

Education Scotland / ADES – Collaborative Improvement

Aberdeen City - November 2023

What is collaborative improvement?

Based on the recommendations from the 2015 OECD report, the Education Reform Joint Agreement published in June 2018 had one of its key principles as ‘effective system-wide improvement requires strong leadership, collaborative working and clarity of purpose at all layers of the system – school, local, regional and national.’ To take this forward ADES (the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland) and Education Scotland have developed a Collaborative Improvement (CI) model.

The model is resourced by an ADES Officer acting as coordinator. The coordinator secures the release of senior colleagues from some of Scotland’s 32 Local Authorities whilst Education Scotland identify a team of Inspectors and Officers to join the peer review team. Over the Collaborative Improvement visit the team work with the host Local Authority to explore a key question of the host Local Authority’s choosing. In real terms, CI enables an individual Local Authority to identify an area for further exploration based on their own self-evaluation and then benefit from an objective 3 day peer assessment of what is working well and what may require further focus.

The focus of the Aberdeen City Collaborative Improvement Visit

Given the variation in Early Learning and Childcare inspection outcomes and inclusion of our work to improve early years practice within the National Improvement Framework Plan and Children’s Services Plan, the team was asked to explore if current systems in place to secure improvement across Early Learning and Childcare settings are sufficiently robust.

The Education Service presented an updated ELC Quality Improvement Framework to the Education and Children’s Services Committee in June 2023. The service’s own self-evaluation had determined that early gains were evident but that some variation remains as the framework is being implemented. As a result, the service was keen to explore if it could do anything further to realise more accelerated improvement and the following key question was posed:

“To what extent does our engagement with ELC managers/leaders empower staff at all levels to improve outcomes for children and their families?”

The Chief Education Officer designed a programme to enable members of the Collaborative Improvement team to explore four themes thought related to the key question. The four themes were:

- Is the purpose of our engagement with Managers/Leads understood and does this impact outcomes for children and families?
- How effective is our sharing of best practice with managers and leaders at influencing change within your setting?
- How do managers/leaders empower their staff at all levels to improve outcomes for children and families?
- How effective are approaches to strengthening management and leadership skills within our ELC settings and how does this inform change?

The Collaborative Improvement visit took place over three days in November 2023 and was supported by an extensive team including:

- Executive Officer – ADES
- Senior Regional Advisor (Education Scotland Northern Team)
- 2 Attainment Advisors (Education Scotland Northern Team)
- Senior HM Inspector from Education Scotland
- Early Years lead Education Scotland
- Executive Director - Education & Children's Services
- 2 senior leaders with responsibility for ELC from local authorities

Team members engaged in a series of focus groups designed to explore each of the themes, visited 8 ELC 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?

The Collaborative Improvement Team (CIT) recognised the commitment of Local Authority senior leaders to realise high quality ELC provision and endorsed the ambitious aims of the ELC expansion programme believing that the Plan is likely to improve outcomes in the longer term. The establishment of a wider range of roles and development of a clear workforce progression pathway as part of the expansion programme was thought to be particularly impactful. The CIT saw clear evidence of both Support Workers and Modern Apprentices seizing opportunities to further their skills and qualifications in order to secure positions with more responsibility. The team identified that the public health restrictions in place at the time 1140 was fully implemented will have contributed to the variation currently being experienced.

The CIT endorsed the arrangements in place to reset expectations and standards and validated the approaches being taken to identify the level of support required in each setting. The enthusiasm of motivated ELC staff (including Locality Leads) was noted with many staff able to describe aspects of best practice and demonstrating a strong desire to share their work with others.

ELC staff benefit from the fortnightly newsletter and remain committed to participating in professional learning. The provider neutral approach taken to the majority of professional learning made available was noted as positive. Networking opportunities provided through the management and leadership programme are highly valued by participants. Opportunities for other staff to network are in the early stages of implementation.

The Locality Leads work well together and have a clear sense of expected standards. Good relationships between Locality Leads and staff within ELC settings is evident in most cases. Where this is the case, staff in settings feel that the Locality Leads provide high quality support which is responsive to their needs. Quality assurance conversations have a strong focus on outcomes for children and arrangements now have more rigour.

The CIT validated the evaluation of senior leaders that poor inspection outcomes are most likely where accountability is unclear. Where accountability is clear, confident staff work as a team and utilise staffing resource to ensure that the team can meet to progress areas identified for improvement and feel empowered and motivated to drive change from within. Some settings clarify responsibilities through visual cues and verbal briefings and this contributes to the effective leadership from Senior Early Years Practitioners. Consistent features of high quality settings visited include the Head Teacher/centre manager having regular contact with the ELC team, ELC viewed as integral to the school community with distinct quality assurance arrangements, positive links with partners, high quality communication with parents and a strong sense of team work contributing to a shared desire to secure improvement in both formal and informal ways.

Almost all staff (practitioners, senior leaders, apprentices, and support workers) demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement and confidently articulate the ways in which they are empowered to lead improvement. The most significant improvement is secured when there is a sense of partnership in leading change through a combination of aspects identified by leaders, staff, and central staff and when messages from setting management and central officers are fully aligned.

In some cases, ELC staff are now effectively supporting staff working in the early stages of primary school to develop play pedagogy.

Highly effective seniors empower their staff by providing positive feedback which builds on strengths and encourages leadership at all levels. They lead solution focussed team meetings and use periods with fewer children to drive improvements. Clear agreements on how paperwork is most effectively completed is in place in these settings. In a few cases the senior is helping to set the agenda for meetings with the Locality Leads and the Locality Leads validate evaluations made by ELC teams.

Recent manager meetings are proving to be a valuable forum for discussion, the sharing of best practice and helping upskill school leaders on expectations. Managers welcome the opportunity to help set agendas for future meetings. Many spoke positively about the use of e-books to record their improvement journey.

Work is in progress but could be further developed

Clear information on roles and responsibilities is in place. However, in a few cases, staff report a lack of clarity around the role of all staff working in ELC settings in driving improvement with responsibility deemed to lie with the Local Authority rather than the individual setting. There is a need to understand the overreliance on the central team in some cases and take action to ensure absolutely clarity. The CIT noted that recent work to address such issues had been successful. The anticipated new national framework could present an opportunity to review roles and responsibilities in the context of delivering against the revised standard and be well supported through a series of FAQs to support staff at different levels.

Some ELC teams are now making considerable progress and are better placed to come to their own solutions. Leaders (both school and Local Authority) should communicate their permission for teams to find their own solution and ensure that there are opportunities for regular face to face team dialogue by ensuring staff better

understand ratios to secure staff meeting time. There is a need to carefully consider how settings who are working at a higher level can be challenged by exploring practice nationally. Co-constructed examples of good to excellent practice shared through an interactive Aberdeen Standard could be considered and there could be benefits in aligning this with planned regional work.

Now that an increasing number of staff are demonstrating their knowledge of the standards expected, it could be helpful to establish a mechanism to enable ELC teams to directly inform the Local Authority professional learning offer both through on-going evaluation of the impact and therefore value of certificated and locally developed courses and through a regular audit of need.

Staff are benefiting from a range of visits to other settings. Staff teams should now be empowered to make approaches to visit other settings both within and beyond their ASG to share practice without the coordination of the central team. It is important that this is done in a way where staff continue to genuinely learn from other, similar, settings both local and national. There could be benefit from including SEYPs from ASG settings in quality assurance activity.

Given their distinct role, Support Workers could benefit from a Network to share ideas and access to a distinct package of professional learning around additional support needs to help them understand their role and responsibilities and help build capacity and capability further. This emerging Networks model should be accelerated.

The relationship between Quality Improvement Managers, Quality Improvement Officers and Locality Leads could be further strengthened to ensure consistent messaging. This should include consideration of how the Locality Lead reports their external evaluations in a consistent way to ensure that both school managers and seniors are able to engage with the feedback to limit miscommunication. The service has been running hard to address the variation issues, they should ensure that time is taken to reflect on progress more routinely.

New areas for development

It could be advantageous to include ELC staff more fully in setting local authority Plans and in driving improvement at local authority level and the central team should now resist providing solutions but instead commission a group of staff from across the city to progress work on behalf of others. A starting point for this work could be exploring paperwork given some perceptions that exist.

There is a need to think about on-line communication to ensure that the number of newsfeeds are kept to a minimum and that every opportunity is taken to empower staff.

Given that some registered Managers are unclear of their role, there is a need to design and implement a mandatory course for all registered Managers based on the current baseline and more routinely share data with them to effect improvement, including if improvement is maintained following intensive support.

There is a need to now share best practice around e-books and quality improvement processes to ensure a shared understanding of their purpose and a group from across the system should drive this work forward. This could be built upon further to consider

how progress through early level (particularly in literacy and numeracy) could be progressed by encouraging staff from across the system to work more closely together.

Consider expanding the use of trios during quality improvement visits to include more practitioners and consider the introduction of the role of the 'disruptor' to ensure there is always appropriate challenge.

Ask HT to clarify the budgets available to ELC Teams.

Reflection on the process

The collaborative improvement process has been exceptionally beneficial to the Education Service. In general terms the team has validated our own self-evaluation and endorsed our long term ambition. They have helpfully shared national best practice that can now be used to enhance our approaches and these areas will be taken forward with support from the team where beneficial. The team has also provided a helpful reminder to pause and take stock of how far many have come and guided us to start to consider arrangements to support good or very good settings to drive their own on-going journey to excellence.

What will happen next?

This report will be shared with the sector, at a HT meeting, with the central team and with the Education and Children's Services Committee.

Actions that can be taken forward with relative ease will be prioritised for completion by Easter 2024, other areas will be used to inform both the refresh of the Early Learning and Childcare Delivery Plan, refresh of the Children's Services Plan and the National Improvement Framework Plan for 2024/25.

The Education Service will engage with the ADES Officer and Education Scotland to secure on-going support in areas agreed with them.