

## **Collaborative Improvement: making it happen**

### **A collaborative approach to supporting improvement and outcomes through partnership working**

#### **How Collaborative Improvement works**

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## 1. Introduction

### **What is the overall aim of Collaborative Improvement?**

The aim of Collaborative Improvement is to share what works well at a local authority level and to support improvement in areas of local authority activity that have been identified as in need of further development. Collaborative Improvement aims to promote partnership working to ensure that we achieve sustainable improvements for all children and young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In short, it is consistent with the national goal of achieving excellence and equity. Collaborative Improvement can also help to promote increased consistency of outcomes for learners.

### **Who or what is the target audience for Collaborative Improvement?**

The target audience for Collaborative Improvement is local authority staff working in support of schools and education staff. It brings together the expertise and knowledge from all parts of the system to secure improvement and share good practice.

### **What is the benefit of local authorities being involved in Collaborative Improvement?**

The host local authority should receive focused and specific support and challenge around those areas which senior officers have identified as in need of development or improvement. This will have already been identified through ongoing self-evaluation and local standards and quality reporting / improvement planning arrangements.

## 2. Collaborative Improvement in outline

### **What is Collaborative Improvement?**

Collaborative Improvement aims to promote partnership working and collaboration to ensure that we achieve sustainable improvements for all children, young people and their families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Different authorities face different challenges. If we are to achieve the national vision of excellence and equity, working together as a collective can help address specific challenges; address unnecessary variability in outcome; promote a self-improving and empowered system, and stimulate collaborative and collegiate working across the system.

### **Why Collaborative Improvement?**

The Education Reform Joint Agreement published in June 2018 set out clearly that *'achieving the national vision of excellence and equity cannot be achieved by one part of the system alone: all partners must work together in a collegiate and collaborative way, keeping the interests of children and young people front and centre'*. One of the key principles set out in the Joint Agreement is that *'effective system-wide improvement requires strong leadership, collaborative working and clarity of purpose at all layers of the system – school,*

*local, regional and national.* The Joint Agreement also signalled a willingness to explore options for implementing change, using additional or new levers already in the system: in these most challenging times, using new and innovative levers can be a route towards further improvement. Collaborative Improvement sits well in this contextual setting.

The 2018-2020 report of the International Council of Advisers (2020), recommended that Scotland should move still further beyond what has become known as a self-improving system to become a Networked Learning System (NLS).

An Networked Learning System is:

- connected through networks across physical, professional and virtual boundaries; and
- driven by design-based research and collaborative inquiry to innovate, test and refine practice and build leadership capacity through practice-based professional learning.

Collaborative Improvement can contribute significantly to delivering this important objective.

### **3. Collaborative Improvement: Key Principles**

- The Coronavirus Pandemic challenged all of us. Collaborative Improvement should be part of a positive and proactive response to the new context in which we work.
- In engaging in Collaborative Improvement, each local authority remains responsible for its own development and outcomes: partners and colleagues will advise, support and challenge through a solution-focused approach to improvement.
- Across Scotland, we have much of which we can be proud in terms of practice worthy of sharing. Sourcing, celebrating and sharing such practice should help make best use of the expertise across the system to support improvement.
- We also face significant challenges as a country and as an education system. These include social disadvantage, closing the attainment gap and an ongoing debate around uneven performance. One of the opportunities of Collaborative Improvement is the chance to support each other in addressing these common issues.
- Collaborative Improvement should utilise genuine partnership working to co-create and build a model, within the overall guidance, that is bespoke for each individual authority: there is no one-size-fits-all approach to this work.
- Success is dependent on creating and sustaining high levels of mutual trust, confidence, cooperation and collaboration to allow effective joint activity to take place.
- We should build on Scotland's well-embedded approaches to quality and improvement based on self-evaluation, and rigorous and robust evidence. Focused and meaningful self-evaluation must be at the heart of Collaborative Improvement.
- All thirty-two local authorities will be involved and engaged in this process, with a relevant focus and over an agreed timescale.

- Collaborative Improvement is one strand of improvement activity. It will sit alongside and complement other self-evaluation and improvement work set out in local authority plans and can support implementation of the Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress.

#### **4. Overseeing and Leading Collaborative Improvement**

How we organise the oversight of Collaborative Improvement should be designed to ensure maximum impact. Leadership of Collaborative Improvement should be done in full partnership between the host local authority, ADES and Education Scotland. The following arrangements are in place to oversee Collaborative Improvement.

##### **❖ Strategic Group**

The Collaborative Improvement Strategic Group is responsible for overseeing, planning monitoring and evaluating the development and delivery of Collaborative Improvement. This group will consist of identified senior leaders from ADES and Education Scotland. This group will meet monthly (approximately) and be responsible for the overall direction of Collaborative Improvement. This will include reporting high-level information on the impact / success or otherwise of the process as required.

##### **❖ Operational Group**

An Operational Group will ensure the smooth running of the entire Collaborative Improvement process and report as required to the Strategic Group. This group will be formed by a small number of colleagues from ADES and Education Scotland. The group will meet on a regular, ongoing basis. It will be focused on practicalities and ensuring that the process runs smoothly on a 'daily basis'. Its responsibilities will include:

- working with relevant Education Scotland and local authority colleagues to support engagement in Collaborative Improvement;
- promoting consistency of approach in Collaborative Improvement whilst at the same time ensuring that the process is unique to each council;
- coordinating the involvement of appropriate parties/partners;
- collecting and collating information on progress to support the review and reporting process; and
- ensuring that there are clear channels of communication with colleagues in the overarching Strategic Group.

##### **❖ Local Organisational Group (formed for each, unique Collaborative Improvement episode)**

This is the group to be set up for each, individual Collaborative Improvement episode.

The relevant host local authority Director or equivalent, nominated ADES coordinator, SRAs, Heads of Scrutiny or Senior Inspector from Scrutiny and other Education Scotland colleagues will work together to organise the finer details of the visits including for example:

- the focus of the Collaborative Improvement
- resource requirements and identification of personnel, depending on focus
- finalise dates for actual Collaborative Improvement activity

- plan focus groups and membership
- suggestions for high level discussion points based on the focus
- IT requirements
- timetable/programme
- recording formats

## **5. Stages of the Collaborative Improvement process**

### **The stages of Collaborative Improvement:**

Please note that we use the term 'stages' to help give an overall shape to the process. The stages will be far less delineated than this might imply.

Evidence from Collaborative Improvement activity to date has highlighted four important points which review teams should take account of the following: cognisance of:

- The Collaborative Improvement process is led by the host local authority.
- The scope of selected area of focus/ should be considered carefully to ensure maximum impact in supporting improvements in specific aspects of equity and excellence. It is important that the scope is manageable and not unnecessarily wide.
- The rationale for identification of the area of focus will be based on the local authority's own data and self-evaluation processes. Early communal exploration of possible areas of focus is an important part of the process as is the need for the LA self-evaluation to be robust.
- Advance and detailed planning is an essential element in the process of Collaborative Improvement; evidence to date indicates the importance of this to the smooth-running of the process.

### **Stage 1: Getting ready**

Experience to date confirms that the participating host authority should undertake preparatory work well in advance of its actual engagement in Collaborative Improvement. The authority will start to think about identifying an area of interest and significance to them. This is likely to develop from their own self-evaluation and from within their service plan. It is important that the focus/ area of interest is aimed at improving outcomes for children, young people and their families in both the short, medium and longer term. Discussing possible areas of focus with colleagues from Education Scotland and ADES is essential to the success of the agreed partnership approach.

### **Stage 2: Exploring the area of focus**

Once the area of focus is agreed, the authority should undertake a self-evaluation process to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the selected area of focus. The emphasis should be on outcomes rather than process. What develops should be bureaucracy-light and action-focused.

There are likely to be a range of outcome factors, including both local and external evidence, which could be considered as part of this self-evaluation. For example:

- progress in closing the gap;
- progress towards meeting stretch aims;

- progress on (aspects of) the National Improvement Framework (NIF) priorities and outcomes for children and young people;
- key attainment outcomes;
- destination outcomes;
- inspection outcomes;
- information gathered from locality working, from recovery visits and other related activities undertaken through engagement with Education Scotland;
- what children and young people say about their experiences and outcomes in key areas; and
- views of school, establishment, service leaders and staff.

It is important that this local group, in liaison with the Operational Group, discusses the focus and other key information in advance of the Collaborative Improvement work starting.

### **Stage 3: Preparing for the ‘fieldwork’**

- The host authority will now be in a clear position to know exactly what area it wants to explore, and how. It will now draw together a succinct paper identifying what it is seeking to achieve from the forthcoming fieldwork. This is crucial to the success of the activity. This will be shared with the Operational Group.
- It is anticipated that there are likely to be aspects of practice worthy of sharing in every Collaborative Improvement episode. It is important that these are not lost or overlooked.
- A round table discussion should take place to scope out each individual the Collaborative Improvement engagement. This is the point where detailed planning and timetabling takes place. This should be led by the Local Organisational Group in liaison with the Operational Group.
- The Local Organisational Group will work together to ensure that the aims set out by the local authority are met.
- Colleagues from Education Scotland and ADES now have considerable experience in the practicalities of planning and organisation and will support fully the local authority in ensuring the smooth-running of the process.

### **Stage 4: Collective activity resulting from priority area/s identified:**

#### **What does this look like and what happens now?**

This is the main stage of Collaborative Improvement.

This stage enables colleagues (from within the host authority and beyond) to come together to take a closer look at identified areas of priority for support and improvement. Led by the host authority, colleagues from ADES and Education Scotland now have the opportunity to work with key authority personnel to explore priority areas and to look for ways to help address identified challenges.

- The assumption is that, as conditions permit, this will now be undertaken in-person, though with an element of online engagement
- There is no definitive template as to the duration of each Collaborative Improvement activity. Most episodes to date have involved at least 2-3 days team engagement
- Each episode opens with a welcome and scene setting from the respective Director
- This is followed by a joint Education Scotland-ADES overview of the process

- One sample of a possible timetable is included as Appendix 2. This is for illustrative purposes only. Each Collaborative Improvement engagement will be bespoke to each individual host authority.

### **Stage 5: Capturing findings and recording**

Each host local authority is expected to produce a report based on the Collaborative improvement. The report should include a focus on action and next steps.

It is important that findings from the Collaborative Improvement engagement are summarised in a report to which all participants are involved. The host authority will be responsible for finalising the report, which should reflect input from Education Scotland and ADES colleagues. It will be important that next steps are clearly outlined, with timescales identified where possible. This should take account of the local authority's established standards and quality reporting procedures.

In drafting the report, key colleagues from the Local Organisational Group should offer feedback. Good practice would suggest that team members should also see the emerging report. The report will be shared with the Strategic Group in order to ensure oversight of the Collaborative Improvement process and its outcomes.

It is very likely that colleagues from the host local authority involved will also want to share key messages from Collaborative Improvement with Elected Members, through local committee processes. This has happened in almost all cases to date.

It is likely other learning/benefits will emerge from the engagement, for example, learning which could be applied in other contexts, benefits for participants. Wherever possible, these benefits should also be recorded and shared across the system.

In the highly unlikely event that a local authority feels that it is unable to produce a report with which key leaders are satisfied, a 'fail-safe' should be produced. This will be in the form of a short, factual statement explaining the position reached. This will be agreed by senior personnel from the local authority, ADES and Education Scotland.

### **Stage 6: Moving forward: supporting progress and the implementation of the authority's plan of action**

In order to support progress and improvement in the identified area of focus, it will be important for partners to continue to work together to:

- implement the plan of action through planned meetings and delivery of the agreed continued support between key local authority personnel, Education Scotland and other relevant partners;
- help identify examples of practice worthy of sharing with other local authorities; and
- develop plans for further engagement with identified local authorities which may be able to help the host authority further in its continued improvement journey. One example might be where an identified local authority has already started similar work.

As well as the learning and actions for participating local authorities, there will also be learning for participating colleagues and, potentially, other local authorities. Sharing the learning nationally from each episode will be an important feature of Collaborative Improvement. This should be done in various forms, including after each individual Collaborative Improvement episode and, for example, after a number of Collaborative Improvement episodes, in order to 'gather up' learning.

## 6. Roles and responsibilities

### Role of host / participating local authority

*This is the local authority in which Collaborative Improvement engagement will take place.*

- The host local authority leads the process, from beginning to end.
- At least two months in advance of engaging in the process, the host local authority should undertake necessary and relevant preparatory work in terms of considering its area of focus.
- The host local authority will provide relevant and useful data, intelligence and evidence for the self-evaluation process (the assumption is that data should already be available, rather than be created only for this purpose).
- Senior staff in the local authority engage in purposeful self-evaluation discussions which help identify both strengths and meaningful areas for improvement.
- Local authority personnel oversee the smooth-running of the process, including ensuring that members of the Collaborative Improvement Team have access to all relevant documentation and data.
- The local authority shares the draft report with relevant personnel in ADES and Education Scotland for comment, as detailed in Stage 5 of this guidance.
- Officers engage in a review of progress at an agreed (later) date.

### Role of the Collaborative Improvement Team involved with the local authority

This is a team of colleagues both from the host local authority and beyond (other local authorities, ADES and Education Scotland) who will engage directly in the process.

The team consists of:

- officers and relevant partners from the host local authority (lead role);
- colleagues from other local authority areas who have significant interest and/or experience in areas being analysed (identified via ADES);
- senior Education Scotland colleagues (relevant Head of Scrutiny / Senior Inspector /Senior Regional Advisor (SRA) and other Education Scotland officers as appropriate; and
- where at all possible, colleagues from the local authority which will be the next one to be involved in Collaborative Improvement. This is designed to foster continuity of approach.

The team will:

- engage in purposeful discussion and activity which supports Collaborative Improvement, for example, through reflective questioning to determine and or confirm the evidence-base in the host authority's self-evaluation;
- support the progress of the identified key areas of success and areas in need of further development;
- engage in supporting the progress of aspects of the plan of action through offering advice and guidance and or sharing practice from across Scotland (this is optional); and



- offer feedback on the process to help refinement and improvement.

## 7. Professional Learning

Everyone involved in Collaborative Improvement (and, in particular team members) should benefit from professional development/training prior to, and during, Collaborative Improvement activity. This will help ensure a consistency of understanding and behaviour by all those involved in the process. To date, professional learning for those involved has been limited to being part of the initial session of each episode. This will be developed further and a short session provided for/with the core team prior to each Collaborative Improvement visit. As part of professional learning, it is expected that team members read and make good use of this guidance. In addition, bespoke sessions will be organised by members of the Operational Group.

## 8. Timeline

Collaborative Improvement activity in any local authority needs to be undertaken over an agreed and time-limited period. The timeframe will be negotiated and agreed depending on the focus and proposed outcome of Collaborative Improvement and with the support of appropriately skilled and experienced colleagues. The period of involvement may vary from case to case – depending, for example, on the size of the relevant local authority, but should be over a relatively short, concerted period. Appendix 3 details expectations in terms of timescales and the timeline.

**PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS GUIDANCE WILL BE REVIEWED AT THE END OF THE CI PROGRAMME.**

### Appendix 1

#### Checklist of different stages in Collaborative Improvement

The following form should be completed in partnership by the ADES and Education Scotland Leads (The SRA together with either the Senior Inspector or Head of Scrutiny for the host education authority.) This should then be sent to the Strategic Operation Group before the Collaborative Improvement engagement begins.

Name of Host Local Authority: (at least 8 weeks in advance) Initial meeting to discuss the process:
Date(s) of Collaborative Improvement (agreed at least 7 weeks in advance):
Focus of Collaborative Improvement: (agreed 6 weeks in advance)

Rationale for focus:
Names of leads from ADES and Education Scotland's Regional and Scrutiny Teams: (identified according to plan)
Team members from ADES (i.e. from councils other than host): Agreed at least 6 weeks in advance
Team members from Education Scotland: (Agreed at least 6 weeks in advance)
Team members from host local authority (if known):
Date for team pre-meeting: (to take place at least 2 weeks before the main fieldwork)
Date for draft report to be circulated to the core team involved in Collaborative Improvement: (this is best done as soon after the fieldwork as possible e.g. within 2-3 weeks)
Date for meeting between leads from each organisation to discuss the draft report (within 4-5 weeks of the fieldwork)
Date for report to be circulated to the Strategic Operation Group:
Date for final reporting arrangements (as per local S & Q reporting arrangements):

## Appendix 2

### Exemplar Programme

To achieve a successful outcome, Collaborative Improvement requires careful planning and preparation.

Prior to Day 1 of the Collaborative Improvement, the focus of the Collaborative Improvement activity needs to have been carefully thought through and agreed.

Importantly, the host local authority must ask itself – and be very clear about – what it hopes to 'get' from Collaborative Improvement – specifically and in its own words.

Collaborative Improvement must be bureaucracy-light and require participants to read only what is essential to their effective involvement. There will, however, be a need for shared documentation. This should be agreed, finalised and shared with all participants at least one week prior to the event itself.

### Collaborative Improvement in action:

#### Day 1:

- Welcome and Introductions

- Director of Education (or equivalent) present
- Local Authority welcomes all involved
- Director and relevant senior personnel initiate the process by setting the context of/for the Local Authority
  
- Key leads from Education Scotland and ADES then talk through how Collaborative Improvement works i.e. the process.
  
- Opportunity for questions and discussion
  
- The Local Authority Directorate leads now start to explain how they want the Collaborative Improvement process to work (specifically).
  
- This is likely to include the local authority selecting key themes or specific areas of focus or examination
  
- If this is the case, time will then be allocated for colleagues to meet in (separate) groups to dissect the areas of focus.
  
- An identified colleague from the local authority (facilitator) would lead each of these groups. Each group would start with some form of introduction/background/context setting to allow colleagues from outwith the local authority to get a grasp of the key issues and a necessary level of detail.
  
- A recorder should be appointed for each group in order to ensure key points are noted.
  
- While meeting in sub-groups has clear advantages, the potential risk in this approach is that colleagues learn only about one narrow area of the local authority's work. It is therefore important that some form of whole-group discussion follows, allowing all involved to see the 'bigger authority picture'.

## **Day 2:**

Day 2 builds on and develops the work of Day 1.

There is no template as to how this should operate, however it is likely to include the following:

- some form of review of Day 1;
- the opportunity for participants to ask questions that they may have started to form;
- the opportunity for participants to clarify issues in order to help them contribute fully to the process;
- the chance for participants to work with colleagues other than those they worked with in Day 1;
- some form of Plenary session to start to form conclusions;
- potential use of a Blue Sky Thinking Session to lift the focus to new possibilities and different ways of doing things; and
- the opportunity for all participants to reflect on the Collaborative Improvement process itself.

NOTE: Most Collaborative Improvement activity will be undertaken in either 2 or 3 days (main fieldwork). If a 3 day model is preferred, the same key elements as above will be covered but over a different timescale and perhaps in more depth.

**Appendix 3**  
**Draft Reporting Outline/Template**

<p><b>Background</b>          (Information on Collaborative Improvement process)</p>
<p><b>Focus for the Collaborative Improvement</b></p>
<p><b>Rationale for selecting this area</b></p>
<p><b>Team composition</b></p>
<p><b>Brief information on who was involved</b>          (High level information on teams from host authority, ADES and Education Scotland)</p>
<p><b>Methodology</b></p>
<p><b>Key Findings</b></p>
<p><b>Positive features of the CI</b></p>
<p><b>Areas to consider to support further improvement</b></p>
<p><b>Next steps / action planning</b></p>
<p><b>Making Connections</b></p>
<p><b>Appendices</b>          (For example, links to initial presentation, PowerPoint used by ADES / ES)</p>

## **Appendix 4**

### **Timeline for each bespoke Collaborative Improvement (8-week period)**

- Week - 8: Initial discussion with the host authority, Education Scotland and ADES re the Collaborative Improvement process.
- Week - 7: Dates for Collaborative Improvement agreed between host authority, ADES and Education Scotland
- Week - 6: Focus for Collaborative Improvement engagement agreed between the host authority, ADES and Education Scotland
- Week – 6: Team members from ADES and Education Scotland identified
- Week - 3: Timetable of activities negotiated and agreed with leads from Education Scotland, ADES and the host authority.
- Week - 2: Programme/timetable/access to documentation made available to all members of the Collaborative Improvement team.

### **Timeline for writing and reporting outcomes from Collaborative Improvement**

- See Appendix 1 for details
- The aim is that the report is finalised within 6-7 weeks of the completion of the CI fieldwork.