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# ADES/ES Collaborative Improvement Empowerment

13 and 14 September 2023

## **Background**

Collaborative Improvement is an approach to bringing about improvement through shared work involving staff from the local authority, Education Scotland and ADES. This approach was secured through the Education Reform Joint Agreement published in June 2018 and all local authorities are committed to the process. Falkirk is the twenty-second local authority to participate.

The local authority provides a range of evidence, underpinned by a self-evaluative statement, to highlight what works well, and areas requiring improvement, within an agreed area of focus.

Through a process of fieldwork by the Collaborative Improvement Team with key personnel from the local authority to work together to take a closer look at identified areas of priority and to look for ways to help address identified challenges.

## **Focus for the Collaborative Improvement**

“An empowered system is one that grows stronger and more confident, working in partnership to lead learning and teaching that achieves excellence and equity for all learners. Empowerment and collaboration for improvement happen at all levels in an empowered system.”

Education Scotland, Towards an Empowered System, 2019

Over time, we have developed a strategic approach to supporting and developing empowerment in our senior leaders. This has been key to the overarching work of our Service in evaluating the progress towards improving experiences, equity and outcomes for children and young people. We wanted to find out how effective this strategy has been in facilitating autonomy with accountability to deliver both service and establishment improvements.

## **Rationale for selecting this area:**

Building capacity for system level collaboration and improvement has been as service ambition since 2017. It was very clear, very quickly, that self-evaluation and planning for improvement were areas for priority attention both at setting level and as a function of the local authority.

At this time, it was clear that senior leaders were positive about and well placed to review practices and move forward in a more collaborative way.

In session 2019-20, we formalised our approach which has built on the positive relationships and partnerships that existed and have been further strengthened across the Service. Partnership is evident in the way senior leaders and central teams support each other and respect the different role each plays in our increasingly empowered system.

Over the last six and a half years, we have developed a Senior Leadership Empowerment Strategy, which values precision in focus for improvement as opposed to prescribing generic approaches / resources. This is aimed to ensure that all establishments work flexibly and in a way that is right for their own context within a clear framework of support and expectation.

Over the same period, a number of successes and improvements have been delivered, notably in attainment outcomes and quality measures evaluated through external scrutiny. It is our belief that the focus on and success delivered by a more empowered system has been instrumental in the delivery of these successes. Therefore, it seemed timely to take the opportunity offered by the ADES Collaborative Improvement Review to explore in more detail the contribution made by empowerment on outcomes for children and young people.

Specifically,

- How are senior leaders using the breadth of their empowered autonomy and what is their appetite for further empowerment?
- What has been the impact of senior leadership empowerment on improving outcomes for children and young people?
- What has been the impact of senior leadership empowerment on curriculum design and innovation?

In exploring these questions, it is hoped that we will gain insight into the following aspects:

- **Measuring impact** - How well has the culture created across the service supported improvement?
- **Identifying next steps** - What else should we consider in developing the strategy further?
- **Widening our reach** - How do we develop the strategy to impact at practitioner level?
- **Establishing our focus** – Where do we have the greatest impact?

## **Team Composition**

### **Falkirk Council**

Rhona Jay – Interim Head of Education

Lisa McCabe – Education Service Manager

Scott Lavery – Acting Education Service Manager

### **ADES**

Colin Grant - ADES

Carrie Lindsay – Fife

Sheena Devlin – Perth and Kinross

John Thin - Dumfries & Galloway

Andrew McClelland - North Ayrshire

Colin Bruce – Clackmannanshire

## **Education Scotland**

Jackie Halawi – Senior Regional Advisor (FWWL)

Kit Gilbert – Attainment Advisor

Ryan Millar – Attainment Advisor

Joan Mackay – Head of Curriculum Development

Jackie Nimmo – Senior Regional Advisor (South East)

### **Brief information on who was involved:**

The visit was coordinated by an ADES officer and Senior Regional Advisor from Education Scotland working with the Head of Education and Service Managers from Falkirk.

In addition, the team for the Collaborative Improvement visit included five members representing ADES who were all senior managers or heads of service in Fife, Perth and Kinross, Dumfries and Galloway, Clackmannanshire and North Ayrshire.

A team from Education Scotland were also involved comprising of an HM Inspector, Senior Regional Advisor, Head of Curriculum Development and two Attainment Advisors including our own link advisor.

### **Methodology**

The visit was over 3 days: 31 August, 13 & 14 September.

31 August: A virtual presentation was delivered by Falkirk Council on key milestones linked to our empowerment journey and some highlights focusing on impact. This presentation set the scene and context and led into a discussion about the actions that had been taken as well as what we were looking to explore with the team in terms of outcomes.

13 & 14 September: A series of focus groups was then arranged over the two-day fieldwork sessions. Groups comprised senior leaders across all sectors of education in Falkirk. Each group was joined by representatives of the Collaborative Improvement Team. An agreed agenda was used to support each group to develop their input. Sharing sessions focused on showcasing the work of a collective group and its impact. Case studies were designed to share what empowerment looks like in practice across our settings. Over half of the cohort of heads of establishments across all sectors were represented on groups.

At the end of each day a team discussion took place with sharing of information and an opportunity for clarification. Recording sheets from each focus group were collated and shared with the team to form the basis of discussions on the focus for that day or any questions that arose from the engagement with groups.

### **Key Findings**

- The clear vision from the central team was evident in discussions with heads of establishment. The visiting team noted the strong sense of belonging and pride demonstrated by senior leaders. The positive energy and warmth during engagements was also commented upon, reflecting the high levels of interest and commitment to Falkirk's improvement journey through individual and group contributions. There was a collective desire to "lift the floor."

- There is a robust strategy and sustained investment in leadership development in Falkirk which is leading to system level impact. The well-structured system allows all heads of establishment to have a safe space to discuss the leadership of change.
- Senior leaders appreciate and value protected thinking time to develop the work of the service. The different network opportunities to do this thinking are also valued by senior leaders. These structures, arrangements and relationships in place to continue to further empower people. The level of investment in senior leadership was noted as sector leading in its ambition and evolution over the last 7 years.
- There was a resounding message from senior leaders that the different groups now all have their own defined purpose/impact and are all involved in the strategic direction of the Service. Confidence and self-efficacy is growing with senior leaders now challenging and supporting each other. They are professional, hard-working, full of integrity.
- Across all interactions with senior leaders demonstrated there is strong leadership which supports trust, honesty and transparency. Senior leaders feel encouraged, respected and supported to think, create and develop for the benefit of their own establishments and for the whole system. This will continue to be a key driver for improvement moving forward.
- The positive culture and high levels of participation amongst senior leaders demonstrates a readiness for evaluating the impact of their collaborative work and its reach into the work of practitioners across all sectors.
- Progress and success have been the result of strong and collaborative partnerships across all sectors and with the central team. There is a recognition that partnerships beyond education within the council and with third sector organisations, need to move to have the same level of accountability.
- The Connected Falkirk approach to creating curricular flexibility in the senior phase has established an innovative platform to extend to the Broad General Education, success has been driven by the collective and collaborative approach of secondary head teachers to align timetables.

## **Positive features of the Collaborative Improvement**

### **Culture**

The strong and proactive culture in Falkirk stems from a strategy to invest in senior leadership that started in 2017. This strategic approach is valued by all those working within it. Senior leaders feel they are working together within a well thought through system in supported, safe spaces. They feel confident and empowered to make decisions and changes and use data very effectively to do this.

There are high expectations of senior leaders in Falkirk, all are asked to play a part in system improvement. Building leadership capacity has been a driving influence for all of the central programmes, developments and supports. The following were highlighted for their particular impact on building leadership capacity, resilience and confidence:

- The Quality Associates Programme.

- The Senior leaders Leading “Well” Programme.
- The framework of the Senior Leadership Empowerment Strategy.

Details of the programmes are included in Appendix 1.

### **Leadership at all levels**

The visiting team remarked on the sense of teamwork, cohesion and collective endeavour of senior leaders across all sectors.

There was a commendable level of professional integrity and commitment to personal, professional and system level development for improvement, some examples of note being:

- Evidence of practitioner enquiry supporting and empowering teachers to make changes to the curriculum with a focus on sustaining effective practices, which make a measurable difference to the outcomes, attainment and achievement of children and young people.
- Transformational changes to improving attendance through the use of data, changes to culture and practice and collective evaluation of the impact across groups of schools. Direct correlation and alignment with the Local authority stretch aim and the development of the interactive attendance dashboard.
- Sector-leading programme of leadership development opportunities at a range of levels. The sustained investment in developing leadership capacity over the last 7 years. Invested in creating protected time and intellectual space to be professionally courageous and honest. Service commitment to investing in external support to enhance programmes and provide objective and challenging facilitation and leadership coaching.

### **Use of data**

There was a clear theme across all focus groups of the importance of using robust and reliable data to inform priorities for collaborative working, identifying helpful partnerships and evaluating the impact of progress and impact.

- Senior leaders have autonomy and flexibility within frameworks to identify and drive improvements for their own establishments and within their various collaborative forums.
- Senior leaders demonstrated a well-developed sense of culture-based accountability, talking clearly and confidently about the balance of empowerment, accountability, responsibility and rigour.
- The focus and work of the Self-evaluation Improvement Group clearly demonstrated senior leaders empowering others, sharing their learning and influencing the direction of development and training across the system.

### **Key themes and associated actions to support further improvement:**

#### **Themes:**

- Increasing the level of risk, challenge and ambition.

- Coherence, reach and evaluation of work.
- Consistency of curriculum offer.

#### **Actions:**

- Create a suite of measures to evidence greater coherence, reach and evaluation of work undertaken through empowerment by:
  - Being clear about what is being targeted for improvement through empowerment.
  - Identifying how actions relate to specific outcomes and scaling-up impactful strategies which have led to measurable improvement.
  - Exploring opportunities for more effective cross-group working, for example, by mapping what is generated by Senior Leadership Empowerment Groups.
  - Identifying ways to extend the model of empowerment to practitioners across the system.
  - Identifying effective practice and be precise as to what makes the biggest impact on outcomes for learners.
- Facilitate and encourage greater risk-taking, peer challenge and collective ambition and delivery of sector-leading approaches by:
  - Continuing to invest in senior leadership development to further strengthen the expectation for shared, ambitious and innovative thinking.
  - Continuing to create conditions for robust support and challenge of quality and performance to be more confidently and autonomously offered by peers.
- Bring about coherence across the learner journey 3-18 ensuring that all learners have a consistent and equitable experience across Falkirk by:
  - Using the “Learning to Achieve” strategy as the standard for learners and practitioners in Falkirk.
  - Adopt a relentless focus on outcomes for learners through all improvement groups and collaborative work.

#### **Making Connections**

- Connections made with both Dumfries and Galloway and North Ayrshire to further support our imminent work on service redesign and restructure.
- Liaison with North Lanarkshire to support the further development of empowered cluster working.
- Develop relationships with Education Scotland Curriculum Innovation Team to support innovative curriculum practice across our settings.

#### **Measuring Progress**

The progress and measurement of success of the actions above will be monitored through routine and established mechanisms of reporting to the Children and Young people’s Education Executive Committee, Scrutiny Committee, self-evaluation for quality improvement activities, quality assurance engagements, our Standards and Quality Report and through our Service Improvement Plan.

#### **Appendices**

Appendix 1: ADES Collaborative Review Scoping Paper

Appendix 2: Senior leadership Empowerment Strategy

