



East Lothian Council

Collaborative Improvement

March 2024



A · D · E · S
Association of Directors of Education in Scotland



What is Collaborative Improvement?

Collaborative Improvement is an approach to support ongoing improvement through shared work involving staff from the Local Authority, Education Scotland (ES) and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES). Together, the group establishes the focus for the Collaborative Improvement Review and then undertakes activities in the Local Authority that will result in an evaluative summary, identifying strengths and areas that may require further focus. The approach to Collaborative Improvement was outlined in the Joint Agreement and is based on the call for a “strengthened middle” in the 2015 OECD report on Scottish Education. The approach is also intended to address the recommendation in Audit Scotland’s report on education that Councils should work with schools, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, other policy teams and partners, for example in the third sector, to reduce variability in outcomes.

Use of the Education Authority Self-Evaluation Framework

In addition to the programme of Collaborative Improvement activity outlined above, ADES has recognised the need to develop further approaches to rigorous and robust self-evaluation of education authorities. Whilst a self-evaluation framework (Quality Management in Education 2) has been used across local authorities, it has been some time since the document has been updated. Work has therefore been taken forward by ADES, supported by Education Scotland, to develop a revised self-evaluation framework. All 32 Education Authorities have agreed to trial the new framework starting in academic session 2024/25. The Executive Director for Education and Children’s Services has been part of the ADES working group and has helped to support the updating and reviewing of two new quality indicators. ADES were keen to explore a range of ways in which quality indicators could be used including as part of Collaborative Improvement activity.

Both ADES and East Lothian Council’s Education Leadership team were keen to trial the use of the two Quality Indicators during East Lothian’s Collaborative Improvement. The indicators and selected challenge questions were used as part of the authority’s evidence gathering and to provide a framework for the collaborative improvement activity.

The Focus of the East Lothian Collaborative Improvement Visit

East Lothian Council has been working towards a self-improving schools system since 2019. Since then, some members of the central team and a significant cohort of Head Teachers have changed and while significant progress has been made in the development of a self-improving system, it was now an important time to take stock, evaluate progress and define next steps. Collaborative Improvement was the perfect tool to support us to be able to do that, with a mix of both independent external advice and review alongside our own internal evaluative activity.

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The following overarching statement was taken from the authority's Self-Improving Schools Guidance:

We invest our energy and focus our resources and accountability to where we make the biggest difference – improving outcomes, through working as close as possible to our children and young people where improvement is owned and led by our practitioners, leaders and schools.

Using the two QIs from the Education Authority Self-Evaluation Framework, the following question and themes were chosen:

In relation to the above statement and under the themes below, how effective is the Self-Improving Schools Strategy in East Lothian?

- our practitioners and schools are responsible for owning and leading their improvement
- local authority support and challenge and the support of regional work and national agencies adds value to our work at a local level

Two challenge questions were selected from each QI to support the focus of the Collaborative Improvement Team:

- How effectively have we developed a collaborative culture in which all staff share a collective responsibility to improve outcomes for children and young people?
- To what extent do we critically engage with research, policy sources and developments in learning and teaching?
- How effective is our guidance to EYC and schools on self-evaluation, improvement planning and standards and quality reporting?
- How well do we provide opportunities for all staff to be involved in and lead aspects of service improvement?

The Collaborative Improvement Process and Team

The Collaborative Improvement visit took place over three days in March 2024 and was supported by the following team:

Carrie Lindsay	Executive Officer – ADES
Moira Allan	HM Inspector – Education Scotland
Heather Robertson	Senior Regional Adviser – Education Scotland
Wendy Gillie	Attainment Adviser – Education Scotland
Jim Hammond	Service Leader, Education and Lifelong Learning - Angus
Tracey Henderson	Interim Service Manager, Schools – Stirling Council
Karen Haspolat	QIO – East Lothian Council
Nick Trussler	QIO – East Lothian Council
Alistair Stewart	QIO – East Lothian Council

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Team members engaged in a series of focus groups designed to explore each of the themes, visited three school settings, attended a series of scheduled meetings with senior officers and took the opportunity to explore documentation and resources. All these sources of evidence were used to inform the findings of the team.

The analysis and challenge provided by the Collaborative Improvement team has greatly aided the education service to reflect on progress made and identify next steps. The findings of the three-day visit are outlined below.

What is Working Well?

How effectively have we developed a collaborative culture in which all staff share a collective responsibility to improve outcomes for children and young people?

Strengths:

A strong culture of collaboration, improvement and accountability, as well as support and clear direction from the local authority with regard to local and national priorities came through very clearly from focus group discussions. They agreed that appropriate actions are being taken to improve outcomes and overall performance at Education Authority and school / East Lothian Council levels. In some areas, it was reported that there was a culture of systems leadership and that up-to-date data and intelligence are informing strategic decision-making. There was found to be clear guidance and communication regarding expectations, and clear strategic direction.

School reviews were cited as a significant contributor to school improvement, with the role of school leader as reviewee and reviewer both holding value. School leaders identified direct outcomes following school reviews which have led to school improvement. Peer relationships, built through School Team Groups (STGs), were identified as a key component of this process, leading to a culture of appropriate challenge and support, alongside a solution-focused approach.

The use of Associated School Groups (ASGs) and STGs to review data collaboratively was also cited as an effective contributor to self-evaluation, with support from QIOs being valued particularly in supporting senior leaders in being much more data focussed.

The recently created and school-led Locality Teams are viewed as having the potential to be a highly effective model for improving outcomes for learners. Although this remains at an early stage, there has been positive engagement from partner agencies with indications of solution-focused approaches being identified.

A refined Single Point of Access (SPA) was also widely reported as highly positive. School leaders, Educational Psychologists (EPs) & Mental Health practitioners reported effective collaboration alongside use of data and pupil voice to inform service provision, supported by the Child Planning Framework and underpinned by a clear culture of shared responsibility.

The following quotes were gathered by the team during the visit:

“In our ASG they are all our bairns”

“We are the local authority”

“We own all the parts and can mould and shape”

“Flexibility to determine own tasks”

“Good level of professional autonomy to lead aspects of improvement across the local authority”

Next Steps:

The team outlined that the success of the creation of a collaborative culture in East Lothian should continue to provoke reflection on the accuracy of local authority attainment data. While a strong improvement system has been developed, a significant shift in attainment is not yet evident. Evidence of improved equity outcomes was shared through stretch aims over a two-year period, with the expectation that forecasting of future gains should bring East Lothian into line with the virtual comparator. A further next step is that tracking should continue to monitor progress closely to ensure these goals are met.

Moderation and robustness of teacher judgements should continue to be the focus of improvement priorities. School leaders themselves identified learning, teaching and assessment, under the Service Improvement Plan heading ‘Back to Basics’, should remain a continuing priority.

To what extent do we critically engage with research, policy sources and developments in learning and teaching?

Strengths:

School leaders who form the Strategic Curriculum Oversight Team (SCOT), demonstrated a clear commitment to systems leadership and described a shared view that this was within their role as a school leader. School leaders reported a clear vision for curriculum development, underpinned by shared values, whilst giving autonomy and agency to schools to apply local solutions. School leaders identified that leadership and delivery of professional learning was within their role, alongside peer support. This was reflective of both their high level of professional skills and knowledge as well as their collective responsibility.

Strengths were identified in engagement with national agencies to support East Lothian’s improvement journey (eg SEIC, Education Scotland, academics, other local authorities, Scottish Government) as well as engaging with evidence-based research. This was found to be supported by senior officers, who provide structure and support, as well as access to partner agencies.

School leaders reported feeling well-supported in applying national legislation and the local policy derived from this, including safeguarding. Staff at all levels have been consulted on policy development. In addition, school leaders described a systematic approach to focus on two policy directives per year, leading to increased focus and resultant clarity. Additional support from professional learning, including support of exceptional needs, and resources available via the EduHub online platform were also evidenced.

Collaborative Improvement activities evidenced involvement in a range of initiatives that reflect service priorities, including national programmes. These were identified as drawing on the robust use of data, which school leaders identified as a strength in East Lothian. The National Writing programme was reported as being a strong example of this.

Next Steps:

Effective collaboration with the Educational Psychology Service was evidenced, with an example of a bespoke project grounded in current theory and research aimed at producing improved learner outcomes, with a specific focus on children who have experienced trauma and adversity. As these needs are reflected at a wider systemic level within the authority, consideration should be given to building further capacity in schools at a universal level through the application of these principles.

In addition, within all projects and interventions staff should have an understanding of planned measurable outcomes, backed up by robust monitoring and tracking of data at all levels of the system.

How effective is our guidance to schools on self-evaluation, improvement planning and standard and quality reporting?

Strengths:

A strong connection from the Education Progress and Improvement Plan to individual School Improvement Plan Priorities was identified. Central and school staff reported that they feel they have ownership in shaping and taking forward council improvement priorities.

School leaders consistently cited School Team Groups (STGs) and school reviews as crucial within the Self-Improving Schools System leading to effective self-evaluation, improvement planning and standards and quality reporting. School leaders reported training in improvement planning and standards and quality reporting created solid foundations in practice, which has been built on through peer-review and collaboration at STGs.

Shared engagement in East Lothian's service level agreement for schools model identified benefits in ensuring equity through a culture of openness.

Next Steps:

The service should now continue to ensure that tracking of data, robust assessment and moderation and quality assurance arrangements are built in to Service Level Agreements to ensure shared responsibility and accountability.

How well do we provide opportunities for all staff to be involved in and lead aspects of service improvement?

Strengths:

There are many examples above of the opportunities that staff have to be involved in and lead aspects of service improvement.

A specific example of a collaborative culture which has included engagement of practitioners at all levels is the review of the exceptional needs process, as well as strategic planning of equity and

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inclusion, informed by data and led by collaborative working between school leaders and Education Support Officers. School leaders and ESOs reported this is leading to robust review and assessment of service provision. This is further supported by Principal Teachers of Equity (PTs Equity).

School leaders, Education Support Officers (ESOs) & Principal Teachers of Equity (PTs Equity) evidenced that the use of the new Equity Trackers is strongly supporting development of data driven approaches to raising attainment and ensuring targeted intervention for those most in need. This has been supported by ESOs providing support on provision and the use of attendance codes to ensure data entering the system is accurate. Further work is underway in developing the referral process within schools and this is being supported by a working group encompassing school leaders, ESOs and multi-agency groups.

Through focus group discussions, it was evidenced that school leaders recognised the potential for wider engagement from school staff in the self-improving schools system.

Next Steps:

Focus group discussion with senior leaders evidenced that they recognise a natural development would also be to create more opportunities for middle leaders, teachers and support staff to share and learn from each other through ASGs and STGs. Consideration should also be given to how the STGs and ASGs could be utilised to share practice and further develop transition at each of the key stages (ELC-P1, P7-S1 & S3-S4).

The team identified through visits and focus group activities that there is scope to strengthen work in Early Years particularly with funded providers and to further increase the ownership and accountability of Head Teachers in Early Learning and Childcare.

There was agreement with the service's own self-evaluation that children and young people should be more involved in shaping service improvement, and this is featured in the Education Service improvement priorities for Session 24/25.

The remit of the Pedagogy Team should be reviewed in the light of changes to its structure. Clearly defined outcome measures should be clarified for the session ahead.

Reflection on the process

The collaborative improvement process has been extremely beneficial to the Education Service. In general terms the Collaborative Improvement team agreed with the service's own self-evaluation including the next steps identified. There were however areas that the service had not yet considered in detail, and the team gave valuable insights into specific areas that have provoked further discussion and planning.

It was a privilege to have a team of professionals in our authority for three days, focussing their valuable time on this area of our service to support our continuous improvement. We benefited greatly from their insight and have made connections that will continue to be of mutual support and challenge.

What will happen next?

This report will be shared at a Head Teacher Development Day, with the central team and at Education and Children's Services Committee.

Areas for further development and next steps will be considered along with our own self-evaluation for inclusion in our service priorities for Session 2024/25 and beyond.

