Engaging parents and families

A toolkit for practitioners

Section 8: Community connections

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For Scotland's learners, with Scotland's educators

Contents

Background

This section provides an overview of the key national policies relating to developing and maintaining community connections. These policies provide the overarching framework and guidance within which local authorities, schools and practitioners should work.

Building capacity amongst practitioners to capitalise on untapped community assets is key to raising attainment, closing the poverty related attainment gap and maximising efforts to improve outcomes. There are a number of community partners and third sector organisations who already work with practitioners, parents and pupils in early learning and childcare (ELC) settings, schools on a range of areas and their contributions is invaluable. Some of the key benefits of collaborative working with communities and partners are outlined in the review of evidence in this section.

Christie Commission (2011)

The First Minister invited Dr Campbell Christie CBE to chair a Commission into the future delivery of public services in Scotland and the published report became known as the Christie Commission. The key message which emerged from the Christie Commission was that public services required urgent and sustained reform to enable them to be effective, sustainable and capable of meeting the challenges ahead.

Priorities identified in the Christie Commission include the designing and delivery of public services with and for people and communities rather than being delivered 'top down' to them. Utilising available resources from the public, private sector, third sector, individuals, groups and communities helps to maximise them. This is particularly important given that resources are in high demand and there is a shortage of supply. Understanding the needs of individuals and communities, working closely with them to maximise talents, resources, support self-reliance and build resilience was also identified as a priority in the Christie Commission (2011, pix). To take these priorities forward, a recommendation was made in the Christie Commission to embed community participation in the design and delivery of services within the Community Empowerment Bill.

Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act (2015)

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 focuses specifically on the promotion of effective engagement and participation to help communities achieve greater control and influence in the decisions and circumstances that affect their lives.

The National Standards for Community Engagement mentioned below, are key in supporting organisations to put the Community Empowerment Act into practice. The standards can be used to help shape the participation process of public bodies and influence how community organisations can involve wider community interests.

National Standards for Community Engagement (2016)

'Community engagement is a purposeful process which develops a working relationship between communities, community organisations and public and private bodies to help them to identify and act on community needs and ambitions. It involves respectful dialogue between everyone involved, aimed at improving understanding between them and taking joint action to achieve positive change'.

(National Standards for Community Engagement, 2016)

The National Standards for Community Engagement are good-practice principles designed to support and inform the process of community engagement and improve what happens as a result. Originally launched in 2005 and revised in 2015/16, they have since been used to support community engagement and user involvement in Scotland in areas such as community planning and health and social care.

The National Standards for Community Engagement have been widely accepted by a range of practitioners as key principles for effective practice. They are clear principles that describe the main elements of effective community engagement. They provide detailed performance statements that everyone involved can use to achieve the highest quality results and the greatest impact.

How good is the learning and development in our community? (2016)

The 'How Good is Our….Frameworks' are designed to promote effective self-evaluation as the first important stage in a process of achieving self-improvement. The 'How good is the learning and development in our community?' supports senior managers, local managers or practitioners working directly with young people, adults and community groups. At the heart of the document is a set of quality indicators and performance measures which will help practitioners identify the strengths in their practice and where further development is required. The frameworks contain illustrations, exemplar features of highly-effective practice and challenge questions. Practitioners at all levels, with a wide variety of different roles and responsibilities can use and adapt the frameworks. Consideration should also be given to the 'How good is our school?' (Fourth Edition), the 'How good is our early learning and childcare?' or the How Good is our Third Sector Organisation? for more information on self-evaluation.

Involving and engaging parents and community partners in self-evaluation and improvement planning is embedded throughout the frameworks. They should be used to support collaborative enquiry and interrogative approaches to self-evaluation to enable ELC settings and schools to develop a shared understanding of what to do next.

Education Governance: Next Steps (2017)

> 'Teachers are best placed, with support from communities and parents, to drive educational improvement for our children'.
>
> **(Governance Review Next Steps, 2017, p1)**

The focus of the Delivery Plan for Excellence and Equity (2016) is to close the attainment gap, ensure a curriculum that delivers, and empower teachers, schools and communities. An initial step towards this goal was for the Scottish Government to undertake a review which asked a number of questions about the governance of Scottish education. The analysis of the consultation responses to the governance review was published in June 2017.

Following on from this, the Education Governance: Next steps document was published. Within the 'Next steps' publication, the Scottish Government outlined the plans to deliver a school and teacher-led system and the subsequent actions which would empower teachers, practitioners, headteachers,

parents and communities to ensure that the vast majority of decisions that support learning and teaching are made at school level.

Place Standard

The Place Standard tool is a way of assessing places. Whether the place is well-established, undergoing change, or is still being planned, the tool can help practitioners take this forward. The Place Standard Tool provides a simple framework to structure conversation about place. It allows practitioners to think about the physical elements of a place (for example, its buildings, spaces and transport links) as well as the social aspects.

Further information can be found [here](#).

Research

'Community is an attitude and feeling of connectedness. When educators, parents, other citizens, and organisations work together to help students succeed, they strengthen the sense of community in and beyond the school'.

(Epstein, 2016, p611)

Why make community connections?

'Community' and its importance is viewed as 'the myriad of overlapping ways in which people come together through a common set of needs, both as communities of place and communities of interest' (Christie Commission, 2011, p30). Scotland has experienced an increased effort and drive towards achieving greater community engagement through new and innovative methods of participation. These have included social media campaigns, online surveys, focus groups, public meetings and discussions, participatory budgeting and community action research (Lightbody, 2017). ELC Settings and schools do not exist in isolation but rather they are a key part of a network of statutory, private sector and voluntary organisations which support and serve the local community (Welsh Government, 2015).

Community engagement features in a range of cross-cutting policy areas as well as in academic literature. Legislation and guidance on how to put community engagement into practice is provided through the Community Empowerment Act (2015) and the National Standards on Best Practice in Community Engagement (2016). The aim of community engagement is not only to have better participation but also to improve outcomes across a range of areas. Such collaboration across communities, individuals and service providers can therefore become 'important multidimensional partnerships' that 'generate wider benefits' and help build 'individual and community capacity' (Christie Commission, 2011, p33).

The approach taken by the Scottish Government reflects the key themes of the Christie Commission (2011) and is built on the four pillars of prevention, partnership, participation and performance. Planning, developing and delivering public services can be influenced through the strengths and assets of communities as well as public, private and third sector organisations. Establishing partnerships helps to develop relationships with communities and partners built on trust but it can take time, effort and resources (Bynner et al, 2017). The benefits of community engagement are viewed as not only helping to tackle deep-rooted social problems in communities but it also makes a 'real difference and can provide positive models for the future' (Christie Commission, 2011, pviii). Embracing a collaborative culture across public services can help prevent strains on budgets and provisions (Christie Commission, 2011).

Public services are most effective, provide best value for money, have more sustainable outcomes and higher levels of satisfaction for staff and users when designed and evaluated together in partnership. Working to extend and deepen a local partnership approach to build on existing community planning partnership models was a recommendation of the Christie Commission (2011). Developing and supporting community led solutions requires to be part of mainstream business as opposed to an occasional project or add-on. However, this remains an ongoing challenge particularly because of shifting resources, changing patterns of service delivery and the reassessing of professional roles and responsibilities (Scottish Government, 2011).

'Regardless of what brings communities together, they not only work towards the desired outcome, but the process itself increases community cohesion' (Christie Commission, 2011, p35). Disadvantaged and deprived communities may have less well-developed social networks and contacts than other stronger communities and they may need extra support to help them reach

their potential (Christie Commission, 2011). Nonetheless, working and involving communities in the design and delivery of services, behaviour change initiatives and solutions is a key priority. Practitioners and school leaders who do work in partnership together not only have a strong sense of professional identity but their systems become stronger (OECD, 2015).

Delivering high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive public services, where communities are at the heart, and which improves outcomes, remains a priority for the Scottish Government. Every school in Scotland will therefore require to have a teacher or professional who has responsibility for promoting parental, family and community engagement from 2019 onwards (Scottish Government, 2017).

Benefits of working with and making community connections are multi-faceted and include improvements across: attendance; behaviour; achievement; family engagement; learner health and wellbeing; support/resources/networks for the ELC setting/school; and positive community contributions.

Raising attainment

> 'If schools are to improve attainment they need to collaborate with the local community and with local partner organisations'.
>
> **(Scottish Government, 2017, p28)**

Major differences are made to a child or young person's outcomes not only through learning and teaching but also through the work ELC settings and schools undertake with families and communities (Scottish Government, 2017). Likewise, families, communities, partners, businesses, third sector groups, youth work, colleges and universities also have an important part to play in a child's lifelong learning journey. Given that learning does not start nor stop at the school gates, some of the factors that can influence a child or young person's outcomes can be in the family, community or in society (Cummings et al, 2011). Drawing on research by Epstein, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017a) (OECD) states that 'student learning is most effective when it is the result of a partnership between the school, teachers, parents and the community' (in Scottish Government 2017, p18; OECD 2015; Epstein 1995). Nonetheless, Epstein emphasises the importance of recognising that 'connections with the community do not take the place of connections with….families' (2016, p611).

Early learning and childcare settings and schools who engage families and communities as partners in education 'will be exerting a powerful lever through which to raise standards and improve learner wellbeing' (Welsh Government, 2015, p5). Community engagement is an essential tool to help narrow the poverty related attainment gap. Practitioners require to work with parents, partners and their community to identify and agree priorities for improvement planning. Account should therefore be taken of the relevant community planning partners at school, cluster and regional levels to help achieve collective and maximum impact. Community learning and development professionals should be an integral part of local improvement planning (Scottish Government, 2017). Furthermore, to ensure effective system-wide collaboration at a school level, it is necessary for partnerships to go beyond relationships with school leaders and engage with children, young people, families, teachers, partners and communities (Fullan and Munby, 2016). Making community connections to improve outcomes is a critical success factor to raising attainment and should be the purpose and focus of collaboration (Fullan and Munby, 2016).

Engaging with the wider community can bring positive influences across a range of areas. ELC settings and schools which 'actively engage the community in the life of the school and the school in the life of the community have positive impacts on educational outcomes. Community engagement contextualises learning, improves adult basic skills and provides positive role models' (Welsh Government, 2015, p4). Communities also have a vast range of opportunities which can help children and young people build skills and links with prospective employers (Governance Review, 2017). ELC settings and schools have a number of opportunities to tap into a considerable source of support to help strengthen their work as opposed to trying to shoulder this alone.

Building capacity

> 'Partnership and multi-agency arrangements are an essential component of a comprehensive strategy for parental engagement'.
>
> **(Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011)**

Building capacity within ELC settings and schools as opposed to further stretching practitioners who are already over-stretched should be a priority focus and desired outcome. Strategies to build capacity should be realistic in terms of what can be expected from the ELC setting/school/community used, especially given the demands on practitioners as well as in-work poverty and welfare reform (Bynner, 2016). Capacity building will vary in communities across Scotland and the potential to do so may be less obvious at the initial outset or even be lying dormant (Bynner, 2016).

The capacity of ELC settings and schools can be built and strengthened not only through additional resources but in the ways that learning and teaching can be enriched. Overcoming barriers to parental and family engagement can be achieved through working with community partners who have expertise, contacts and understanding of specific groups (Welsh Government, 2015). Being somewhat distanced from the ELC setting or school and having access to community venues can be an advantage for community partners in helping to break down barriers to engagement.

Community partners and the third sector can also offer professional support and expertise along with extra-curricular activities for children, young people and their families through their existing connections, resources and volunteering. Some of these offerings may not be readily available to ELC settings or schools. Additionally, third sector organisations can help ELC settings and schools to reach out to families that they might have less initial engagement with. ELC settings and schools can in turn also make a positive contribution to their local communities as well as to adult learning, family learning and therefore ultimately increase parental engagement in their child's education. Working with local businesses and community partners within the ELC setting or school's local area can provide opportunities for sponsorship, joint projects and sharing resources.

Partnership working with families and community partners may be new to some practitioners particularly where their professional training has previously focused on working with children rather than adults. Building capacity through a whole-school approach to family and community engagement may require an assessment of staff development needs to build on existing skills and provide the necessary training and support (Welsh Government, 2015). Practitioners may find the National Occupational Standards on 'Work with parents' or 'Engage with families in ways that encourage them to be involved with their children's learning and development' useful when taking this forward.

Co-production

> 'Co-production is a relationship where professionals and citizens share power to design, plan and deliver support together, recognising that both partners have vital contributions to make in order to improve quality of life for people and communities'.
>
> **(Slay and Penny, 2014)**

Empowering voices that are not heard is a key element in co-production as opposed to hearing more from those who are already powerful. The time required to build relationships with individuals and communities to understand their needs, maximise talents, resources, build relationships and resilience should not be underestimated.

Becoming outcome focused, integrated and collaborative, together with transparency, community driven and needs led, is highlighted as being essential to improving outcomes. Additionally, engaging with people, families, communities, organisations and the third sector is key to building capacity.

The vision for more participative, prevention oriented, outcome focused and equality driven public services can, according to the Scottish Community Development Centre, be achieved by 'building on existing community engagement through increased community capacity building' (in Christie Commission, 2011, p35). This will give practitioners and communities the skills and confidence to co-produce the design, delivery and evaluation of public services.

Place-based approaches

Place-based approaches are defined as 'public services working in partnership with each other, the third and business sectors and communities to plan, design, resource, build and deliver services around people, families and communities in the most disadvantaged communities to support them to improve their life opportunities and outcomes'.

(Improvement Service, 2016, p6)

Focusing on the community or 'place' as a 'magnet for partnership and as the basis for stronger community participation in the design and delivery of local services' is a key priority for the Scottish Government (2011, p10). 'Place' can mean 'a sense of home, of community and of a network of family, friends and colleagues' which combine to shape and define the lives of families and communities (Scottish Government, 2017, p4). Not only is there value in taking the 'fun, food, folk' approach, it can help 'boost a sense of community spirit (Bynner et al, 2017, p28).

The key to developing new and innovative place based approaches is best undertaken through 'learning from the past and evaluation of the present' (Bynner et al, 2017, p4). This may require a shift in approach from communities being viewed as recipients of services to being more equal partners in the process (Bynner et al, 2017). Reform in the shape of community connections and partnerships may require new 'institutional practices' and approaches by undertaking the task of 'de-institutionalising old ways of working' (Byner et al, 2017; Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004, p67).

Places can empower people and places can alienate people but regardless of which, everyone has a relationship to a place whether this be positive or negative (Bynner, 2016). This relationship provides the opportunity that can be capitalised to help bring about change through community connections. Furthermore, although it is important and necessary to involve parents, families and members of the community to make changes, consideration should also be given to utilising untapped resources through people who work in the local area as well.

What helps parents, practitioners and the local authority to work together?

'Parents often fear the worst. Honesty is important as the reality of a situation is often not as scary as what parents have been imagining.'

(Enquire, 2015)

People can work together most easily when the factors below are all present:

- **Issues:** People are working together on matters which they think are important.
- **Ways of working:** Respect and value each person's contribution. Being realistic in terms of the time and effort it takes. The process welcomes and encourages people who have less experience or confidence, as well as including the children and young people.
- **Getting results:** Working together gets results. People can see their effort has been worthwhile and that they have been listened to.
- **Involving the community:** Working with people outwith the school to contribute knowledge, skills and experiences.

Activity 1: Self-evaluation exercise

Purpose
To consider the community partners in your catchment area through a self-evaluation exercise.

The work and efforts of staff in community connections matters. Collaboration with and across professions is really important and key to raising attainment. Equally, building and establishing partnership working with people and members of the community who have 'lived experience' of the area can help with making community connections. Having face-to-face human contact cannot be taken for granted.

With other members of staff, the Parent Council, parent teacher association, family learning, community learning and development team, community representative or as part of a professional learning session - draw up a list of all the organisations, individuals and groups that staff or members of the school community are involved in or are aware of who might be interested or willing to work with the ELC setting or school. Then consider the questions below.

Reflective questions:

- Are there partners in your community who could help you deliver the improvement plan?
- Which potential partnerships do you wish to develop and build upon? Work through the list and discuss how the partnership with each is or could be working and how their role might be developed.
- How can you best utilise the services of your community partners to help you take forward the improvement plan?
- How do you understand, collate information and build upon the skills and expertise parents bring?
- Are community venues used for parent or family engagement events or parents' evenings to help break down identified barriers?

Activity 2: Developing community partnerships

Purpose
To develop community partnerships.

Reflective questions:

- Has your ELC setting or school developed links with higher and further education establishments (if appropriate) to encourage and inspire learners to consider post-16 options?
- Does your ELC setting or school work with feeder/post-school settings to ensure smooth transitions?
- Does your ELC setting or school effectively engage with multi-agency partners to support families facing multiple challenges?
- Does your ELC setting or school take a strategic approach to community partnerships, plan which relationships to develop, agree outcomes, identify or share resources, evaluate impacts?
- Does your school have a 'support directory' of potential community engagement partners?
- Have you identified the resources available to support children's learning in the community?
- Do families get information from the ELC setting or school about a range of activities and services available in the community?
- Does your ELC setting or school participate in community events to help establish relationships with community groups including faith groups?
- Are third sector/voluntary organisations able to run bespoke projects in the ELC setting or school to help engage families or develop community cohesion?
- Are Parent Councils/parent teacher associations actively involved in helping the ELC setting or school to develop community partnerships?
- Choose a partnership to work alongside in the next academic year, develop a plan. Consider what the ELC setting or school and the partnership will get from working together.
- Are community representatives involved in developing, reviewing and evaluating the improvement plan?
- Is there a community representative on the Parent Council/parent teacher association?
- Are local shops and businesses supporting fundraising initiatives or able to volunteer their time to help the ELC setting or school?
- Have you considered a community showcase to invite groups to an event to display information about their services and/or organisation and share this with staff, parents and families?

Activity 3: Supporting staff to work with partners in community engagement

Purpose
To help support staff take forward community engagement partnerships.

Working with community partners helps bring professionals together from a range of sources and businesses to help improve outcomes for children and young people. This approach can help address the needs of families from a holistic perspective and ensure parties contribute to the ELC setting or school's improvement plan.

Reflective questions:

- How can staff best be supported to work effectively with partners in community engagement?
- Can Pupil Equity or Scottish Attainment Challenge Funding be used to help take community engagement forward?
- Do staff have a 'can do' positive and problem-solving approach along with an understanding of the role/function of the relevant community partners?
- How will the results of the partnership be measured to identify successes and areas for development?

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