# Introduction: What is collaborative improvement?

The aim of Collaborative Improvement is to share what works well at a local authority level and to support improvement in areas of local authority activity that have been identified as in need of further development. Collaborative Improvement aims to promote partnership working and collaboration to ensure that we achieve sustainable improvements for all children, young people, and their families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. All local authorities face different challenges. If we are to achieve the national vision of excellence and equity, working together as a collective can help address specific challenges; address unnecessary variability in outcome; promote a self-improving and empowered system and stimulate collaborative and collegiate working across the system.

# Context

The Dumfries and Galloway Council area is 6426 km2 and is the third largest council area in Scotland. At the time of the Collaborative Improvement there was a total of 94 Primary Schools, 16 Secondary Schools​ and one Specialist School​, led by 75 Headteachers of whom 23 Headteachers were appointed in the last 18 months.

Dumfries and Galloway Council are committed to providing a good start in life for all, and to give all children and young people an equal chance to make the most of their potential. That means a commitment to improving outcomes in attainment, closing the attainment gap, supporting the health and wellbeing of all children and young people, and improving employability skills as well as securing a sustained, positive school leaver destination for all.

# Rationale: Area of focus

In April 2024, the Schools Service within the, Education, Skills and Community Wellbeing Directorate of Dumfries and Galloway Council, in partnership with ADES and Education Scotland (ES), undertook a Collaborative Improvement Review to consider and reflect on the extent to which key aspects of quality assurance procedures and headteacher empowerment could help build on the overall attainment picture. Through discussion and in consultation with ADES/ES, colleagues agreed an area of focus to frame the Collaborative Improvement Review:

‘To what extent has the revised D&G approach to the Quality Assurance and Raising Attainment Strategy as described through the Framework for Improvement, provided a basis for a practical/cultural shift that builds Headteacher Capacity in delivering School Improvement.’

The area of focus was explored through 3 questions:

* Have we got our WHY right - How good are we at evaluating?
* Have we got our WHAT and HOW right?
* What’s our capacity for improvement?

Each of the above questions were explored through context setting and associated overarching self-evaluation documentation, focus group discussions and the provision of relevant evidence.

# Methodology

A team including the Assistant Director, Schools (Chief Education Officer), and the Quality Improvement Manager, Schools, Quality and Curriculum alongside ADES and Education Scotland were brought together to discuss the scope, ethos, process, and outcomes prior to the start of the engagement. In advance of the scoping meeting, Dumfries & Galloway colleagues prepared and distributed the Revised Strategy: Framework for Improvement. The visit was coordinated by an ADES officer and a Senior Regional Adviser from Education Scotland working with the Assistant Director and the Quality Improvement Manager in Dumfries and Galloway. In addition, the team for the Collaborative Improvement Review visit included 3 members representing ADES who were all senior managers in Clackmannanshire, East Ayrshire, and Midlothian and 3 representatives from Education Scotland.

The visit was conducted over 2 ½ days with a scoping meeting and presentation by the Assistant Director and the Quality Improvement Manager, to set the scene and context. The scoping meeting was broken down into 3 parts: background, data, and the journey from the vision to the refreshed strategy. The meeting enabled the Assistant Director and the Quality Improvement Manager to present a range of key information in an open and transparent manner to share high level messages focussed on the why, the how and the what, and the capacity for improvement.

ADES and Education Scotland leads set out the process, ethos and intended outcomes for the full team. All members of the visiting team were given access to information to evidence progress to date and highlight capacity for improvement. Across 2 days, 16 focus groups took place, consisting of Senior Managers, Education, Skills and Community Wellbeing Directorate, Resources Managers and staff, Schools Managers, Quality and Curriculum (QAC) staff including PTs of Inclusive Practice, and Headteachers from Dumfries and Galloway. These groups were facilitated by Education Scotland and ADES/local authority colleagues. Most attendees joined the focus groups in-person with a small number attending online. Groups consisted of a spread of the directorate including Headteachers from varying contexts across the authority with a focus on either:

Question Set A

* Has there been a shift in the sense of purpose of the Quality and Curriculum (QAC) service?
* Is there a sense of purpose and team?
* The QAC team has a clear strategy for the delivering quality assurance and for raising attainment, this is called the Framework for Improvement, to what extent are you aware of the document and its contents?
* To what extent does the QAC team provide clear guidance on this strategy to schools and centres?
* Previously, there was a lack of coordination in the approach of the QAC team - schools could have a very different experience from one another.  To what extent is there a more coordinated approach in place now? Impact?
* Previously, in some cases, the school Education Officer was the one point of contact for Headteachers.  Has this changed? If so, how?
* Each Quality Improvement Officer (QIO) has a number of allocated schools and is also responsible as lead for an area of strategic development.   To what extent are we getting the balance right?
* Has the QAC team been effective in building capacity in Headteachers. Does the strategy offer a way to increase this?

Question Set B

* Has there been a shift in the sense of purpose of the Quality and Curriculum (QAC) service?
* Is there a sense of purpose and team?
* The QAC team has a clear strategy for the delivering quality assurance and for raising attainment, this is called the Framework for Improvement, to what extent are you aware of the document and its contents?
* To what extent does the QAC team provide clear guidance on this strategy to schools and centres?
* Has the QAC team been effective in building capacity in Headteachers. Does the strategy offer a way to increase this?
* Previously, there was a lack of coordination in the approach of the QAC team - schools could have a very different experience from one another.  To what extent is there a more coordinated approach in place now? Impact?
* Each Quality Improvement Officer (QIO) has a number of allocated schools and is also responsible as lead for an area of strategic development.  Are you aware of the strategic areas of work?  To what extent are we getting the balance right?
* Previously, in some cases, the school Education Officer was the one point of contact for Headteachers.  Has this changed? If so, how?
* To what extent do you see the strategy/framework as a live document which is being reflected on an ongoing basis.

The agreed set of questions was used for each focus group meeting with inbuilt flexibility to respond to and explore points raised. Discussions developed organically to encompass other relevant themes out with the original area of focus. Each focus group reflected on have the QAC team got the WHY right, have the team got the WHAT and HOW right and what is the capacity for improvement?

At the end of each day a team discussion took place with sharing of information and an opportunity for clarification. Recording sheets from each focus group were collated and shared with the team to form the basis of feedback discussions or to explore any gaps in the information.

At the end of the 2½ day visit, the visiting team, the Assistant Director, Schools, and the Quality Improvement Manager engaged in a robust discussion to share and explore key findings and establish next steps.

# Key Findings

The feedback session held at the end of the 2½ day visit highlighted the key strengths and gave answer to the questions, have we got our WHY right? have we got our WHAT and HOW right and what is our capacity for improvement?

## Key Strengths

* The Assistant Director and the Quality Improvement Manager demonstrated a strong understanding of the rationale for change and the need to move away from a traditional compliance model with an over emphasis on empowerment at schools’ level as opposed to a genuine professional partnership between the directorate and schools.
* There is a positivity about the energy of the Quality and Curriculum (QAC) Team and a perception that that renewed focus on Quality Assurance & Raising Attainment was relevant.
* The decision to focus on the core issues of Quality Assurance & Raising Attainment had been made in response to need.
* The review of QAC remits, roles and responsibilities had created an opportunity to refresh the quality of engagement with Headteachers and Schools.
* Headteachers welcomed the new Quality Assurance & Raising Attainment model as it applied to school visits – specific mention made re the format of visits including the Term 3 visits and the introduction of learning walks.

## Have we got our WHY right? - How good are we at evaluating?

There was agreement that the focus on quality assurance and raising attainment reflects the current needs of the local authority. The challenge for the Quality and Curriculum team is that the implementation of the new strategy is at an early stage and requires to be fully embedded and implemented at school level. This will require active input and engagement by Headteachers to ensure that all schools are involved in the journey as equal partners.

## Have we got our WHAT and HOW right?

The Framework for Improvement is in its infancy. The challenge will be to ensure that all staff have ownership of the strategy and are involved in the next iteration.  There is an opportunity to revisit the strategy with a view to creating 2 documents to reflect the local authority’s priorities:

* Quality Assurance Framework - across all levels of the system
* Raising Attainment Strategy to incorporate sections on Learning, Teaching and Assessment.

## What is our capacity for improvement?

There is capacity for improvement within Quality and Curriculum Team. The strategy paper is a work in progress.

# Key Areas for Improvement

* Data analysis is not consistently well used, applied, or understood. Data should be shared across schools and setting to inform, debate and raise awareness of wider performance issues.
* Tracking and monitoring is not consistent across schools, and this has a direct impact on attainment and progress in learning. Careful consideration will be required to ensure that this is used across the local authority. This would simplify the work of the Quality and Curriculum Team.
* Communication approaches should be reviewed to ensure that Headteachers do not feel overwhelmed.
* The traditional model of empowerment and delegated responsibility at school level is changing and Headteachers must be involved in the process as agents of change so that they have ownership. The future direction of travel should be set out by the directorate but placing a greater focus on collaborative working and shared leadership to ensure consistency of practice across early years settings, primary and secondary schools. The authority should make explicit reference to:
  + The baseline standards expected of schools regarding improvement and performance.
  + What constitutes a successful inspection in term of outcomes and evaluations? Is ‘satisfactory’ acceptable? Is ‘good’ good enough for the children and young people of D&G?
  + Policies to be revisited in partnership with headteacher, providing a clear focus on the authority’s standards and expectations.
* The authority should continue to develop the moderation approaches used to analyse School Improvement Plans (SIPs) as well as Standards and Quality Reports (SQRs) and provide feedback to schools.
* There is further scope to involve Headteachers in presenting information to Elected Members, colleagues, and committees on aspects such as performance, attainment, and self-evaluation.

# Next Steps

Dumfries and Galloway, Education, Skills, and Community Wellbeing Directorate will use Scottish Approach to Service Deign to deliver scenario planning activities in relation to Quality Assurance & Raising Attainment using the key questions:

* Where do we want to be in 3 years?
* What steps do we need to take to get there?

This will involve all Headteachers and could be extended to include other school staff. This would create an agreed/shared route map to address the issues highlighted.

# Conclusion

The collaborative improvement programme has provided Dumfries and Galloway, Education, Skills and Community Wellbeing Directorate with validation and very valuable and meaningful feedback on strengths and areas for development. Education Scotland locality team will continue to work alongside the Assistant Director and the Quality Improvement Manager to support the delivery of key actions. The Assistant Director and the Quality Improvement Manager will follow up engagement with colleagues from other local authorities and further collaborate on key areas of improvement.

The Collaborate Improvement Review has also strengthened the partnerships with Education Scotland and ADES colleagues and laid the foundations for future collaboration. This collaboration will extend to school leaders working with other colleagues in the local authorities with whom this programme was undertaken.