



Beyond Boundaries

A self-evaluation tool for London local authorities and their partners wishing to progress integration across early years services and systems

Developed by Isos Partnership for London Councils

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Background

In early 2022 London Councils commissioned Isos Partnership to explore effective models of service integration to support babies, children and their families from pre-birth to five in London. The purpose of the research was to generate policy recommendations, but also, critically, to empower local authorities and their partners in health and the wider community to reflect on how they work together to progress joined-up support for London children and families in the future. This research drew on the existing evidence base on early years service integration, new insights gathered through interviews and workshops with early years leaders and professionals across the city, conversations with London parents, and a survey of local authorities. A final report setting out what we found and proposals at the local, regional and national level was published in July 2022 and is available [here](#).

In this document we present a self-evaluation tool that draws on the detailed learning about ‘what works’ in the research. It provides a framework for local authorities and their partners to reflect constructively on where they are in terms of early years integration, and poses questions to help them identify sticking points and move forward. This tool is designed for local authorities that want to work with partners to progress integration across their local early years system and build a common agenda for change. We have used the framework emerging from our research as a starting point, and have engaged local authority leaders and managers and their partners in health and the private and voluntary sector across London in a series of co-development workshops to test thinking and design a format that is practical and useful.

Vision and principles for effective early years integration

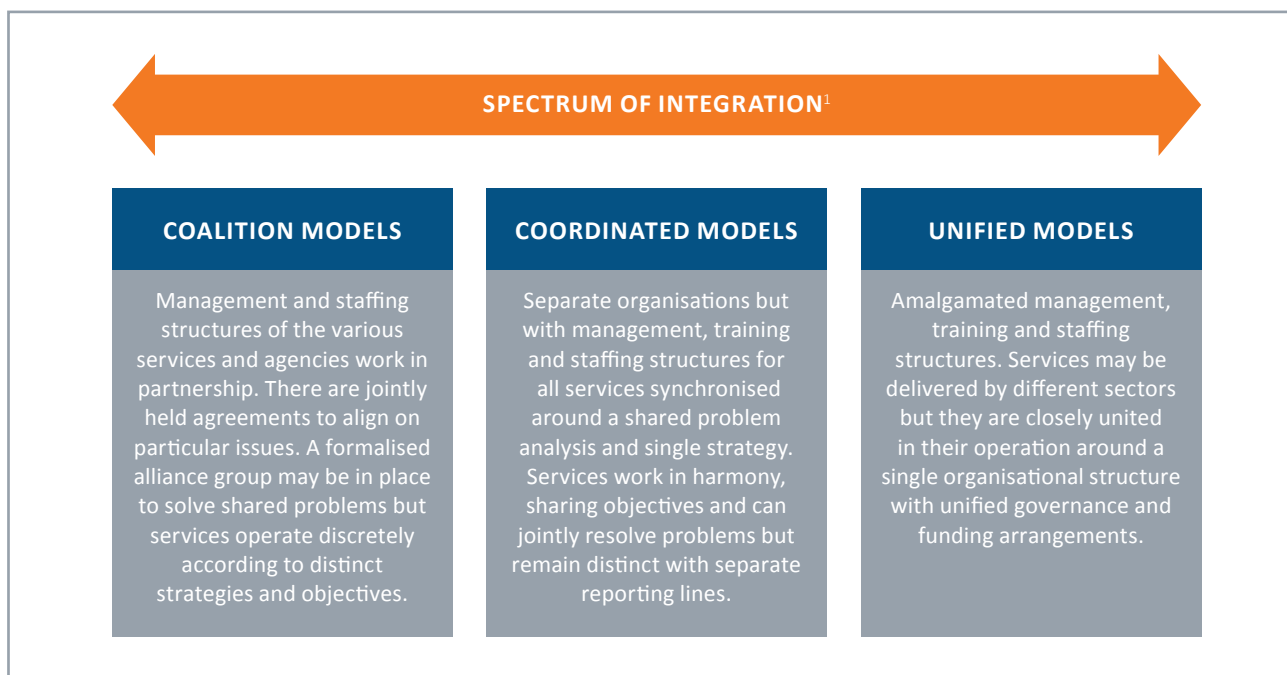
Our starting point is that there is no one fixed model of ‘good early years integration’. Service integration is a broad concept and a means of achieving child- and family-centred services, not an end in itself. The depth and breadth of integration and the form it takes are matters for local areas to determine, and aims and ambitions must be based on local need. Integration can range from loose coalition models organised through joint agreements on specific issues, to unified models that operate under a single structure, and many things in between. Integration is also not fixed, in that it evolves over time – it is the product of multiple systems with many moving parts. It is a journey and there is no neat end point.

Yet it is possible to identify where services are working together effectively for children and families. Across our fieldwork we found excellent examples of local systems in London where this was the case. They had identifiable common characteristics, including a shared focus on children and families and their needs, good cross-service relationships at every level, an understanding of the importance of ‘place’, strongly valued partnerships and a variety of common processes. Where integration works well, it supports better outcomes for children and families by creating more opportunities for early identification and up-stream support, smoothing the path from universal to targeted and specialist support and preventing vulnerable families from ‘slipping through the net’.

Drawing on our learning from London, and with reference to the wider literature, our research identified 12 common ‘enablers’ of effective integration at the local system level. These enablers are organised around three key themes:

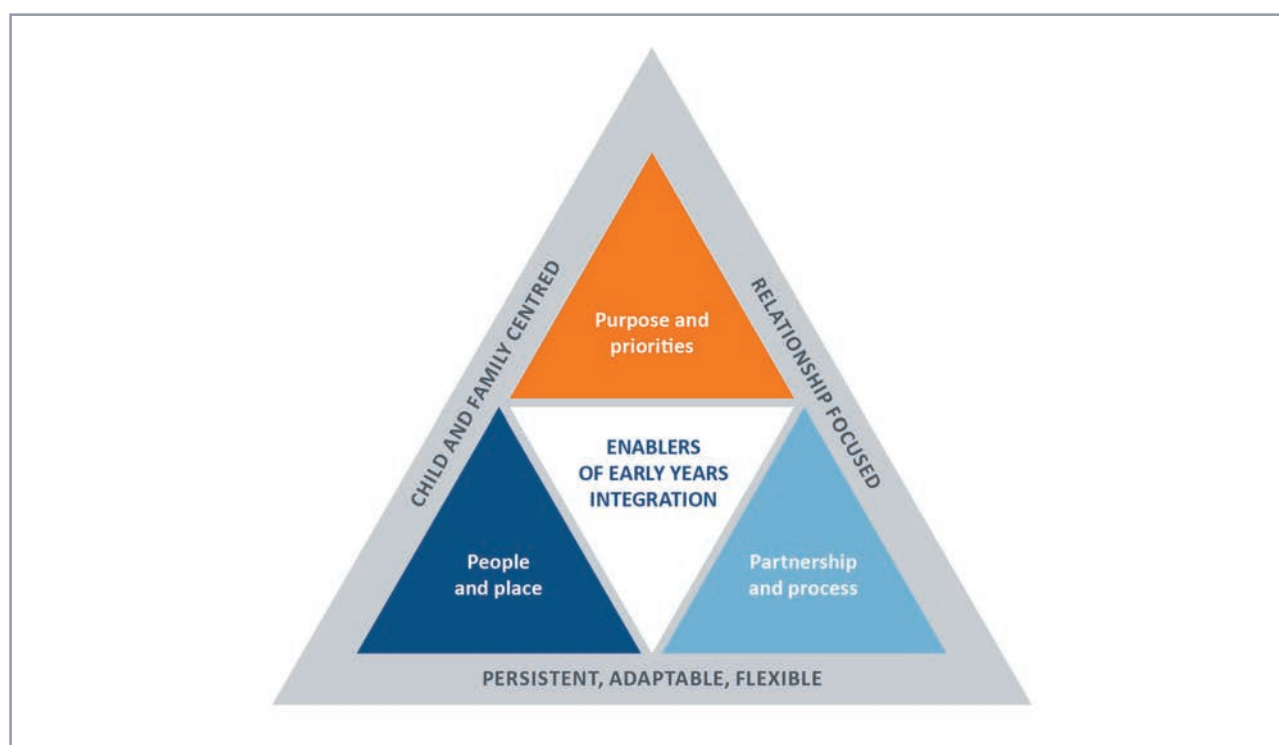


Spectrum of integration

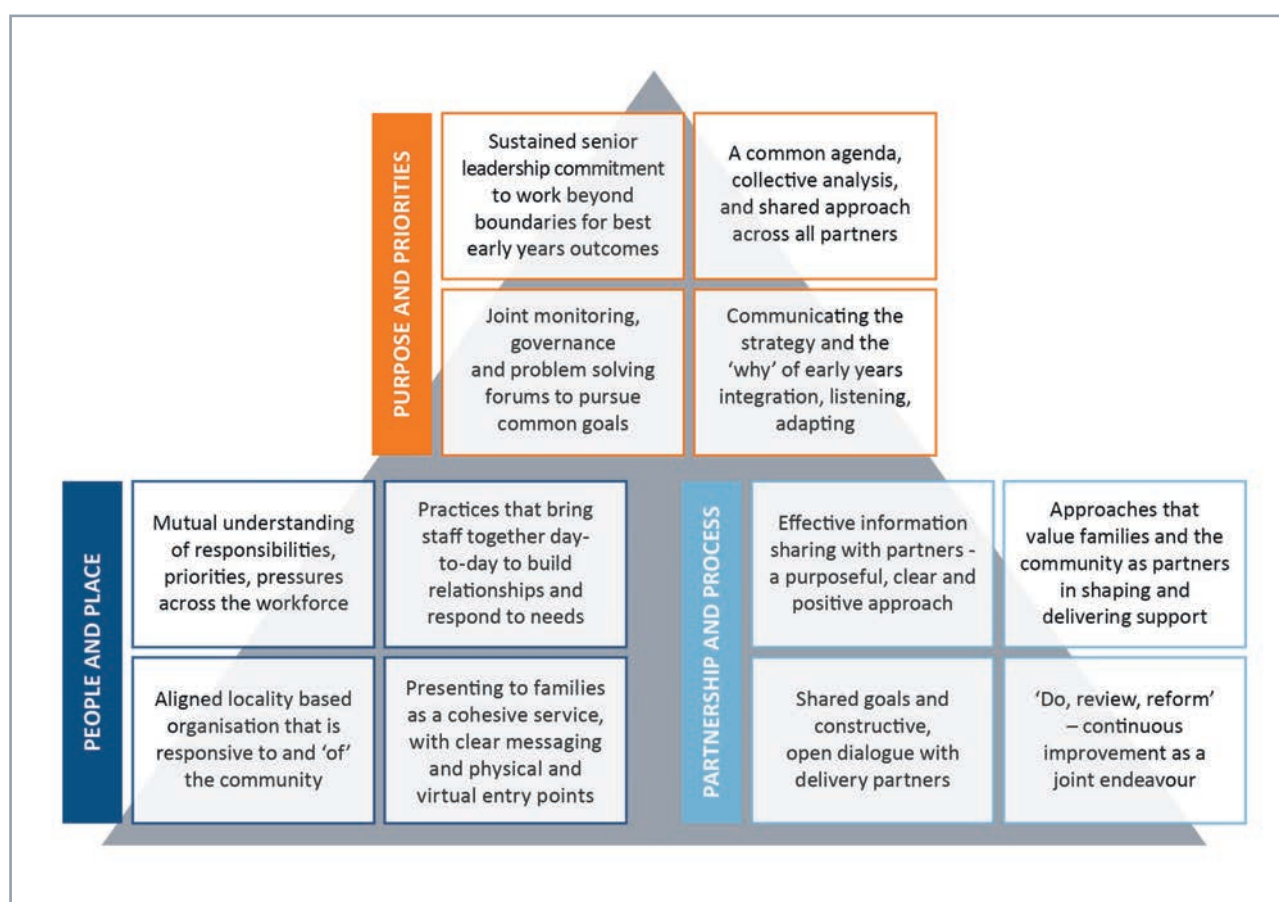


1. Adapted from Pascal, Bertram, Gasper, Mould, Ramsden, Saunders (2001) [Research to Inform the Evaluation of the Early Excellence Centres Pilot Programme](#), DfEE Research Report, IoE, visited February 2022.

A conceptual framework for thinking about early years integration



Twelve enablers of early years integration



How to use the tool

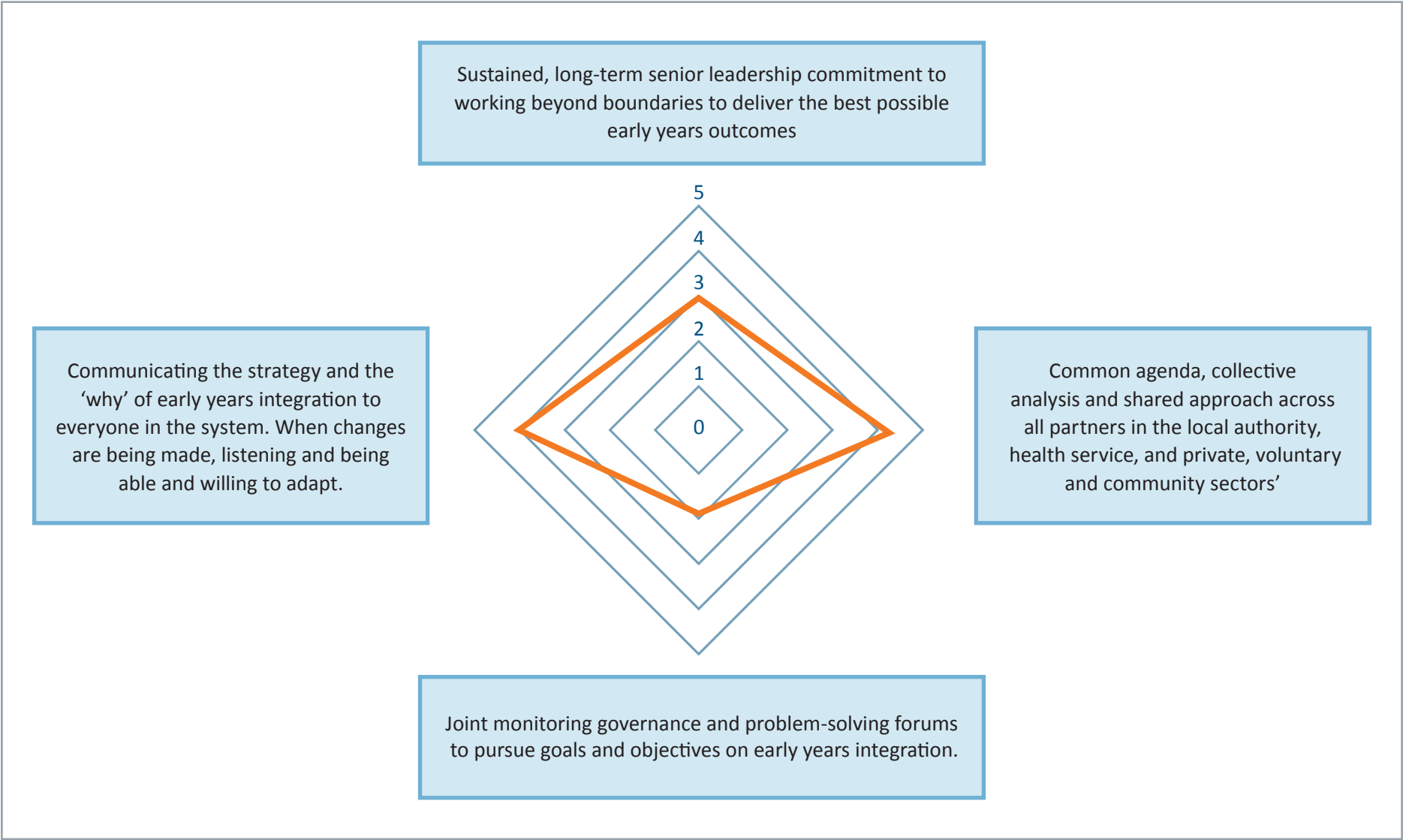
The tool is structured around the three key themes that we identified in the research: purpose and priorities, people and place and partnership and process. The relevant enablers are listed for each theme, together with the characteristics we identified within effectively integrated early years systems in London. These characteristics represent ‘maturity indicators’ for an effectively integrated system. Areas should work as a partnership to identify average scores for each of the 12 enablers, based on the extent to which the maturity indicators are present, what is working well and the evidence that shows this.

After reviewing average scores for enablers and comparing assessments, partners may want to zoom further in to explore areas where scores are either low or polarised. You can ‘dig deeper’ into these areas by asking partners to provide scores at an individual indicator level. This can be completed manually on paper using the grids provided here and brought together, or it can be completed with our Excel tool, which can be accessed here <https://bit.ly/BeyondBoundariesToolLondon>. The Excel tool is a quick way of bringing together average scores across a group of up to 10 participants and generating radar diagrams to show collective assessment outcomes at the enabler and more detailed indicator levels.

Once you have been through this process, it might be helpful to consider the six common types of challenge outlined on **page 12**, and which, if any, are getting in the way of you fulfilling your ambition. The table on **page 15** directs you to relevant case studies in the Beyond Boundaries research report to get an idea of how other areas in London have addressed similar issues.



Example: Purpose and priorities group self-assessment scores



Who is the tool for?

The tool is designed for local authorities and their partners to use as a basis for structuring discussion and collectively identifying areas of strength and development, and further lines of enquiry. The goal is to help begin to build consensus around future priorities for action.

The tool is thus aimed at strategic and operational leaders within local authorities to use themselves, and in dialogue with key partners involved in decision-making, planning, designing and commissioning services in local areas. It is likely to have the greatest impact if used in a multi-agency context, either in an established group setting or through individual service leaders coming together to develop their forward plan. However, there may be times when it might be useful to ask teams or partners to conduct the exercise separately and then compare findings across agencies or strategic and operational level staff.

How it sits with other tools

This Beyond Boundaries tool should be used to complement other excellent tools already in use to help evaluate the maternity and early years system more generally. Examples include the Early Intervention Foundation's **Maternity and Early Years Maturity Matrix** (2021), and tools to support the integration of targeted support for whole families through early help, including **Isos Partnership's early help tool**, developed for the Local Government Association and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' **Early Help System Guide**. It is a tool that should be relatively swift to use and engage staff with. It is ideal when integration and the join-up across early years services and systems has been specifically identified as a challenge that may be undermining progress.

The self-assessment scoring system

We ask you to rate your areas in relation to each of the 12 enablers on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 representing 'mature' early years integration. Please consider what is in place and how well embedded it is, and any evidence of impact on experiences and outcomes of children aged 0 to 5 and their families. Do not be tempted to score everything an average 3!

If an individual feels they have absolutely no experience or knowledge of an area, then it is permitted to skip over it, although we expect in most instances this will not be the case.

1	2	3	4	5
No descriptors in place. No plan to achieve this.	Some descriptors in place but generally not embedded.	Some descriptors in place. Some well embedded.	Most descriptors embedded, or a clear plan to get there if not.	All descriptors in place and well embedded. Impact is evident.

A blue-tinted photograph of a young child with curly hair, focused on playing with wooden blocks on a table. An adult's hands are visible, assisting with the blocks. In the background, another child and an adult are partially visible, also engaged in play. The text "The self-assessment framework and grid" is overlaid in white.

The self-assessment framework and grid

PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES

Enabler	Maturity indicators	1	2	3	4	5
Sustained, long-term senior leadership commitment to working beyond boundaries to deliver the best possible early years outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long-term commitment to improving early years outcomes across leaders in children's services and public health, and political leaders When efficiencies are required, pre-birth to 5 services are protected wherever possible Policies relating to integration are seen through to their conclusion, and pre-pandemic initiatives to integrate have been resumed Key decision-makers are engaged in understanding the lived experiences of children and families Leaders appreciate what service integration can deliver in terms of wider benefits to community outcomes and long-term value Leaders recognise that individual organisational interests may sometimes have to be relinquished in order to fully support an integrated agenda 					
Common agenda, collective analysis and shared approach across all partners in the local authority, health service and private, voluntary and community sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners have made time to work together to develop a shared understanding of the gaps and how effectively services meet needs The process is informed by data on population needs and financial analysis – with commissioners playing a key role The engagement process has enabled strategic and delivery partners at all levels to feel safe to contribute honestly and actively The process has involved listening to local parents and children and understanding the 'user journey' of various vulnerable groups Ambitions, approaches, goals, and timings are clearly articulated and agreed across partners in a shared early years strategy or similar 					
Joint monitoring, governance and problem-solving forums to pursue goals and objectives on early years integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A cross-agency group of senior leaders exists, whose core focus is to be explicitly responsible for making a reality of the early years plan The senior group works closely, meets regularly and models integrated working to others across the system There are mixed service operational groups with the power to identify, resolve and escalate challenges at service interfaces Integrated or closely aligned commissioners work actively to promote integration across 0 to 5 services, in line with objectives 					
Communicating the strategy and the 'why' of early years integration to everyone in the system. When changes are being made, listening, and being able and willing to adapt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The rationale for integration, and the specific forms it takes, is clearly articulated and communicated across the workforce Powerful arguments on the benefits for children and families, and how integration helps people work effectively, are harnessed Messages on 'why' integration is happening are targeted at middle leaders – and space is made to address concerns and make adaptations Where big changes are introduced to improve integration, effective vertical and horizontal feedback loops exist for staff at all levels 					

Reflections – what are the key areas where progress is needed?

PEOPLE AND PLACE

Enabler	Maturity indicators	1	2	3	4	5
Strong mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities, priorities and pressures across the early childhood workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-used pre-birth to 5 pathways make clear how all families should be supported across services, including roles and responsibilities Professionals have opportunities to work alongside others, observing different roles and understanding each other's pressures and priorities, e.g. co-location, joint training, multi-agency panels Experience of working in different roles across the early childhood workforce is valued and opportunities are created to encourage this 					
A core of working practices that bring a wide range of staff together on a day-to-day basis to build relationships and respond to needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionals in different services and agencies know each other on a personal basis and regularly communicate with ease Professionals are explicitly encouraged to embrace informal communication and be available to talk to outside colleagues Senior strategic leads model close relational working day-to-day Child- and family-centred multi-agency practice models bring people together regularly, e.g. Team Around the Family, Team Around the Setting, linked professionals, locality teams Virtual opportunities to work across agencies are fully harnessed – complementing (not entirely replacing) face-to-face interactions 					
Aligned locality-based organisation that is responsive to and 'of' the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services are organised around sub-areas of local authorities, and this is driven by a borough-level plan developed with health partners Professionals who work in a locality know their 'patch' and have a strong understanding of the needs of children and families who live and access services there Decisions on the size of localities balance the need to be responsive to communities with the ability to secure enough effective leaders at the locality level Parent and community voices are part of locality service design, delivery and oversight Locality boundaries do not restrict which services families can access 					
Presenting as a single, cohesive early years service to families with consistent messaging about the offer and clear entry points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong multi-service information portals exist for parents, which go beyond standard Family Information Service requirements There is a sense of 'one workforce' providing consistent messages to families, via common training, communication and support pathways Parents of children aged 0 to 5 are able to access a local physical space where they know they can get basic information and advice and meet other parents Parents of children aged 0 to 5 have opportunities to 'drop-in' with their children and get direct access to specialist support or be referred on as needed Referrals from one service to another are as quick as possible; where there is a wait, parents are kept well informed There is a strong cross-agency early years workforce brand which is clearly identifiable to parents 					

Reflections – what are the key areas where progress is needed?

PARTNERSHIP AND PROCESS

Enabler	Maturity indicators	1	2	3	4	5
Effective information-sharing with partners – taking a purposeful, clear and positive approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information-sharing agreements and protocols between agencies are established, with a clear purpose to deliver better outcomes for children and families Clear plans and delivery systems have been developed and iterated to ensure information-sharing agreements can be operationalised Services work together to identify key moments to ask parents for consent to share their information, and this takes place Rules around what cannot and can be shared are communicated clearly across the workforce – e.g. via joint learning, myth-busting 					
Establishing shared goals and constructive, open dialogue with delivery partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The commissioning process is used to ensure that the vision and principles of commissioning and providing organisations are fully aligned Ongoing commissioner/provider relationships are positive and consensual and characterised by trust and the free flow of data Ongoing dialogue takes place between the local authority and key 0 to 5 health services that are not directly commissioned, e.g. GPs and maternity, so that the best possible service alignment is achieved for families There is good communication and sharing across early years services and wider council-led services such as schools, social care, and housing 					
Valuing families and the community as equal partners in shaping and delivering integrated early years support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is active and diverse parent and community representation on family hub and children's centre boards Individuals in outreach roles have a specific remit to work collaboratively with local community organisations Principles of co-production and co-design are embedded at a strategic level and senior decision-makers engage parents directly There is a place at the table in early years strategic groups for key local Voluntary and Community Sector organisations The community offer, including from private and VCS partners, is embedded within 0 to 5 pathways 					
"Do, review, reform" – embedding a cycle of continuous improvement as a joint endeavour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition across the system that integration is an ongoing process – after the 'hump' of a big change, continuous improvement is needed There are permanent structures for strategic decision-makers to jointly listen to operational and frontline views and make changes The impact of integrated services, and wider services, is measured on an ongoing basis – not just one-stop checks Insight into families' pressures and experiences of services informs planning at every level 					

Reflections – what are the key areas where progress is needed?

An interactive version of the self-evaluation assessment can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/BeyondBoundariesToolLondon>

Being clear about the underlying issues

Our research identified six broad types of challenge to progressing early years integration at a local system level within London. Once you have completed the self-assessment grid, you may find it helpful to collectively consider which of these issues are in play for you locally, and identify what might be within your gift as a partnership to change, influence or work around as part of your plan to improve integration. As many of the case studies we link to in the **next section** illustrate, often it is possible to make progress even where challenges are borne out of issues beyond direct local control or influence. Building a shared understanding of what has blocked service integration to date is essential groundwork for developing a common agenda for change.

6 common types of challenge

1

First, technical blockages due to mismatched legal rules and national frameworks.

Rules around information-sharing and mismatched IT systems were most frequently cited as obstacles to integration in our local authority survey. Parallel case management systems are usually a reality. Where professionals lack clarity about exactly what information can (and cannot) be shared, or practical mechanisms for enabling this, siloed working is more likely. Inflexibility around the use of ring-fenced budgets, differing national professional frameworks and expectations, and differing pay and conditions across local authorities and the NHS can also be obstacles to forging deeper models of integrated working.

2

Second, capacity challenges at the strategic and operational levels.

At the strategic level, lack of capacity can impede the ability of local authorities and those commissioning health services to lead and drive the changes required for integration. For example, not having time to invest in joint leadership forums or individuals in post to manage transformation. Lack of operational capacity among key frontline professionals can also undermine the ability of services to come together around children and families' needs, introduce new joint working practices, collectively reflect and develop solutions to problems together. Effective integration is an iterative process and all professionals involved need to be able to invest time in making it work.

3

Third, cultural barriers across organisations, professions and sectors.

Difficulties integrating are often to do with less tangible cultural factors. Differences in framing and professional language used across parts of the workforce can allow disjuncts to persist if not explicitly recognised – for example “school readiness”. The natural desire to protect organisational sovereignty can also impede effective partnership – where goals are not explicitly aligned, it is not always obvious to professionals that the best way of meeting their organisational objectives is by looking outside and developing compromises. Professional anxiety over role and status can further feed resistance to change – those whose roles and reporting have seen recent turbulence are likely most susceptible.

4

Fourth, tensions about geographical level. Discrepancies between local authority and commissioning health agencies' footprints can be an issue, resulting in local authorities needing to negotiate with multiple partners to align services around a clear pathway or get a standardised offer in place. Commissioning on a wider geographical level (for example London or Integrated Care System sub-region) can create a sense of distance and make it more complex to negotiate integrated offers that respond effectively to specific place-based needs and considerations. Other local authority partners might operate at a more micro geographical level requiring careful thought about the most effectively models and levels of engagement, especially where service boundaries do not align.

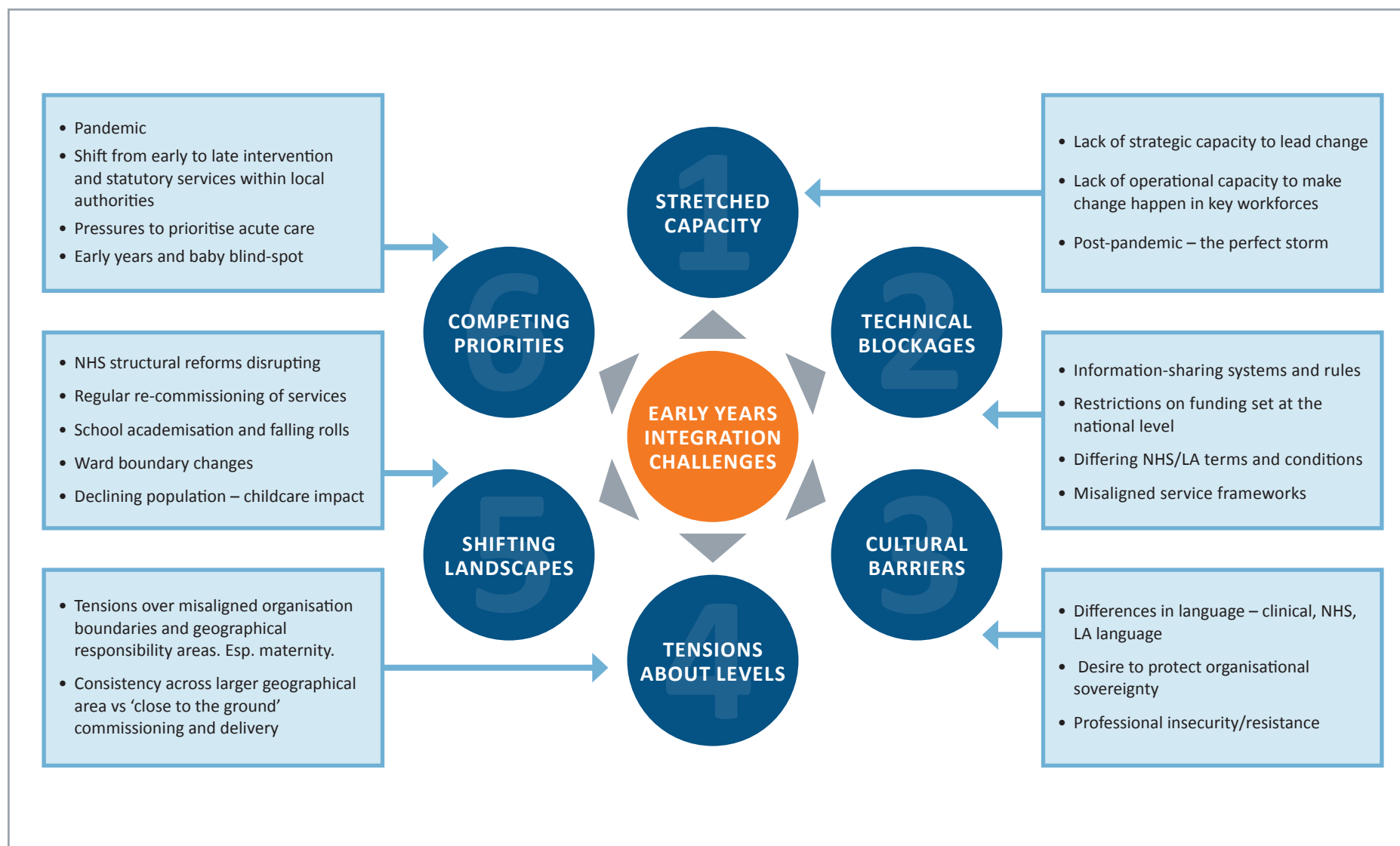
5

Fifth, shifting landscapes. With each shift in organisational structure and boundaries of responsibility, different interfaces become important for integration, corporate knowledge is lost and new agreements, and relationships must be formed. Changes and complexities created by top-down NHS structural reforms, school academisations, the commissioning and regular recommissioning of services, and diversification of an already complex early education and childcare sector are all challenges in this respect. Have the nature and scale of these “disrupters” been fully taken account of and their implications for early years partnership working and integration understood?

6

Sixth, competing priorities and incentives. The pandemic caused significant disruption to all services, and initiatives to integrate early years services across the city were paused, with many only just getting back on track at the time of our research. Long-term lack of prioritisation of early years within policy, governance forums and budgets can be exacerbated by financial pressures, for example seeing local authorities shift focus to statutory services and health prioritising acute care. In some cases, a local focus on early intervention and early help has helped to maintain ambitions around joined-up early years services – and family hubs may be harnessing this further. Yet an early intervention focus can be pursued whilst offering very little in terms of goals, funding and accountability related specifically to supporting children in the early years and their families. Does this apply in your area?

Six common challenges to effective early years integration



Examples of effective integrated working in London

Case studies summary table

We have compiled a series of short case studies illustrating effective practice across London in relation to specific aspects of early years integration. These are included in the Annex of the Beyond Boundaries research report, available [here](#). The table below is designed to help you find your way to examples that are relevant and useful to you.

Title	Issues included	Where?
Box A: Collective problem analysis and an integrated pathway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing a common agenda Creating a single early years pathway Establishing shared goals with partners 	Bi-borough
Box B: Integrated leadership – a model of relational working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint monitoring and problem-solving forums Bringing staff together day-to-day Locality-based organisation 	Islington
Box C: Integrated and pro-active early years commissioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint monitoring and problem-solving forums Integrated commissioning Working constructively with delivery partners 	Lewisham
Box D: Bringing health services in-house – a change journey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unifying services in one structure Sharing and aligning data 	Newham
Box E: Creating a sense of one early years service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating ‘one workforce’ Presenting a single cohesive service 	Islington and Ealing
Box F: Integrated one-stop-shops for families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presenting a single cohesive service Clear entry points for families Multi-agency hubs and drop-ins 	Greenwich and Bromley
Box G: Sharing birth data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information sharing agreements Sharing information with parents consent 	Bi-borough
Box H: Effective data sharing through Integrated Business Support Officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delivery systems to support information sharing Measuring impacts of integrated services on an ongoing basis 	Islington
Box I: Parent Champions and apprentices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Valuing families and the community as partners 	Lewisham
Box J: Providers as partners – commissioning community health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructive relations with delivery partners Developing a common agenda Locality-based organisation 	Ealing
Box K: Working with the childcare sector as partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open dialogue with delivery partners Bringing staff together day-to-day 	Havering and Lewisham
Box L: Working with partners and parents to integrate services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing a common agenda Shared evaluation frameworks Valuing families and the community as partners 	Sutton

Acknowledgements

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Tool developed by Jodie Reed and Natalie Parish of Isos Partnership for London Councils.

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