

Collaborative Improvement Summary of Findings

The Highland Council, ADES & Education Scotland | March 2023

1. What is collaborative improvement?

Collaborative Improvement is an approach to bringing about improvement through shared work involving staff from the local authority, Education Scotland and Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES). Together, the group establish the focus for the Collaborative Improvement visit and then undertake activities in the local authority that will result in an evaluative summary of where there are strengths and where there are areas that may require further focus.

This approach to collaborative improvement was initially outlined in the “Education Reform - Joint Agreement” between the Scottish Government and Local Government, published in June 2018, and was based on the recommendation for a “strengthened middle” in the 2015 OECD Report on Scottish Education, “Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective.” The approach is also intended to address the recommendation in Audit Scotland’s 2021 Report, “Improving outcomes for young people through school education” that Councils should work with schools, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, other policy teams and partners to promote partnership working to ensure sustainable improvements for all children and young people.

2. Focus for Highland’s Collaborative Improvement visit

The theme for Highland’s Collaborative Improvement Review was focused on progress being made in developing systems to support improvement in our schools. The Local Authority has been focusing on developing a framework to support system wide self-evaluation to support and challenge schools to raise attainment.

The overall focus for the collaborative improvement process was based around a key question:

“How can we enhance our systems of engagement with schools to improve positive outcomes for our children and young people?”

At the time of the visit, several different areas of work were being progressed to support improvement. A recently created draft Collaborative Improvement Framework which outlines roles and responsibilities and outlines a transparent framework for support to schools from central officers to promote improvement in a universal, focused or intensive approach, as appropriate.

Further work has been progressed on the use of data analysis within schools to inform improvement. Strategic support has also been made available to schools from Collaborative Lead Officers including literacy, numeracy, moderation and self-evaluation activities. In view of the ongoing work the underpinning the overarching question, we identified three key themes for the team to focus on:

1. Building a Collaborative Culture
2. Effective Use of Data to inform priorities
3. Strategic support: curriculum; self-evaluation & moderation

The collaborative improvement visit therefore contributed to confirming progress made to date and the purpose of working in collaboration with Education Scotland and ADES was to identify the next steps in our improvement journey. The visit provided the opportunity to review potential areas where more limited progress had been made, which could then be addressed as we move forward with our local authority priorities.

3. Planning and process

A team including Highland Education Service leaders, ADES and Education Scotland were brought together to discuss the scope, ethos, process and outcomes a number of weeks before the start of the engagement. The scoping meeting clarified the background and enabled Highland to present some key information. ADES and Education Scotland leads set out the process, ethos and intended outcomes for the full team.

The visit was coordinated by an ADES officer and Senior Regional Adviser working with the Director and Senior Education Officers responsible for education in Highland. In addition, the team for the Collaborative Improvement visit included four members representing ADES who were all senior managers or heads of service coming from Orkney, Shetland, and Angus; a team from Education Scotland who were predominantly from the North Team alongside an experienced member of Education Scotland Inspectorate team.

The visit was carried out over 3 days in March 2023. The initial session involved a presentation by Highland on progress to date and which included a focus on outcomes data. The presentation session set the scene and context and led into a discussion about the actions that had been taken and strengths and areas of challenge. A series of focus groups were then arranged, some face to face, others virtual sessions.

On day 2 of the visit, two members of the ADES & Education Scotland team attended an attainment summit arranged for Primary Head Teachers (Appendix 2).

An agreed agenda was used for each focus group meeting. At the end of each day a team discussion took place with sharing of information and an opportunity for clarification.

4. Arriving at conclusions

A meeting of the full team took place at the end of the visit. During this meeting all involved in the visit engaged in a discussion to arrive at a broad consensus on the main strengths and areas for consideration by the authority. This was followed by a written overview, which was then utilised to inform this summary report of findings, further to extensive scrutiny and analysis by the management team of the Education and Learning Directorate in Highland.

5. Findings

Theme 1 - Building a Collaborative Culture

Strengths

- Primary Head Teachers welcome the renewed focus from the Central team on improving attainment, support for them in their understanding of their school's data, and the quality of the engagement and dialogue during recent Attainment Review Meetings. This was symptomatic of a general feeling that effective 'support and challenge' from the centre was returning.
- There is more clarity on the direction of travel from the local authority and the need to drive forward to improve attainment and outcomes for young people. This strategic approach and leadership from the centre has been welcomed by head teachers.
- The Collaborative Improvement Leads, whilst in their infancy in terms of their role and impact, have made a positive start across primaries. They are being supported by senior managers and are working well as a team. The Head Teachers are supportive of their advice, support and presence within their settings.
- Secondary Head Teachers were positive about the role of the Head of Service for Secondary Schools and felt that she was supportive and positive.

- The 'Collaborative Improvement' framework has the opportunity to define and clarify the support and challenge role for the Central team, working with their schools.
- The universal, focused and intensive approach to managing and supporting schools offers the opportunity for further clarity and prioritisation in a vast and large local authority

Challenges

- Communication (at all levels) – this included the timing of messages, the inconsistency of messages and the speed at which information sometimes needed to be assimilated was a concern.
- There is a lack of opportunity for head teachers to become engaged / contribute to developments. Some Head Teachers recognised that this may be developing as part of the process of improvement.
- The impact / role of the Area Education Managers – there is a need to have clarity about who does what regarding a number of key elements of school life e.g., performance management, to ensure consistency across all Areas.
- The Professional Review and Development process is not clear for Head Teachers.
- The secondary Head Teachers highlighted the fact that, while the support they received from the secondary Collaborative Lead was of a very high quality, they felt the single Collaborative Lead for 29 secondaries was spreading the resource too thinly.
- Finance (clarity re decision making process / staffing). This links back to communication. The messages need to be presented in a number of ways to ensure busy head teachers fully understand the reasoning behind the decisions.
- Format of HT meetings. More opportunities for head teachers to lead the agenda and the focus of termly Head Teachers' meetings with a greater emphasis on learning and teaching, collaboration, self-evaluation and moderation.
- There is a risk of the 'Collaborative Improvement' framework being implemented in an ad-hoc manner, causing uncertainty and different interpretations of its use, which, in turn, could potentially dilute its effectiveness, and add further to the sense of disconnection some head teachers feel towards the central team.
- How consistently are processes being followed and how does the LA know? Moderation of approaches, for example, in relation to the structure of attainment meetings with head teachers or how well/often schools are supported by the Collaborative Leads, should be further explored to ensure consistency.

- Some officers refer to the hierarchy of positions in a top-down way which is not helpful in developing collaboration.

Improvement Recommendations

- The Collaborative Improvement framework requires more work around its intended purpose, how it will be implemented, and its impact measured and reported. The development of the framework should be a major piece of work for all head teachers over 2023. There is now a need to engage with school communities about the framework, in its development stage, to ensure a collective understanding and buy-in from stakeholders. There is a need to shape and confirm the universal, focused and intensive criteria with all head teachers prior to formal implementation.
- Monitor the universal, focused and intensive framework over time - not a one size fits all model. The universal, focused and intensive approach is very transparent, but Head Teachers do not yet fully understand the implications of the process. Time for explanation and discussion will ensure that this approach is clearly understood.
- Review the Area teams to ensure every post is adding value. There is positive feedback of partnership working emerging amongst the various central post holders within and across the four regional area teams. However, reviewing some posts and possibly changing remits might increase the focus on improvement in the classroom. Clearer definitions of the roles and responsibilities of Service Heads, Area Managers, Education Support Officers and Collaborative Improvement Leads would help school leaders.
- Increase the opportunities for Head Teachers to become engaged / contribute to developments. Consider how wider consultation, with a range of stakeholders, can be included at the self-evaluation and planning stage of developments.
- Relationship building, openness and transparency as the collaborative culture and strategic support approaches develop will be crucial to break down barriers and ensure effective implementation of the framework.
- Improve communication between central team and Head Teachers. “The most important part of communication is to hear and understand what is being said.” Important to check understanding and communicate the message in several different ways.
- Support for the Collaborative Leads in having the challenging conversations in schools, especially where intensive measures have been identified.

- There will be a need to continue to quality assure the impact of the work of staff at the different levels in the Central team to ensure they are adding value to schools and supporting Highland Council's priorities, especially at a time of budget challenges and reduced resources.
- Moderation of approaches by officers across the service to ensure consistency of approach. This could be done via anonymous surveys to all Head Teachers.
- Bringing on board all members of the central education team and making them feel part of a wider team to ensure all colleagues are aware of the service priorities and enhancing the collaborative spirit across the whole directorate.
- Ensure that a support and challenge culture is in place at every level of the system. This support and challenge should focus on the quality of what is happening in classrooms and schools, with support provided for improvement in teaching, learning and assessment where necessary.

Theme 2 - Effective Use of Data to inform priorities

Strengths

- The increased use of data is clear, with the Local Authority providing Head Teachers with data for their setting, prior to discussions about attainment. Training for Head Teachers and class teachers has been provided.
- The term, "putting faces to the data" was highlighted a few times. The impact of these approaches should become evident as attainment data at the end of the school session becomes available. Evaluation of this could include comparing predictions with actual attainment.

Challenges

- Is school use of data monitored? The approach could create an issue re 'learned helplessness'.
- Several Head Teachers highlighted the ongoing need to have a consistent approach to tracking and monitoring in the classroom and that this is a 'work in progress'.
- The increased use of data and the increasing focus on data sets is welcomed but there is a need to ensure that, where necessary, support on how to effect improvement is provided.

Improvement Recommendations

- It would be helpful for the Local Authority to gather evidence of the ways in which classroom teachers are increasing data literacy and using a range of relevant data to inform planning and next steps.
- Evaluation of the approach to data across the Local Authority could include comparing predictions with actual attainment.
- Ongoing review of datasets required to establish what is / is not being used?
- How to engage / involve senior staff and teachers in data analysis. Widening the understanding of the data sets and their development would also lessen the burden on the central team.

Theme 3 - Strategic support: curriculum; self-evaluation & moderation

Strengths

- The increased clarity of direction from the development plan and the strategic roles of the Collaborative Lead Officers is welcomed. There were several examples provided of Collaborative Lead Officers being asked for advice in a particular area and bringing in another strategic lead to support.

Opportunities for Improvement

- A few Head Teachers thought that a Collaborative Lead Officer with a primary background could not support secondary schools.
- Head Teachers are concerned that there are too many developments being delivered in a short space of time by the central team.

Improvement Recommendations

- Head Teachers need to be made aware that Collaborative Lead Officer's strategic leads cover primary and secondary.
- It would be helpful to identify two absolute priorities and allow time for engagement, discussion and the development of a shared understanding of the direction of travel. Possibly a visual of the major developments over the next five years, showing sequencing? Keep asking the question, "What will colleagues take away from this and how can they implement it effectively?"

6. What will happen next?

- This report will be shared with all key partners mentioned above
- The Education and Learning Directorate will develop and implement an Action Plan to prioritise and take forward recommendations.
- Continue to develop the Local Authority strategy to ensure attainment and other data is robust and staff are confident in using it to identify strengths and areas for development.
- Education Scotland Locality team will continue to work alongside Aberdeenshire Council to support the delivery of the relevant actions.

Appendix 1 – Programme for the visit

ADES Collaborative Improvement

Overview

How can we enhance our systems of engagement with schools to improve positive outcomes for our children and young people?

Themes		
Building a Collaborative Culture	Effective use of data to inform improvement priorities	Strategic support: curriculum; self-evaluation & moderation
Focus Areas		
Collaborative Lead Engagement	Data dashboards and datasets for schools	Raising Attainment framing support and consistency
Collaborative Improvement Framework of support	Attainment Analysis templates & target setting processes	Literacy/ Numeracy progressions and support
School Improvement planning	Data Training	Moderation & Assessment framework of support resources & training
Self-evaluation activities & tools	Attainment meetings & review	LA Assessment & Attainment Calendar linked to school SE calendar
Standard & Quality Reports	Central data analysis to target and support schools most in need	SECI training for all HTs & SE support guidance and term 4 clinics
Central support & challenge		

Outline of the 3 days

Day	Date/Time	Focus	Participants	Format
1	21 st March 2023. 10am - 3.30pm	Presentation/Background Focus Groups - Themes 1, 2 & 3	See sheet	Face-to-face/Virtual
2	22 nd March 2023 10am - 4pm	Primary Attainment Summit Focus Groups - Themes 1, 2 & 3	See sheet	Face-to-face/Virtual
3	23 rd March 2022 9.30am – 11.30am	Professional Dialogue – Pulling together key themes from Day 1 and Day 2	See sheet	Face-to-face

Day 1 Tuesday 21 March 2023

10:00 - 12:00	Presentation, Questions and Clarification
12:30 – 14:00	Focus Groups with Collaborative Lead Officers
14:00 – 15:30	Focus Groups with Primary Head Teachers
15:30 – 16:00	Professional dialogue – points for clarification

Day 2 Wednesday 22 March 2023

10:00 -16:00	Two members attending Primary Attainment Summit
10:00 - 11:30	Focus Groups with Secondary Head Teachers
11.30 – 13:00	Focus Groups with Area Officers
14:00 – 15:30	Focus Groups with Curriculum Support Officers
15:30 – 16:00	Professional dialogue – points for clarification

Day 3 Thursday 23 March 2023 – Professional Dialogue

10:00 – 11:30	ADES/Education Scotland Feedback Session - Key findings & next steps for Highland
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