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Delivering The Promise in Local Government

Findings from Qualitative Research

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Background

The Improvement Service (IS) were asked to carry out research into the progress being made by Local Government on The Promise. The Promise Local Government Programme Board provided oversight and ownership of the research findings.

The research aimed to support the board's objective "to oversee and accelerate our collective work to fulfil our commitments to The Promise" by providing evidence on the progress Local Government is making.

Methodology

A survey was sent to Promise Leads in each local authority in October 2022 with a three-week deadline for completion. Leads were asked to collate and return one response for their local authority. The deadline was extended by two weeks after receiving requests for extensions. In total, 29 local authorities responded to the survey.

To supplement the information received in the survey responses, four focus groups were held in November and December. In total, officers from 13 local authorities attended across the focus groups. The time was spent in the groups delving into some of the key issues from the survey responses and identified further examples of innovative and exemplary practice in local authorities.

Key Findings - Leadership

Senior officer leadership

▶ Leadership from senior officers is important for driving progress of The Promise in local authorities and with partners. The research found examples of Chief Executives, Depute Chief Executives and other senior officers taking active roles in leading Promise related groups and forums, and pushing for positive changes for children and their families.

▶ Leaders opened doors and paved the way for activity, more effective partnership working and conversations to happen that otherwise would not have happened.

▶ Where there was a lack of evidence in the survey and focus groups on senior leadership involvement and awareness of The Promise, this correlated with scarcer information about progress/activity, or acknowledgement on a lack of progress.

▶ Work could be undertaken with professional bodies to highlight the importance of senior officer leadership in driving progress of The Promise in local authorities and with partners. The use of case studies highlighting the role exemplary senior leadership could be used to motivate and inspire others.

Political leaders

▶ There are some examples of elected members heavily bought into The Promise and taking an active interest in activity. This included being Champions for care experienced young people.

▶ The need to raise awareness of The Promise amongst members was highlighted as necessary in many local authorities, partly in light of large turnovers of members since the local government election. Many local authorities were taking steps to increase engagement with members on The Promise.

Key Findings – Governance

▶ The Promise (and the monitoring and evaluation of it) tends to sit within Children's Services and Social Work governance structures. While this is not surprising, nor necessarily problematic, Promise Leads have indicated there can be a perception that The Promise is a Children's Services or Social Work issue, therefore such arrangements could be reinforcing that view.

▶ Monitoring and evaluation is an area for improvement for the sector and this is linked to issues on data and evidencing progress.

▶ An issue identified in the research was how much monitoring and evaluation is being driven by external bodies/funders/statutory requirements as opposed to the experience of children and families.

▶ The governance being driven by external sources may be hindering relationship-based practice on the ground.

▶ Local government as a sector could do more to be proactive in setting out a plan for the monitoring and evaluation of progress in delivery of The Promise.

▶ Other priorities and agendas can make it difficult to focus on The Promise and better coordination of the various asks and legislative requirements would be helpful. This could include various reporting requirements to be coherent and brought within the same timescales to reduce burden of reporting to various external actors.

Key Findings – Partnership Working

▶ There is a clear understanding that delivery on The Promise requires effective partnership working.

▶ The research found examples of effective partnership working which has led to improvements on the ground for children and families. There are also examples of innovative approaches to partnership working which are leading to more effective and trusted partnerships, which should be better able to deliver sustainable change.

▶ Competing priorities for national partners is seen as an issue, with examples of good partnership working tending to be as a result of local leaders prioritising The Promise. Local relationships and arrangements have been crucial and good partnership working is evident where investments in partnerships were made prior to The Promise.

▶ There is however, evidence that The Promise has been a useful initiator of better partnership working for some. Senior leadership is important in this space and Promise Leads indicated the importance of leaders opening doors for them to raise awareness of The Promise.

▶ Local government is playing a key role in increasing awareness of The Promise amongst partners.

Key Findings – Funding

▶ External, short-term, competitive funding streams with tight application timescales are unhelpful for the sustainable delivery of The Promise.

▶ Some local authorities have been put off accessing external funds as the time and resource commitment to apply, implement and monitor is significant and increasingly unrealistic with the day-to-day pressures on services and managers. External funding that requires additional data and evidence is placing an extra burden on local authorities.

▶ Twenty-five local authorities indicated they had successfully applied for The Promise Partnership funding with four indicating they hadn't been successful

▶ Funding has been used for various activities and purposes, including:

- Training

- Delivering a strategy

- Redesign of services

- Event facilitation

- Engaging with partners and establishing internal/external networks

- Self-evaluation

- Identifying available data and gaps

- Further capacity building e.g. in applying for more funds

Key findings – Data

Quantitative data

▶ The survey and focus groups highlighted dissatisfaction at what data is needed and how it fits with The Promise and Care Review recommendations.

▶ Data used for statutory reporting, including CLAS, is being used for decision making and progress checking at the local level. These data sets are collected and used regardless of the need for statutory reporting.

▶ Local Government Benchmarking Framework colleagues provided initial analysis to the board on key areas of the Promise. The board felt it would be useful for there to be agreement on 'what good looks like' and propose 'stretch targets' for those areas. These targets are will have to be scoped out and decided by the board. Work on data mapping is being undertaken by The Promise Scotland and should feed into this work.

Qualitative data

▶ There is recognition the sector has to do better at using evidence from lived experience. The first challenge facing many local authorities is collecting good qualitative data from people with lived experience. Some local authorities are taking steps to address but it is an area for improvement for the sector. 'How to' use voices of lived experience to provide better services and support to care experienced young people, those on the edge of care and indeed all young people, is a further challenge and one that the sector needs to do better on.

▶ Examples of councils doing work on this and good practice examples need to be shared so those who are further behind can learn.

▶ Learning can also be shared on good practice in using lived experience in other policy areas, such as the Violence Against Women and Girls trauma informed project (Authentic VOICE).

Key Findings – Potential Areas for Collaboration

▶ Recruitment and retention of the workforce and foster carers could be supported nationally rather than local authorities trying to tackle gaps in labour market themselves.

▶ There is a lot of activity and work being done between Promise Leads in local authorities to share learning and practice. The national Promise Leads group has been well received and informal local and regional networking is happening in addition to this. This includes doing some informal regional benchmarking between local authorities, but also third sector organisations.

▶ The Promise Scotland are recognised as an important source of learning and support, with Promise Delivery Partners playing a key role in supporting learning and sharing good practice, as well as helping to set up some of the informal regional networks.

▶ There was also evidence in some local authorities of the use of internal networks and forums that were supporting officers to build relationships across services and directorates. These investments are important to reduce the effects of siloed working and change long-standing cultures. The benefits of the investment and culture change will take time to emerge.

Key Findings – Progress

▶ There was a recognition in the survey responses and focus groups that evidencing progress is a big challenge. The Promise Scotland are looking to provide national support on this and such work should be welcomed.

▶ There is a lot of activity in local government in relation to The Promise, though some local authorities are further ahead than others. Indeed, within local authorities the awareness and level of priority of The Promise is variable and this includes directorates and services with a key role in supporting the delivery of The Promise. There is also a risk that some local authorities are using the language of The Promise while lacking evidence of activity and progress displayed by others.

▶ There is ample anecdotal evidence of culture change happening – *"conversations are happening that wouldn't have happened before"* – but there is a recognition that this will not necessarily be seen as progress to children and their families.

▶ There is a clear desire to use voice of lived experience to improve services, but having the capacity and the knowledge of 'how to' do so is a real challenge.

▶ Benchmarking and shared learning between local authorities is helping with the understanding within local government about what can be done to make progress. Seeing more examples of local authorities making progress on The Promise will help, inspire and motivate others to see what is possible in spite of the challenges facing the sector.

▶ Only four local authorities felt expectations on them to keep The Promise were realistic (Eleven stated 'not sure'). Key reasons given by local authorities who responded 'No' or 'Not sure' were around resource constraints, competing priorities, COVID-19 pandemic and potential disruption of a National Care Service.

Next steps

▶ The research findings were presented to The Promise Local Government Programme Board in February 2023. The findings are informing the boards work plan.

▶ The research has identified potential case studies of good work being done in local authorities. These case studies will be developed and shared in the coming months. COSLA and the Improvement Service (IS) will take this work forward.

▶ There has been good initial engagement with The Promise Scotland on the findings and this will continue. The issues of data (quantitative and qualitative) and evidencing progress have been identified as areas for collaboration between the IS and The Promise Scotland.

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