



Scottish Borders Council Collaborative Improvement Review

Summary of Findings

September 2022

COLLABORATIVE IMPROVEMENT

Collaborative Improvement is an approach to bringing about 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.

RATIONALE

Post COVID lockdown, a range of data collected via surveys for Scotland’s National Performance Framework found, “with children back at school, there is a decline in some areas related to learner confidence and a positive learning environment; fewer children report that they enjoy learning new things and fewer report they know they can be creative if they want to.”

In Scottish Borders Council’s (SBC) schools and settings, Head Teachers reported an increase in children and young people struggling to readjust back to the routines and structures of school life, an increase in distressed behaviours, and a decrease in mental wellbeing and resilience.

In May/June 2022, we completed a short, focussed service evaluation around Inclusion. We asked the question of Head Teachers – Are Your Approaches to Inclusion Effective?

This evaluation raised the following issues:

1. **Behaviours impacting on learning** - a small percentage of children and young people displaying distressed behaviours.
2. **Meeting the needs of all children and young people** - limited access to specialist support from the Inclusion and Wellbeing Service and other partners.
3. **Physical environment** - challenges posed by the school environment including on provision of nurturing, calm and safe spaces.



OUR FOCUS

Scottish Borders Council identified two key priorities last session which remain our key areas of focus as we move forward. These are:

Priority 1: To raise attainment by ensuring high quality learning, teaching and assessment in all schools and settings.

Priority 2: To raise attainment through improved inclusion, equity and wellbeing for all children and young people.

The purpose of working in collaboration with ES and ADES was to identify the next steps in our improvement journey around Priority 2.

In August 2022, Senior Managers and Officers from SBC's Education Service engaged in a Collaborative Improvement Approach with colleagues from ES and ADES in order to support us with these findings. The focus of this Collaborative Improvement was to consider the following:

KEY QUESTIONS

- To what extent do we have a shared understanding across SBC of the needs of children and young people exhibiting distressed behaviours/ struggling with self-regulation?
- Do we have a consistent response to meeting the needs of distressed learners across SBC?
- Is the implementation of our Inclusion Policy/ Framework underpinned by our values and ethos?
- Do we all agree on the features of a nurturing school environment? Are we consistently embedding nurturing approaches across SBC?
- To what extent do we use the full flexibility of Curriculum for Excellence to meet the wide spectrum of learners' needs?
- Are there creative and innovative approaches which have been successful in re-engaging some children and young people and could now be shared more widely?
- How do we work together to ensure that we have agreed expectations about meeting the needs of our most distressed learners?

PLANNING, STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

This year, a team of Senior Officers from SBC, ADES and ES were brought together to discuss Collaborative Improvement and its likely scope, ethos, process and outcomes on a number of occasions before the start of the engagement. The scoping meeting clarified the context and enabled SBC Senior Officers to present key information. ADES and ES Lead Officers set out the process, ethos and intended outcomes for the full team.

The collaboration was organised over two days (29 and 30 August 2022) in Scottish Borders Council Headquarters and the process was led by SBC. The visit was coordinated by an ADES Officer and ES Senior Regional Adviser working with the SBC Director of Education and Lifelong Learning and Chief Education Officer. In addition, the team for the Collaborative Improvement visit included two ADES



members who were Senior Managers/ Heads of Service from Glasgow City Council and South Ayrshire, and an ES Team including an experienced member of HM Inspectorate. This core team also comprised of an SBC Secondary School Head Teacher, Depute Head Teacher (pupil support) and a Primary School Head Teacher.

The visit began with a welcome and introduction from our Director of Education and Lifelong Learning, followed by a presentation from our Chief Education Officer and Quality Improvement Manager who set the Scottish Borders context. Relevant data around attainment, attendance, exclusions, positive destinations and School Inspections was shared with the group to outline areas of strength, where progress had been made and highlighted areas requiring improvement.

Strategic Lead Officers with responsibility for Inclusion policies and guidelines and from the Inclusion and Wellbeing Service then provided more in-depth detail around specific systems, frameworks, networks and Professional Learning opportunities. It was highlighted that our policies and guidelines on Inclusion and Nurturing approaches had been introduced over a period of time during 2020 – 2021 when all Professional Learning was provided in a virtual environment.

A series of eight focus groups were established around four themes:

- THEME 1: CULTURE & ETHOS**
- THEME 2: BARRIERS TO EXCLUSION**
- THEME 3: LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**
- THEME 4: POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR**

Themed group meetings took place on both days to allow time for professional dialogue around the efficacy of specific systems, frameworks, networks and Professional Learning opportunities to be considered through associated key questions. Mixed groups of staff representing Early Years, Primary, Secondary, Additional Support Needs (ASN) Services and Educational Psychologists were joined by ES and Local Authority Senior Officers. Recording sheets from each focus group were collated and overall feedback was then shared with the core group at the end of each day.

In order to collate the key findings and reflections from the Collaborative Improvement Review, the core group convened on Tuesday 30 August 2022. Our Chief Education Officer provided an overview of the findings and next steps, in each of the themed areas.

An overview of these findings is outlined below.

KEY FINDINGS

STRENGTHS

- Our vision confirms high expectations that the needs of all of our learners are met in an inclusive, nurturing environment and is in clear alignment with Scottish Government legislation and policy.



- Our school leaders and staff have a strong commitment to our vision for inclusion and building a nurturing Local Authority. There are the beginnings of a shift in culture in our learning communities around inclusive practice. There is some evidence of creative and flexible solutions to meet the wide range of needs of our children and young people.
- Our policies, frameworks and guidelines are well received and provide relevant information to schools and settings.
- Systems and processes are in place to support schools and settings.
- All Secondary Schools have created nurture bases to support identified young people that is leading to positive outcomes.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- There is a need to revisit the strategic approach to implementation of our Inclusion documentations for schools and settings. Implementation during the pandemic impacted on their effectiveness. There are inconsistencies around a shared understanding of inclusive practice and nurturing approaches. Not all schools engaged fully with the Professional Learning offer available. Head Teachers would benefit from further engagement in discussion regarding expectations and responsibilities within their role.
- Clarity on roles and responsibilities, in the context of empowerment, is crucial in ensuring further improvement and a shared understanding of the importance of leadership of change to support inclusive practice. All our stakeholders, including parents and community partners, should have an understanding of their important role in developing further and supporting inclusive, nurturing school communities.
- More creative and innovative approaches to the curriculum and learning pathways should be explored to ensure that all our learners receive their full entitlement to a learning experience that engages and motivates them. An asset-based community approach with more effective partnership working will support this.
- Some school learning environments facilitate more easily the meeting of learners' needs; there is a need to explore how other learning spaces can be more fully developed.
- Improvements in partnership and multi-agency working would result in a more effective 'Team around the Child' approach for those children and young people with high levels of Additional Support Needs (ASN).



- There needs to be increased transparency and consistency of approach around the allocation of resource and access to ASN services. This will lead to greater consistency in schools and across cluster areas.
- It is recognised that recruitment of staff, particularly in Additional Support Needs roles, continues to be challenging.

NEXT STEPS

- Revisit and reset understanding around inclusive practice and nurturing approaches through engagement sessions, using SBC Inclusion policies. We need to agree with all staff key expectations and responsibilities around inclusive practice. We need to define empowerment at every level and involve all stakeholders in decision-making.
- Share effective practice across the Local Authority. Schools identified as being inclusive should share their journeys with other colleagues so that we can all learn together. Identify, make links and share effective practice in other Local Authorities.
- Review current processes and systems for allocation of resources for targeted support. Ensure consistency in universal and targeted support to schools and how these are accessed.
- Ensure a consistent approach, by a dedicated team, to the delivery of Professional Learning on inclusive practice and nurturing approaches to all sectors. This should be aligned with approaches to Mental Health and Wellbeing, emphasising that health and wellbeing is the responsibility of all.
- Review our staffing structures in our Additional Support Needs (ASN) services in order to best meet the changing needs of our children and young people.
- Review how we can devolve areas of our Additional Support Needs (ASN) budgets and services, considering a locality-based approach, to meet need. Head Teachers will take a lead role in this process.
- Develop a holistic Communication Strategy for all staff, parents and community partners around inclusive practice.
- Review structures and processes for effective partnership working and access to partner services, considering a locality-based model to meet need. This could include the delivery of valuable family learning offers in schools and clusters.
- Review our Quality Assurance Strategy. Review the structures and processes for the Central Team working with partners and schools to ensure support and challenge. Consider focussed validated self-evaluation sessions.
- All learners to benefit from their entitlement to a Broad, General Education. Review and explore:



- The quality of curricular offers in terms of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) entitlements
- More effective transition planning at all stages
- Review outdoor learning spaces in schools and the wider community with a focus on outdoor pedagogy, curricular opportunities, nurturing approaches and linking with Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)