Collaborative Improvement

Draft Final Report 2025
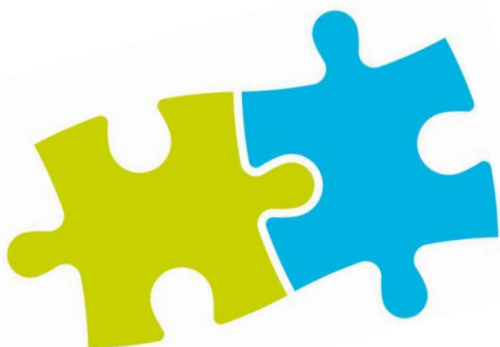
Introduction

Scotland's first ever national Collaborative Improvement (CI) programme was supported by the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) and Education Scotland (ES), both ES and HMIe, and took place across all thirty two local authorities over a 3 year period from 2021-2024.

The programme was consistent with key recommendations to the Scottish education system from external perspectives, including the OECD and the International Council of Education Advisors. The OECD (2024: p.39) recommended that Scotland should:

"Continue efforts to strengthen self-evaluation at all levels of the system"

It also noted that "(T)he potential of…inter-authority collaboration has been demonstrated by the Collaborative Improvement initiative" (OECD, 2024: p30). Two previous reports: An Interim Review of Collaborative improvement (August 2022) and Progress Report of the Programme of Collaborative Improvement (September 2023) were completed to outline the purpose and process of this National Collaborative Improvement activity. In summary the CI work involved a team of around eight/ten members from within the local education authority and external members from ADES and ES to bring a more robust review of an aspect of work in the local education authority. The focus of the CI visit would be agreed, and the CI team would then work with the host local education authority to offer support, advice and challenge designed to lead to improvement.

Although the CI visit was intended to benefit and improve outcomes in the host local authority it also served as a meaningful professional learning experience for all members on the team with many further pieces of collaborative work happening as a result of the initial CI visit thus strengthening the development of a national networked learning system.

All thirty two local education authorities recorded their visit identifying strengths and areas for improvement in the form of a report that was made publicly available. The collaborative Improvement process evolved significantly over the 3 year period and has now developed into a more structured process using data and a Framework for Improvement based on the QMIE 2 materials previously used for local education authority inspection. This work now links 4 local authorities with similar characteristics, based on their LGBF family groups that are referred to as Quads and takes learning from the original CI work.
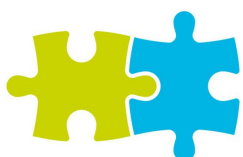
The OECD (2024) has noted that "(I)n recent years, there has been a significant increase in the collaboration between actors at all levels of the Scottish education system. This includes school-to-school collaboration and networking, which has shown to be effective in enhancing the capacity and reducing the isolation of schools" (OECD, 2024: p26).The OECD also highlighted the positive perceptions of the Collaborative Improvement programme at that point in time, noting that:

"(T)he CI initiative has been well received by the 32 local authorities, all of which have joined the programme. The CI support process is designed to benefit the host authority through direct support, while also serving as a professional learning experience for the participating volunteers, who can share the good practices they observed within their organisation or local authorities" (OECD, 2024: p22).

The programme also resonated with key insights into the value and necessity of networked learning systems, 'leadership from the middle', collaboration, and self-evaluation.

Fullan (2008) describes the necessity of "generating collaborative and collective leadership with a common focus on learning and on the policies and strategies necessary for sustainable development".

This is the third and final evaluation report linked to the Collaborative Improvement (CI) initiative. It sets out findings from a survey of Programme participants, and a focus group of participants and officials who supported the Programme at various stages. It also provides a number of case studies from participating local authorities that reflect on their experience of the programme.

The report also presents some considerations on how the key lessons learned from the CI Programme might inform the ongoing development of the self-evaluation framework and associated Quads activities from Spring 2025.
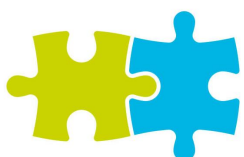
Survey results February 2025

Survey data had previously been gathered from CI Programme participants and presented in the pilot and interim reviews noted previously. The final survey took place towards the end of 2024 to capture the views of participants in the final tranche of CIs up to the end of the programme in October 2024. In total 13 participants completed the final survey, comprising 9 local authority employed personnel and 4 from Education Scotland.

The survey followed a similar format to the previous ones, to allow for a degree of comparability between the different 'cohorts' of participants across the pilot, interim and final phases. Table 1 below provides a helpful visualisation of the results from the final survey; broadly speaking, the green and yellow bars reflect positive dispositions towards different aspects of the CI process, while red and amber reflect negative perceptions. With this in mind, it is apparent that most aspects of the process were viewed very positively. This is in line with the previous survey findings. Particularly strong perceptions were associated with the enjoyment factor of participating; the benefits accruing to organisations that participated; and the inherent value of the CI process/the need to continue this kind of work. Strong positive feedback was also provided for practical and organisation aspects of the CIs, the extent of openness and honesty in the discussions, and the potential for positive outcomes from the process – for participants, learners and organisations. The less positive responses equated to 1 or 2 participants only who reported strong disagreement across the range of possible responses.

Table 1: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (*n=13*)

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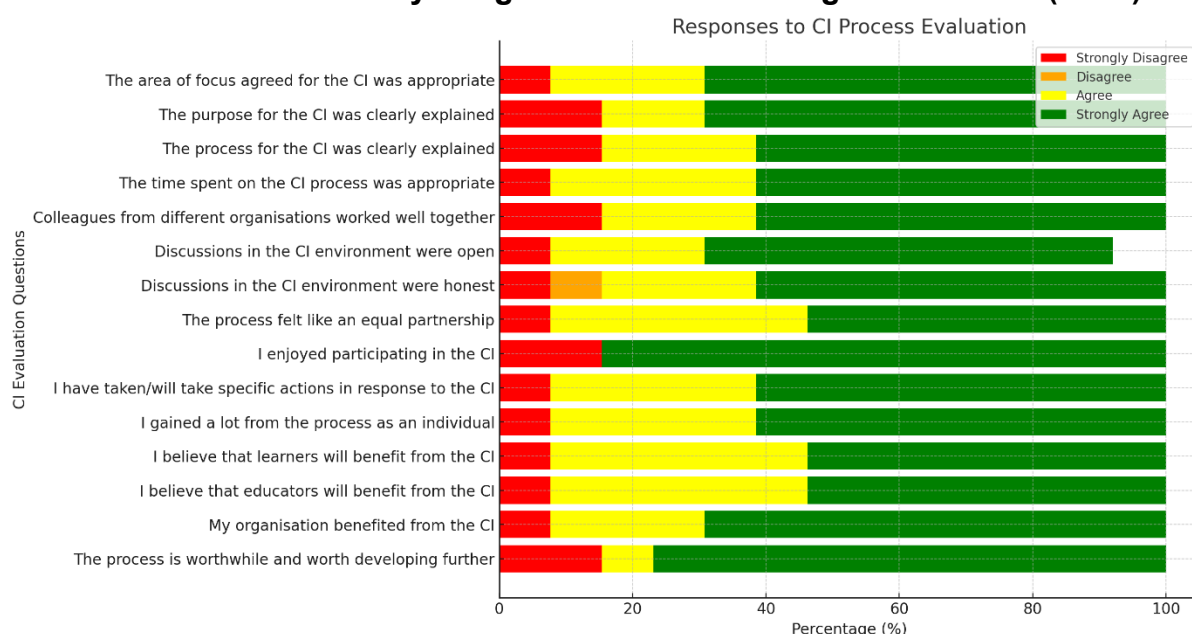
Survey participants were also able to provide open comments that further elaborated on their perceptions of the process. There was a recognition that working together strengthened problem-solving efforts and supported national priorities like raising attainment and equity in education.

The process encouraged professional discussions and self-reflection, helping local authorities evaluate their progress and identify next steps. Participants appreciated having a supportive but constructively critical space for discussions. The CI process created a space for open, honest discussions, enabling critical reflection and external scrutiny.

Many felt it provided a platform for sharing diverse experiences and perspectives, strengthening connections across organisations. Participants found the element of external validation especially valuable, helping to affirm their self-evaluations and next steps.

Responses highlight several key benefits of the CI process, including opportunities for collaboration, reflection, external scrutiny, and professional learning. Many participants emphasised the value of working with a diverse range of colleagues, fostering joint learning and collective problem-solving. Many appreciated the structured approach that allowed for in-depth exploration of key areas.

The CI process was widely seen as a valuable professional learning opportunity in its own right, and a means of driving meaningful change. The CIs increased awareness of LA processes and procedures, provided national perspectives, and contributed to participants' professional learning (PL).

Illustrative Quotes from survey respondents

> "The experience allowed me to connect with a wide range of educators, school leaders, and stakeholders, creating a strong sense of shared purpose and collaboration."

> "The opportunity to engage in meaningful collaboration with others and the clear, structured approach to identifying and addressing areas for improvement."

> "Sharing of expertise and analytical thinking; connections made across the wider education spectrum."
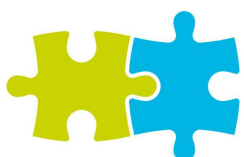
"It was a space where new approaches were not only encouraged but actively celebrated, which made the process feel energising and forward-thinking."

"Personally, I consider the CIs as one of the best CPD activities I have been privileged to be involved in."

"The opportunity to reflect on a significant piece of work, to share the work to date, and have others gather feedback from a wide range of key stakeholders has been powerful."

"The view of external partners about our skills framework and reassurance that the landscape is complex and that the direction of travel we were on was appropriate."

A limited number of the open comments reflected a more critical perspective, albeit often associated with constructive suggestions for improvements to the process. One participant for example suggested their CI would have benefited from wider involvement from other partners, particularly from CLD and ASN colleagues; this reflects the importance of achieving the right team composition, closely linked to the emerging theme for a CI, although in some instances the final core CI theme/questions only emerged late in the day due to a number of unavoidable factors.

Some participants felt that having LA representatives in the room while focus groups were conducted may have impacted on the honesty of responses from headteachers and practitioners. On the other hand, the majority of respondents noted that an atmosphere and ethos of openness and honesty largely prevailed.

While the CI process was seen by a significant majority of respondents as valuable and effective, some further areas for improvement were noted. First-time participants felt they would have benefited from pre-reading materials to better understand the process, key terms, and expectations. Some participants suggested that scheduling follow-up sessions would have helped to track progress and sustain improvement efforts. Some also felt that more time gathering stakeholder input before discussions would have helped to better define the area of focus. Some concerns were raised about overlapping efforts between CIs and the National Thematic Inspections (this would have impacted on some of the final CIs conducted later in 2024).

Focus group feedback

Participants

The Focus group took place in February 2025. The participants had collectively participated in a total of 21 CI visits in a range of different roles; including as Directors of Education, ADES Officers and ES Officers. HMI views were requested in writing as they were not able to attend the focus group.

Overall Feedback

It was felt that the CI model provided an improvement model with a focus on self-evaluation where people were being brave and honest as they built relationships and connections. It was a good opportunity for professional learning and showed signs of maturity in the system.

The process allowed for a wider knowledge of possibilities for improved outcomes for children and young people that was naturally developing a Networked Learning System and making connections that have continued beyond the CI visit.

Partnership was an important aspect but it was felt that the local ownership needs to be maintained to have the greatest impact. At times it was felt that there could have been more challenge from those external to the host local education authority.

The process facilitated a framework in which to develop relationships, and the model benefitted from not being top down but which instead drew on the strengths of the members of the teams. Where there was robust input from external members of the team it helped to improve approaches in local authorities that would lead to improved outcomes.

Learning from the CI Process

As the process matured it was important to amend and adapt to improve the whole process as the guidance was updated to ensure a consistent approach. Inclusion of an ADES Officer helped with consistency of approach and relationship building. The Interim review and report were helpful to ensure the process improved and a record was kept of what had changed and why.

The CI visit and subsequent reports written by the LA helped to have a sustainable model for self-evaluation that did not depend on using external staff to support improvement. Reports being public through local committee structures and on the ADES website were important for transparency, and local authorities were able to use the CI Reports when writing S and Q Reports.
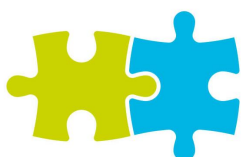
Collaboration only works effectively when adding value either at a local level or on a national basis. The external input helps avoid 'self-delusion' and brings about thoughtful challenge. Many local authorities now use a similar approach when looking at quality improvement/assurance and look outwards as required.

Actions Following CI Visits
In some local authorities there was evidence of impact on the area looked at by the CI team, for example a numeracy focus saw a subsequent positive impact on ACEL data. Some Educational Psychology services recognised the benefit of connecting collaboratively and are now working together following involvement in a CI visit.

A number of local authorities are now using the CI model for other QI/QA work in schools or thematically across the LA, for example through secondary school CI visits, and evaluating Learning and Teaching across a cluster.

CI Reports became part of local Improvement Plans to ensure continued progress and measurable impacts resulting from the CI visit.

The CI visits developed further appetite in many local authorities for collaboration across all partners involved in the visits, leading to a more developed and naturally occurring Networked Learning System. Several LAs have visited each other to learn from good practice as discussed as part of their CI team deliberations.
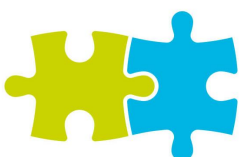
Conclusions

As noted previously, the ethos, principles, and broad approach established through the CI programme between 2021 and 2024 have been sustained into the ADES Quads work which commenced in 2024-2025. Key features from CI, including the emphasis on partnership working, the role of external validation and critical friendship, and the importance of openness and honesty, have been replicated in the Quads work. In addition to these features, the Quads initiative has placed robust self-evaluation at the heart of the work. While there was an element of this to varying degrees across the CIs, the self-evaluation aspect is now front and centre, with a detailed rubric and set of questions that all 32 local authorities have responded to prior to embarking on their Quads deliberations.

The perception that CIs did not always provide sufficient challenge has also been picked up upon, and again the new frameworks established for the Quads provide a more robust basis on which to challenge local authorities' policies, strategies and practices.

The Collaborative Improvement process has already made a significant contribution to enhancing system improvement across Scotland. It is focused on improving outcomes and experiences for our children and young people and recognises the capacity that exists across the key partners.

It has the potential to enable us to support the delivery of the vision set out by The International Council of Education Advisors in their 2018-20 report, and in particular, a more connected learning system, which refines practice, builds leadership capacity and delivers improvement for all learners.

The emergence of the Quads work may also help to mitigate some of the impacts of the discontinuation in funding for the Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) from April 2025. While some RICs intend to continue to pursue a more limited set of collaborative objectives and workstreams, it is evident that the resources will no longer be in place to support sustained collaborative activity at this level in the system. Therefore the Quads have the potential to develop new partnership structures, bound by affinity through the Local Government Benchmarking families rather than geographical proximity.

Importantly, there is now a widespread expectation that rigorous collaborative activities should be a natural part of the educational improvement landscape in Scotland.

Next steps and implications for the Quads work

The Survey and focus group respondents who were consulted for this report on the CI programme also reflected on some of the lessons learned from this that could help to shape the Quads work. They noted:

- Sometimes CI visits didn't appear to have enough of a framework or rigour to help drive improvement; however as noted above this has been addressed with the HGIOEA Framework developed by ADES for Quads.
- CI guidance was seen to be helpful; Quads guidance should be similarly brief and supportive.
- Reviewing both the CI guidance and process regularly, and adapting where necessary, was important, this iterative approach should be followed for the Quads work.
- The SRA role/link would benefit from having local SRAs involved in their own area visits along with re-introducing a link HMI for each area. This would allow ES and HMI to have in-depth knowledge of the local area that they support. Quads would welcome and benefit from more challenge, not just supportive conversations.
- The forthcoming updated HMI Inspection Framework should take account of the extensive work already undertaken in the Collaborative Improvement Programme and in the development and implementation of the HGIOEA Framework and Quad structures.
- The Education system has demonstrated an appetite for collaboration as noted throughout this report. It would further benefit from a shared approach to improvement through the Quads work that is based on a self-improving system, and supported by external input as appropriate.

References

Fullan, M. (2008) 'Education for Continuous Improvement'. Article for *Patio-Revista Pedagogica,* available at: Untitled Document
International Council of Education Advisers (2020) 'Report 2018-2020', available at: International Council of Education Advisers Report 2018-2020 - gov.scot
OECD (2024) *Enhancing Scotland's multi-level school improvement support system*. Education Policy Perspectives, No. 94.

Appendix 1: The Collaborative Improvement programme in summary

| Local Authority Area	Timetable of visits	Themes
Phase 1		
South Ayrshire	September 2021	Primary Attainment Gap
Fife	October 2021	Support for school improvement
Perth and Kinross	November 2021	Inclusion
Inverclyde	January 2022	Senior Phase
Clackmannanshire	February 2022	Data for Improvement
East Renfrewshire	March 2022	Numeracy and mathematics
Aberdeenshire	April 2022	Data for Improvement
Orkney, Shetland, Western Isles (1)	May 2022	Senior Phase
Glasgow	June 2022	Impact of learning community teams
Phase 2		
Scottish Borders	August 2022	Inclusion
South Lanarkshire	October 2022	Senior Phase Curriculum
Midlothian	November 2022	Senior Phase Curriculum
Dundee	January 2023	Senior Phase Curriculum
Moray	February 2023	Senior Phase Curriculum
Highland	March 2023	Quality Assurance
East Ayrshire	March 2023	Inclusion/HWB
City of Edinburgh	April 2023	Inclusion
Orkney, Shetland and Western Isles (2)	May 2023	Broad General Education
Renfrewshire	June 2023	Inclusion
Falkirk	August 2023	Empowerment
North Ayrshire	September 2023	Play Pedagogy
Aberdeen City	October 2023	Early Learning and Childcare
North Lanarkshire	November 2023	Inclusion
Phase 3		
East Dunbartonshire	January 2024	Leadership in Early Years
Argyll and Bute	February 2024	Attainment and Empowerment
East Lothian	March 2024	School Improvement
Dumfries and Galloway	April 2024	School Improvement
Orkney, Shetland and Western Isles (3)	May 2024	ASN
Stirling	June 2024	Inclusion
West Lothian	August 2024	Positive Destinations
West Dunbartonshire	September 2024	BGE into Senior Phase
Angus	November 2024	Learning and Teaching from P7 into S1

Appendix 2: Local Authority Case Studies

<u>West Lothian</u>

In September 2024, West Lothian Education Services and partners engaged in a Collaborative Improvement (CI) initiative. The initial planning phase ensured a clear purpose for the three-day CI event. The event itself was then sharply focused on our identified priority of improving Positive Destinations, involving discussions with relevant colleagues and partners to determine the next steps for making improvements. A drop in the council's positive destination figure initiated further analysis of the positive destinations data which revealed a high percentage of those in a negative destination had an identified Additional support Need (ASN) need or stayed in a lower Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) band. A working group was created in the local education authority with Education staff and partners to review this, look for supports moving forwards and create a strategic action plan. It was also agreed that having this as the focus for the CI would support this improvement journey.

The key question for the collaboration was: "To what extent do our existing partnership pathways ensure a positive destination for young people in mainstream schools with barriers to learning (poverty related barriers, Social, Emotional or Behavioural Needs (SEBN), Care-Experienced Children and Young People (CECYP) and anxiety)?" The 3-day event focussed on the areas of Partnerships, Data use, School based support and Developing the Young workforce, and Central support and challenge and was supported by West Lothian school staff, central officers and a range of partners.

The key to success throughout this work was the openness, transparency and honesty by everyone involved – very much focussed on improvement. The fact that the authority can choose the area of focus ensured that the process added value to an area we were very much working on – did not therefore feel it was a 'bolt on' or adding extra workload. It became integral to the work we were doing and challenges we were facing. It also provided further opportunity to explore authority partnership working as well as collaboration with other authorities and professionals. Perhaps it would be helpful to have had more external colleagues from CLD, ASN or social work? It was also helpful to have examples of how the days were structured from other LAs – and also helped clarify expectations.

Everyone from West Lothian felt very positive about the experience and appreciated the work and effort from external colleagues. It was extremely beneficial and we
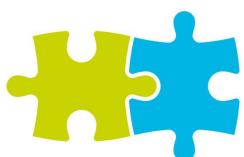
would look forward to building this into future aspects of our improvement work. Thank you!

ACTIONS/IMPACT:

- Strategic action plan was created for the working group which was based on validation of the areas of focus and intended actions by the collaboration. Ensured a sharpened focus, particularly at a time of change in structures and staffing for us.
- The shared vision for improvement in positive destinations became a higher priority for all partners within the local authority as a result of the shared collaborative experience, supported by external visitors.
- Often been able to reference back to the work that was undertaken at the collaboration as a reminder of the moral purpose of our improvement journey.
- Data impact below:

	2022-23	2023-24	Percentage point improvement
All pupils	94.1%	95.8%	1.7pp
Q1	88.6%	92.5%	3.9pp
ASN	89.5%	93.2%	3.7pp
LAC	71.4%	89.2%	17.8pp

East Lothian

The Collaborative Improvement in East Lothian focused on progress with creating a Self-Improving Schools' System. There was very positive feedback about where we're having the biggest impact, but the points for action were particularly helpful in affirming where we know we need to go next, and in sharpening our focus on how to ensure continuous improvement. This led to very productive, honest and formative discussion within the team about next steps.

The CI feedback encouraged us to have uncomfortable conversations about progress and next steps to an extent that would have been less impactful had there not been challenge in a collaborative approach including from external stakeholders. To that end, change has probably happened more quickly than it might have done. Following the CI visit we reflected on the accuracy of local authority attainment data - while a strong improvement system had been developed, a significant shift in attainment was not yet evident and this was fully discussed and explored as part of the CI visit.

The moderation and robustness of teacher judgements was therefore identified as a priority area and will continue to be the focus as an explicit priority in our Education Progress and Improvement Plan and has protected time under the Working Time Agreement. The work on asset-based moderation is being led by a Head Teacher with middle leaders supporting to continue building leadership capacity within East Lothian. By the time of our Thematic Inspection in September 2024 (the CI was in March 2024) HMIE commented that 'There is evidence that improvements in attainment in some areas are beginning to be made.'

The CI visit also identified that all improvement projects and interventions should be understood by staff who also understand the use of planned measurable outcomes, backed up by robust monitoring and tracking of data at all levels of the system. A Headteacher Development Session on evaluative writing, including the formulation of measurable outcomes and related evidence gathering and reporting was held. This work will inform the next improvement planning cycle, and Headteachers will now cascade their knowledge to their SLTs.

QIOs have delivered training to school staff on tracking and monitoring and the use of the SEEMIS Progress and Achievement module, specifically the use of East Lothian specific developments to ensure the robustness of the data being entered in tracking windows. These tracking windows support the output of a report which allows Head Teachers/ SLT to have more specific challenge discussions with teachers on where progress requires improvement.

Following this feedback on tracking, moderation and quality assurance, we reflected on whether or not Service Level Agreements for schools were explicit enough about expectations, and consequently they have been strengthened. Specific training needs with regards to assessment, moderation and quality of teacher judgements have been planned in advance with follow-up dialogue where related improvements have not been evident.

Perth and Kinross (PKC)

In November 2021 PKC engaged in the third cycle of collaborative improvement. Five representatives from both Education Scotland and ADES were identified to work alongside Perth and Kinross Council Education Service colleagues to form the Collaborative Improvement Team. The theme of our CI was Inclusive Practice-framed around what we identified as the three "C"s of culture; capacity and continuum of support. We were hugely grateful for the support of colleagues from Glasgow City Council; South Ayrshire and South Lanarkshire Councils.

The actions taken forward from this exercise came under three broad headings: leadership; learning, teaching and assessment and curriculum. Some actions that were planned and have successfully been implemented from the collaborative improvement include:

- implementation of a Validated Self Evaluation framework in Secondary Schools in session 22-23 with a range of subsequent recommendations and actions.
- completion of a review of our Quality Improvement Framework which was implemented in session 23-24.
- supporting improvement through implementation science and improvement methodology. Further development of the use of data and analysis will ensure sustainable, locally embedded change.
- good examples of better partnership working with the 3rd sector to support positive engagement and improved practice for young people and families
- create more learner-centred classrooms through implementation of CIRCLE and a whole school nurture programme in all schools

The most significant outcome from the experience however was the creation of a five year transformation project around Inclusion. We are currently in year two of the project and amongst other actions have: revised our staged intervention framework and associated processes; worked with property colleagues on creating more inclusive learning environments as part of our capital spend and increased the number of intensive support provisions making them available in all localities. Further work is planned and ongoing.

East Renfrewshire

The ADES approach to Collaborative Improvement supported the East Renfewshire Education Department and schools to reflect on our practice, look outwards and learn from other LAs across Scotland. The team focused on evaluating '*How effective is the Education Department at ensuring the numeracy and mathematics strategy results in improved experiences and outcomes for all learners?'*.

The Collaborative Improvement process had a number of benefits including:
- Enhanced our existing approaches to improvement, building on our own self-evaluation and evidence, ensuring that the ownership of the process remained with the Department;
- Clear framework which ensured the process was rigorous and challenging whilst not requiring burdensome preparation;
- Flexibility of the process allowed us to modify the approach adopting by the ADES pilot models, ensuring it was appropriate for our context and added value;
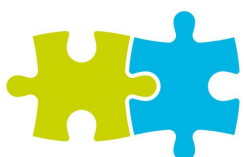
- The model was a very effective way of sharing learning and promoting partnership working across LAs and schools; as an authority we have continued to follow-up and share practice with one LA during 2022-23.
- Support by ADES and other external team members, was excellent; this enabled the process to go smoothly. It also created the right environment which supported open, honest dialogue; this was key in providing the right balance in terms of support and challenge;
- Input from Education Scotland supported our approach sharing key research finding and learning from inspections in numeracy and mathematics – this enhanced the overall process and future practice; and,
- Supported the authority in evaluating the key questions, establishing key strengths and next steps in numeracy and mathematics and producing a refreshed strategy.
- The Table below provides a snapshot of progress in P1, P4 and P7 Numeracy following the CI programme in East Renfrewshire Council.
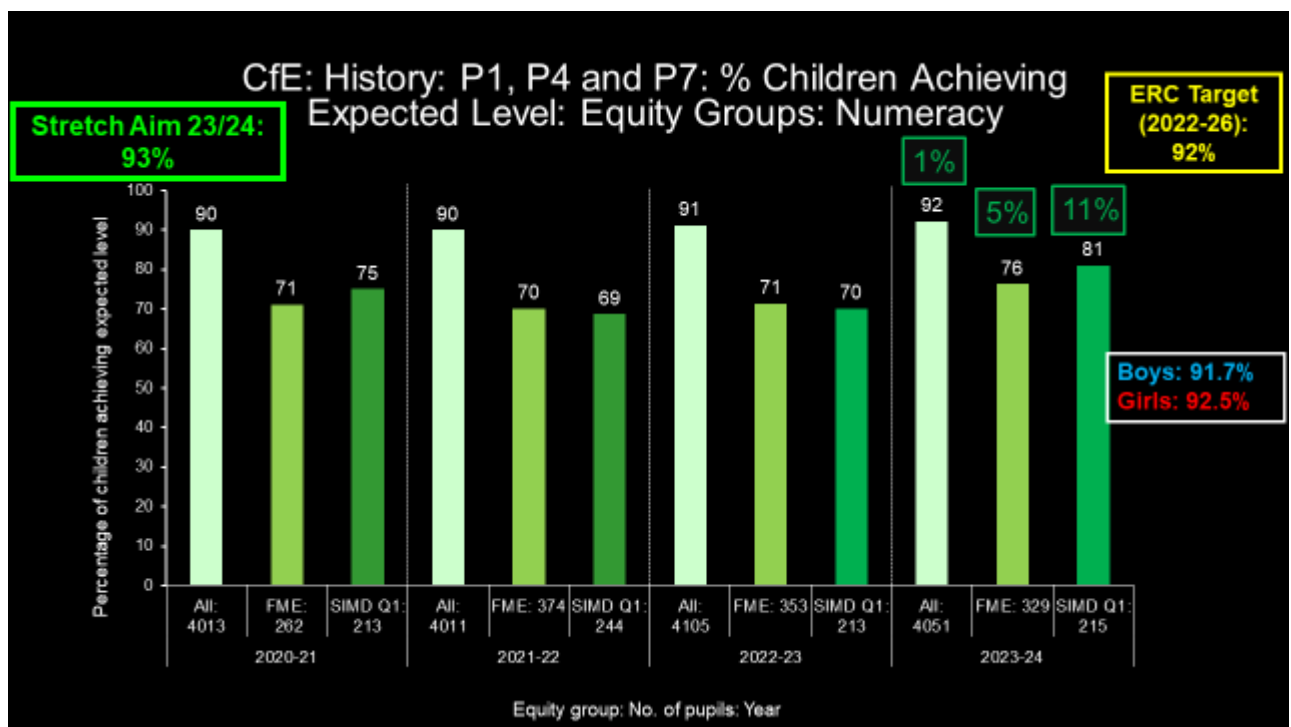
As a result of our participation in the Collaborative Improvement process we have reviewed our approaches to quality improvement and adopted a similar approach to authority reviews at a school or cluster level. An updated model was put in place last session, with very positive feedback from stakeholders.

In addition, we are planning to adopt a collaborative improvement approach for our review of Literacy which is taking place during 2023-24.