



EDUCATION, SPORT AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE: 20 SEPTEMBER 2022

REPORT ON THE THREE-ISLAND COLLABORATIVE IMPROVEMENT REVIEW

Report by Director of Education, Skills and Children's Services

PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide information to the Comhairle about the process and outcome of a Three-Island Collaborative Improvement Review that took place in May 2022 as a partnership between Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Orkney Islands Council, Shetland Islands Council, ADES and Education Scotland.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 Under the leadership of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) and in partnership with Education Scotland, all local authority areas in Scotland have made a commitment to work together to undertake Collaborative Improvement Reviews.
- 2.2 The critical role of cross-authority collaborative improvement work has been recognised for several years as a key approach to improving outcomes for Scotland's learners, strengthening professional practice and decreasing inequalities. The following reports specifically recognise the vital role of collaborative improvement activity.
 - The Muir Report (2022) Putting Learners at the Centre;
 - Education Reform – Joint Agreement (2018);
 - OECD Report (2015) Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective.
- 2.3 Working closely with ADES and Education Scotland, it was identified that the three island authorities of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council would be able to form a strong partnership to undertake a review, recognising the similarities, cross-cutting themes and issues, that delivery of education in island settings face.
- 2.4 Senior officers from the three authorities worked with ADES and Education Scotland staff to identify an agreed focus on the Senior Phase curriculum and progression pathways within and beyond it. The overarching review question was: **How well do the three local authorities meet the needs of all their learners in the Senior Phase to maximise outcomes for positive and sustained destinations beyond school?** Three themes were then identified to provide a framework to gather evidence and allow participants to evaluate responses to the review question. The themes were:
 - 1) The Curriculum and Learner Pathways in the Senior Phase (S4-6);
 - 2) Vocational Provision Within the Secondary Curriculum and the Contribution of Partners;
 - 3) The Broad General Education in S1-3 and the Support Given to Transition to Senior Phase.
- 2.5 In recognition of both the rural geography of the three authorities and the on-going challenges of COVID-19, the review was designed to take place online using virtual meetings, document sharing and online collaboration sessions. Focus groups were established for each of the three themes and membership was drawn from the review team and a broad range of stakeholders. Each authority also provided access to documentation including curricular programmes and attainment and performance information.

2.6 Following conclusion of the review activities, the lead senior officers from the three authorities have continued to meet regularly to evaluate the findings and plan approaches to take forward the feedback. A summary of strengths and areas of development have been collated and recognise areas where issues are common across the island areas as well as unique aspects relevant only to one partner authority. The team will continue to work through the autumn to consult with review participants to develop and implement an action plan to progress the findings of the review which will be incorporated into respective National Improvement Framework plans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle note the report, recognise the findings of the review and support the improvement priorities it identifies.

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Appendix: Three Island Collaborative Review Programme
Background Papers: [The Muir Report \(2022\)](#)
[Education Reform – Joint Agreement \(2018\)](#)
[OECD Report \(2015\) Improving Schools in Scotland](#)

IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	None
Legal	The Comhairle has a duty under the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act (2000) Section 3(2) to 'secure improvement in the quality of school education in the schools managed by them.' Section 3D(2) of the same act requires education authorities to carry out their duty with a view to achieving the strategic priorities set out in the National Improvement Framework.
Staffing	None
Assets and Property	None
Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	None
Equalities	None
Corporate Strategy	None
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	The action plan developed from the findings of the review will be subject to consultation with participants and stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

- 5.1 Securing better educational outcomes and creating greater consistency in learner experiences is embedded in Scottish education policy and in particular, the National Improvement Framework and the government's aim of excellence and equity for all. There is a legislative duty on education authorities under the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act (2000) to secure improvement in the quality of education and strong collaboration between authorities is recognised as an important approach to both identifying areas for improvement and addressing development needs.
- 5.2 In addition to legislative requirements, a number of reports on Scottish education have identified the importance of collaboration for improvement and a need for education authorities to be outward-looking in seeking collaboration with other authorities, professional bodies and stakeholders.

Three such reports are:

- **The Muir Report (2022) Putting Learners at the Centre**
Identified the need for increased collaboration and meaningful engagement between stakeholders, local authorities, professional associations, trade unions and national bodies.
- **Education Reform – Joint Agreement (2018)**
Stated a principle of effective system-wide improvement requiring strong leadership, collaborative working and clarity of purpose in all layers of the system.

- **OECD Report (2015) Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective**
OECD Review called for a strengthened 'middle' operating through networks and collaboratives among schools, and in and across local authorities.

- 5.3 With the support of ADES and Education Scotland, all thirty-two authorities committed to work together to begin a programme of collaborative reviews that would see education authorities working in pairs or trios to agree areas of focus and to undertake supportive joint reviews of their services.
- 5.4 In recognition of the many common aspects and cross-cutting themes faced by island authorities in the delivery of high quality education, it was agreed that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council would be able to form an effective collaboration to undertake a review. This collaboration also provided opportunities to further develop partnerships and networking already in place across the islands under the umbrella of the Northern Alliance. Whilst recognising the many areas of commonality, the review also identified and understood the unique features, strengths and issues of each island area.
- 5.5 ADES and Education Scotland staff worked with the three authorities to identify a focus area and develop a review programme that would provide evaluative evidence, strengthen partnership working and provide findings that would allow an improvement action plan to be developed upon completion. It was intended from the outset that the findings would recognise both common areas of improvement and priorities specific to each authority area. The review was scheduled to take place across the week beginning 23rd May 2022.

DETAIL

- 6.1 A Collaborative Review Project Team was established in early 2022 with a remit to agree the focus of the review and design a delivery programme. The project team involved a senior officer from each of the three authorities along with a senior representative from ADES and from the Education Scotland Northern Alliance Regional Team. The project team met regularly to devise the programme included in Appendix One. It was agreed from the outset that this review would take place online and that evidence would be gathered from virtual focus group meetings, document sharing and online collaboration sessions.
- 6.2 The three partner authorities agreed that the Senior Phase curriculum and post-school outcomes was an area that all were keen to evaluate, share good practice and identify both common and individual areas of development. To that end, the review question was agreed to be:

How well do the three local authorities meet the needs of all their learners in the Senior Phase to maximise outcomes for positive and sustained destinations beyond school?

- 6.3 The focus of the review was then further distilled into three key focus areas to allow for more details analysis of contributing elements, as detailed below.

1) The Curriculum and Learner Pathways in the Senior Phase (S4-6)

- Quality, breadth, equity and consistency of the curriculum offer
- Curriculum design and the number and type of pathways
- How well the curriculum offer meets all learners' needs
- The timetabling and organisational structure of the senior phase
- Relevance of curriculum to local labour markets and post-school opportunities
- Quality and accessibility of pathways through and beyond schools
- Support for learners with additional needs.

2) Vocational Provision Within the Secondary Curriculum and the Contribution of Partners

- Equity and quality of access to vocational and applied learning pathways in school
- Range and type of vocational pathways and how they feed into post school options for employment and/or training
- Effective partnerships external to the school such as colleges, employers etc.
- Quality and impact of work experience
- Recognition of voluntary work and wider achievements

3) The Broad General Education in S1-3 and the Support Given to Transition to Senior Phase.

- Considering the equity and effectiveness of learner experiences in the S1-3 Broad General Education
- How well it prepares learners for the senior phase and pathways beyond school.
- Transition arrangements: P7-S1 and S3-S4
- Pastoral support and guidance for young people at the end of S3 to support progression into the senior phase
- Quality of information and communication provided to learners and parents about options and choices.

6.4 Focus groups were drawn from a broad range of stakeholders and each session included representatives from the three authorities alongside a member of the project team. Membership of various groups included:

- ADES representative
- Education Scotland staff
- LA education department staff,
- Headteachers and deposes
- Subject teachers
- Learners
- Parents
- College staff
- Community delivery partners
- Trade unions/professional associations
- Employers/industry partners

6.5 Participants in the focus groups were asked to consider four consistent questions across the three themes to support feedback to the project team.

- What is working/going well in schools/the local authority and what are the strengths?
- Where are the challenges and concerns?
- What should be the focus moving forward?
- How can your local authority/ADES/Education Scotland provide support?

6.6 Feedback from the focus groups was taken together with other performance evidence provided by the three authority leads on the project team and a verbal feedback session with ADES, Education Scotland and the Project team took place on 26th May 2022. Since that date, the three island project leads have met to further discuss and collate the findings and begin to develop action plans to take forward the proprieties identified in the review.

FINDINGS

7.1 In the overarching feedback from the review, the following common strengths were identified and reported:

- The knowledge of, and relationships with, learners and the commitment of education staff to meet the needs of all learners.
- Strong, positive and sustained destinations for young people leaving school.
- The curriculum rationales in schools are very much linked to local economies and local employment needs.
- Strength in the development of Foundation Apprenticeships for learners.
- Online collaboration and engagement are widening course choice for learners and addressing some of the recruitment and retention challenges schools are experiencing.
- Strong relationships with local partners, including Skills Development Scotland, Developing Young Workforce staff and local colleges.
- Relationships with the community, partners and local businesses are very good.
- Good breadth of wider opportunities within schools and employment options for young people.
- Many pastoral transitions within the secondary stage are very strong and learners feel supported through these transitions.
- Partnership working examples to support for learners were evident during the review, including children with additional support needs.
- Good practices learned in terms of ensuring continuing of learning through COVID-19, including the positive impact of online professional learning and collaboration opportunities for staff.

7.2 Feedback also identified common areas of challenge or areas for further exploration or development across the three-island partnership:

- The recruitment and retention of staff, particularly in our most rural settings and within certain shortage subjects.
- The inequity of learning options/curriculum offers across schools within local authorities.
- The relevance and consistency of the curriculum offer for learners with Additional Support Needs.
- The access to, and harmonisation of, timetables between different schools and between schools and local colleges.
- Consistency of communication with parents and carers around the curriculum options for their children.
- Consistent teacher knowledge of both learner pathways and the totality of the curriculum offer available for young people.
- Developing greater consistency of language to support a parity of esteem in respect of more traditional academic routes and emerging vocational opportunities, including when communicating with parents and carers.
- Short term funding decisions around the curriculum causing difficulties in respect of strategic medium and long-term planning.
- Travel and accommodation barriers for some learners accessing the curriculum, particularly from more remote localities.
- The quality and availability of the online experience for learners is variable across the three areas and leads to digital inequity.
- The transition from the Broad General Education into the Senior Phase, and the experience of learners in S3 is inconsistent and requires development.

- Ensuring the principles and entitlements to a broad curriculum are adhered to in S3, and the presence of appropriate assessment and moderation within the final year of the BGE.
- There is an increased demand on Pupil Support and Guidance staff, partly due to the impact of the pandemic, and approaches to addressing the needs to be considered carefully.

7.3 Having considered the review feedback, the focus areas for the island authorities partnership have been identified and organised under three key headings: Young People, Staff and Curriculum.

Young People

- Build resilience in young people to support them into destinations beyond school.
- Harness the learner and teacher voice and involve young people in curriculum planning.
- Create more networking opportunities for young people within and across the island authorities.

Staff

- Broadening access to professional discussion through the Collaborative Improvement Review to all practitioners.
- Increased networking for schools with similar sized school rolls across the three island areas.
- Introduction and development of subject and other network groups across the three islands.

Curriculum

- Clarify the totality of the Senior Phase curriculum offer.
- Review and further develop Foundation Apprenticeships.
- Further review how interdisciplinary learning (IDL) can be used to enrich learners' experiences, especially in transition from BGE to Senior Phase
- Bring all relevant parties together to develop a consensus around online/digital learning.
- Promote and support parity of esteem between traditional subjects and courses that are more focused on applied learning and vocational skills.

7.4 In addition to the common areas of strength and development across the three island partnership, the review identified a number of development needs or areas for further exploration specific to Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and they are summarised below.

1) The Curriculum and Learner Pathways in the Senior Phase (S4-6)

- Focus on trying to maintain Gaelic pathways and qualifications from the BGE and through the Senior Phase. Can courses be maintained? Are there staffing challenges?
- Evaluate uptake and breadth of engagement with e-Sgoil and the National e-Learning offer across our schools – Should be more strategic.
- Develop more dynamic information about the interface between course offers and labour market intelligence, especially taking account of variation in employment and training opportunities across different islands.
- Strengthen procedures to capture the voices and views of young people in the design of the curriculum and the qualification and accreditation pathways open to them. Be prepared to adapt and innovate.
- Clarity, consistency and stability are needed in the roll-out of harmonised timetabling policy and the associated digital delivery of some courses. It is an opportunity to wider curriculum, create equity and make the system more resilient but delivery requires more support.

2) Vocational Provision Within the Secondary Curriculum and the Contribution of Partners

- Strengthen connections between Gaelic Medium Education and local post-school employment opportunities, especially in hospitality, health & social care and education.
- Aim to maximise the charter agreement with Skills Development Scotland to strengthen skills profiling and the support available to young people exploring employability, training and learning opportunities.
- Continue to develop more effective partnership with UHI Outer Hebrides, particularly in co-delivery of senior phase courses and in supporting local post-school pathways.
- Seek stronger and more strategic engagement with voluntary services such as Volunteering Western Isles to improve access and engagement in support of wider achievement.
- Evaluate local Foundation Apprenticeship delivery with a view to identifying strengths and opportunities to increase uptake and promote opportunities they present.
- Can current high post-school destination rates be maintained as the local economy is squeezed and opportunities may decrease? Are our pathways dynamic enough to respond?

3) The Broad General Education in S1-3 and the Support Given to Transition to Senior Phase.

- Is our secondary curriculum a true BGE and Senior Phase offer? There are some concerns about the S3 experience pre-Senior Phase. Schools must ensure that the transition from S3 to Senior Phase is more robust and meaningful.
- Consider review of guidance and pupil support services in our schools to make sure they are resilient and adaptable enough to meet developing and changing learner needs, especially post-pandemic.
- Review methodology and strategy for provision of information and guidance to learners and parents as they move from S3 to the Senior Phase.
- Much more effective use must be made of interdisciplinary learning, especially where it can systematically support transition, progression and contribute to vocational or applied learning courses.
- More consistent support and guidance should be provided to secondary subject networks. There is scope for cross-authority collaboration to develop this.

7.5 A new joint National Improvement Plan and Local Authority Improvement Plan for the Comhairle is under development and it will capture and take forward key areas from this review. The new NIF/LA plan will go forward to the Education, Sport & Children's Services Committee in November 2022.

CONCLUSION

8.1 Participation in the Collaborative Review has allowed the Comhairle to receive high-quality collegiate feedback on its own work within the Senior Phase as well as to contribute to evaluation of the work of colleagues in Orkney and Shetland, including finding areas of strength and good practice that we can develop locally. The collaboration has fostered links between staff across the three island areas and forms a platform for further networking and collaboration into the future.

8.2 When considering the original question posed by the Collaborative Review: **How well do the three local authorities meet the needs of all their learners in the Senior Phase to maximise outcomes for positive and sustained destinations beyond school?** The evidence points to significant areas of good practice and a positive senior phase experience for many learners that leads to strong and sustained post-school destinations, delivered through effective partnership working. There are challenges, though, in terms of equity of access to the curriculum offer and inconsistent experiences within and between schools that impact on some learners, especially those seeking less-common pathways or those with additional learning needs. A greater willingness to innovate within the curriculum, integrate learner voice and embrace digital learning fully will be priorities in addressing these issues into the future.