provide ongoing challenge and scrutiny when leading organisational change. This requires leaders to have a detailed understanding of the different system-wide issues affecting the organisation alongside a clearly articulated strategy to address these. Such scrutiny should include-

- > A robust focus on de-bureaucratisation to improve efficiency
- > Identification of strengths and areas for development or concern
- > Facilitation of change and improvements and performance management, focusing on the systems which inform practice improvement rather than simplistic performance metrics
- > Ensuring that underpinning theoretical approaches and values of practice models are explicit.

The review also highlighted the importance of:

- > Recruiting internally (where possible) to the senior leadership team so that the improvement narrative remains unchanged, which avoids practitioners having to adjust to a different strategic vision.
- > A learning and development focus on leadership throughout the organisation. It is important that this supports and coaches middle managers to take up more senior leadership roles.

### Key points:

1. Stable leadership is a pre-requisite when embarking on a process of organisational change.
2. Leaders must be ‘passionate advocates’ for their vision, modelling this in everything they do.
3. The absence of a co-operative and collaborative mind-set amongst senior leadership inhibits innovation and organisational change.

### Reflective prompts: Leaders are the catalysts that drive change in organisational culture and practice

‘Leaders are key to promoting an expectation that all colleagues treat each other, and the families they serve, with respect, honesty, kindness and care whilst still challenging when needed. They should also ensure that commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion is embedded into practice at all levels of the organisation.’<sup>7</sup>

‘Leaders need to publicly and purposefully model the behaviours and values which they want to promote in the work of the wider organisation. A key element of this is promoting an organisational culture, ‘in which scrutiny is seen as leading and supporting good practice, rather than as being part of a ‘blame-culture’.’<sup>8</sup>

In summary, leaders set the direction for the whole organisation by:

- > Developing a vision, collaboratively.
- > Setting direction and strategy.
- > Motivating colleagues and building allies.
- > Encouraging (and actively role modelling) learning and improvement.
- > Setting an example.
- > Sustaining change and momentum.<sup>9</sup>

### Challenge questions:

- > How do you communicate your values and vision about innovation and improvement within your organisation? How do you know if your messages are being heard and interpreted as you intended?
- > How do you know whether others in the organisation share the same vision as you? And where there are differences, how are these negotiated?
- > How do you encourage the development of a cooperative and collaborative mind-set in your senior leadership team and within the wider organisational culture?
- > How do you ensure that there is challenge and scrutiny within the organisation which is not experienced as a ‘blame-culture’?
- > What support and development pathways need to be in place to ensure that there is consistency (of both vision and personnel) within the leadership team and that you grow the skills of future leaders?

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7 [practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP\\_Senior\\_Managers-Briefing\\_emotions-relationships-resilience.pdf](https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP_Senior_Managers-Briefing_emotions-relationships-resilience.pdf)

8 [practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP\\_Senior\\_Managers-Briefing\\_maximising-the-impact-of-practice-supervisors.pdf](https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP_Senior_Managers-Briefing_maximising-the-impact-of-practice-supervisors.pdf)

9 Hodson and Cooke 2007 Leading Evidence-Informed Practice : Research in Practice

### 3. Allowing sufficient time for change to occur

PiPs highlighted that whole system change takes time (planning 5-7 years ahead was suggested) and needs to build on existing knowledge, expertise and practices. This requires reliable and predictable sources of funding that are sustained over time.

The review also identified that a measured pace of change is vital for practice to develop and be sustainable; where the process is not rushed but allowed to develop over time, so that ‘people can feel the culture’ (Partners in Practice: Practice Review 2020, p18).

Similarly, the study also noted the importance of not being overly ambitious too quickly, on keeping it simple, doing one thing well and learning about what changes as a result of this over time. Before it is possible to see the results of initiatives, time is required to allow the developments to settle down and be consolidated. Once this is achieved it is then possible to develop ‘harder’ metrics to measure success and effectiveness. Organisations then have the capacity to ‘understand what drives excellence from a really solid baseline’ (Partners in Practice: Practice Review 2020, p18).

The importance of being methodical in approach, playing the longer game and not expecting results too quickly, i.e. seeing developing improvement and achieving and sustaining excellence as a process and not a one-off event, were all acknowledged as key features of understanding excellence and sector improvement initiatives.

PiPs offered the following advice to those organisations undertaking an improvement journey:

- > ‘Think long-term, short-termism doesn’t payoff and in fact ends up costing more.’
- > ‘You need to live it. It’s taken me and my senior teams several years to live it. If you want them [staff] to change you’re going to have to change.’
- > ‘There is not a magic wand in there. It takes a lot of time, energy and resource to do it properly.’ (Partners in Practice: Practice Review 2020, p17)

#### Key points:

- > Allowing adequate for whole system change is crucial
- > A measured pace of change is vital for practice to develop and be sustainable (building on existing knowledge, expertise and practices).
- > Achieving and sustaining excellence is a continuous process not a one-off event.

## Reflective prompts: Organisational change requires persistence, commitment, tenacity and time

Stable and visionary leadership is closely aligned with a commitment to longer timescales so that innovation can become embedded and sustainable.

Developing an organisational culture that promotes excellence in practice requires a stable leadership and workforce, with energy sustained over time.

Persistence is required from leaders because any drift or inadvertent / perceived complacency can easily lead to a return to the previous less desirable organisational culture. Senior leaders must, therefore, ensure that they are regularly connected to the experience of employees by developing robust and inclusive channels for feedback and consultation within the wider organisation-

‘Senior leaders need to be seen to be listening and taking on board what employees are saying at all levels of the organisation (by meeting staff through forums, webchats, joint visits, and team meetings) and using this to develop their thinking about service changes.’<sup>10</sup>

Undertaking a change process, therefore requires leaders to -

- > ‘Communicate – so that everyone understands why change is required and what changes need to be made, whilst still honouring good practice that needs to be sustained.
- > Collaborate– so that everyone feels they have a part to play in the change process and their input is valued and valuable.
- > Commit – so that their persistence and motivation encourages others to keep going when the change process is difficult.’<sup>11</sup>
- > Care –so that everyone can see that you mean it and are creating the kind of relationship-based organisational culture in which organisational innovation and change can flourish.

## Challenge questions:

- > What are your long-term plans for organisational innovation and improvement over the next 5-7 years? Do the shorter-term imperatives reflect and support these longer term strategic goals?
- > What initiatives or improvements do you need to progress first? What areas might you focus on as quick wins which are more easily achieved? How will colleagues be supported to understand why some efforts are immediate and others are longer term goals?
- > How can you build on the knowledge and understanding you gain from the improvement measures you progress first?
- > How will you know what the pace of change feels like from the experience of staff at all levels of the organisation?
- > How will you identify any silent voices or missing perspectives?
- > How will you know if you are making progress? What hard and soft data do you need to evaluate this?
- > How will you build capacity and readiness in the system to make further changes?

The innovation and improvement journey is neither quick nor easy but the reported experiences of the PiPs indicate it is unequivocally rewarding and worth embarking on.

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<sup>10</sup> [practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP\\_Senior\\_Managers-Briefing\\_Developing-a-culture-of-excellent-social-work-practice.pdf](https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PSDP_Senior_Managers-Briefing_Developing-a-culture-of-excellent-social-work-practice.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/successful-change-leader/](https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/successful-change-leader/)

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Research in Practice  
The Granary Dartington Hall  
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE  
tel 01803 869753  
email [ask@researchinpractice.org.uk](mailto:ask@researchinpractice.org.uk)

Professor Gillian Ruch  
Dept of Social Work and Social Care,  
School of Education and Social Work  
University of Sussex  
Falmer  
Brighton BN1 9QQ

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Registered Office:  
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall, Totnes TQ9 6EL

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