



THREE-ISLAND COLLABORATIVE IMPROVEMENT REVIEW

Report by Chief Officer for Education 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 the second Three-Island Collaborative Improvement Review that took place in May 2023 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. The collaborative review that took place in June 2023 was the second in a series of three.
- 2.4 Senior officers from the three authorities worked with ADES and Education Scotland staff to identify an agreed focus on the Broad General Education (BGE) in secondary schools, encompassing S1-3. The overarching review question was: **In the context of our island communities, how well does the secondary BGE curriculum engage and meet the needs of all learners, equipping them for learning, life and work?** 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 offer in S1-3
 - 2) Curricular transitions and articulation between stages (P7-S1 and S3-S4)
 - 3) Assessment, moderation and achievement in the BGE.
- 2.5 The majority of the review activity was undertaken online with participants drawn from the three authority areas and partner organisations. Education Scotland provided an officer to be based within each island area to undertake face-to-face focus groups and reviews of evidence.

- 2.6 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 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 findings of the review will be incorporated into respective National Improvement Framework plans for the next academic year.

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:

Background Papers:

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	2.1.1 – Attainment rates continue to improve.
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.
- 5.3 With the support of ADES and Education Scotland, all thirty-two authorities committed to work together to undertake 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 form an effective collaboration to undertake a review. This

collaboration was successful in delivering the first review in 2022 and it was agreed to retain the same structure for a second review in 2023.

- 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.

DETAIL

- 6.1 The Collaborative Review Project Team was reconvened in April 2023 with a remit to reflect on the 2022 review and agree the focus for 2023 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 Regional Team. In the interests of learning lessons from the first review, it was agreed to take a hybrid approach for 2023. The majority of activity would take place online but officers from Education Scotland would be present in each island area to lead local focus groups and analyse evidence in-situ. An additional officer was provided by Education Scotland for the Comhairle to focus specifically on Gaelic curriculum and GME.
- 6.2 Following on from the focus on the Senior Phase last year, the project team agreed that this year, the evaluation should consider the other years of secondary education, specifically the S1-3 BGE. To that end, the review question was agreed to be:

In the context of our island communities, how well does the secondary BGE curriculum engage and meet the needs of all learners, equipping them for learning, life and work?

- 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 Offer in S1-3

- The purpose of the S1-3 curriculum
- The role of the S3 year
- The ability of the S1-3 curriculum to meet the needs of all learners
- Breadth of subjects vs. quality vs. equity (should we offer everything everywhere?)
- Curriculum structural models (2:2:2 or 3:3, breadth & depth in S3)
- Interdisciplinary Learning or a subject-based preparation for SQA awards
- Use of digital platforms to enable access
- Gaelic curricular pathways (CNES Only)

2) Curricular Transitions and Articulation Between Stages (P7-S1 and S3-S4)

- Collaboration between staff and across phases
- Curricular progression and avoiding duplication of content
- Skills progression (for learning, life and work)
- Validity of assessment across phases
- Loss of learning during summer, esp. P7-S1
- Consistency/standardisation of curriculum in associated primary schools
- The ability of the S1-3 curriculum to meet the needs of all learners during transition
- Impact of the type/model of primary school on transition to secondary curriculum

3) Assessment, Moderation and Achievement in the BGE

- Assessment of progress – in the “responsibility of all” areas, in subjects/curricular areas
- Accreditation of attainment (availability, equity, desirability, early presentation)
- Recording of achievement at end of BGE

- Confidence in assessment judgements
- Approaches to moderation
- Meaningfulness of assessment information provided to parents and learners.
- Preparation of learners for formal assessment in Senior Phase.

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 deputes
- Subject teachers
- Learners
- Parents
- College staff
- Community delivery partners
- 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 after the review.

FINDINGS

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

- Learners and parents felt that our schools offer a broad curriculum with a lot of choice and many learners do well in progression through it. The general consensus was that our schools were safe and young people were well looked after, with their social and emotional needs being met.
- There is a strong desire from across the system to have a BGE curriculum that offers a wide range of experiences to give breadth of learning, which is complemented by a commitment to supporting all young people. Staff are keen to find innovative solutions to provide the best curriculum they can.
- There are some strong examples of Inter-disciplinary Learning (IDL) and working with Skills Development Scotland (SDS) to integrate elements of Developing the Young Workforce (DYW). This incorporates strong partnership links, especially from colleges and local employers, to support skills development. There is significant scope to develop this further.

- Transitions from P7 to S1 are well organised and focus on strengthening and making new relationships with new peer groups. P7 activities in primaries are organised as part of transitions and end of year projects. One parent described the young people as already feeling part of the family of the secondary school whilst still in primary. Transitions focus heavily on pastoral and relationship factors.
- There are strong pastoral transitions no matter what type of school, with staff from different contexts working together to ensure young people feel confident and secure in their next stage of education.
- Generally, there is good information given to learners to prepare them for transition from S3 to S4, although this can vary in some locations depending on the curriculum structure.
- There is a willingness to look beyond subjects at pupil readiness for the world ahead. This involves improving confidence and awareness of options available on and off the island(s).
- The focus in many schools has been on building on progression frameworks to ensure continuity and progression in learning and this is showing signs of strengthening the BGE curriculum offer in terms of the CFE entitlements.
- Some examples of cluster working across the primary sector are impacting positively on transitions and readiness for S1.
- There are strong examples of collaborative approaches to moderation being supported within local authorities and, increasingly, across Local Authority areas, especially with the support of the Northern Alliance.
- Some very strong partnership working with service level agreements is making a real impact in relation to DYW and career planning.
- Partners work very well with schools and are beginning to become embedded in aspects of the curriculum. A few are involved in curriculum planning prior to engagement with young people.
- Schools reported good systems to make sure pupils were supported in assessment to ensure barriers were removed.
- Benefits of discussions with colleagues were noted, although time/travel challenges were discussed. There was a strong will from staff to build professional networks across the islands and to enhance collaboration between schools of a similar nature.
- Subject networks were welcomed, especially for single-person departments. It was noted that the establishment of Northern Alliance subject groups had been very beneficial in supplementing local groups.

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

- The review team saw considerable evidence of post-pandemic professional retreat and regressive practice in collaboration. It is important to encourage the rebuilding of strong collaborative practice within schools, between schools and across LAs.
- The review found that, despite teachers' best efforts, the curriculum doesn't work for all learners in the BGE, with some pupils 'treading water' and not being challenged enough. A number of learners expressed comments that they felt it was a waste of time.
- There were concerns shared across the review about the structure of the S1-3 BGE curriculum, with most preferring a 2-2-2 model (courses organised as S1-2, S3-4, S5-6) but young people suggesting that there is a 2-2-2 curriculum being taught within a 3-3 structure was not serving them well. It would be worth exploring what pupils and teachers feel is

best. Young people felt there was fragmentation where there are choices at the end of S2 and again at the end of S3. There were some views that schools state that they have a 3-3 curriculum structure but it is masking a 2-2-2 or even a 2-1-1-2 structure underneath.

- It was a commonly held view that secondary education is focused on senior phase exams and, as long as that was the case, the S1-3 curriculum would be seen as a transitional 'poor relation'. This is a great missed opportunity for learners.
- The purpose of S3 is unclear and views varied about its effectiveness:
 - Does not prepare those learners who are struggling to make the jump into National Qualifications in S4.
 - Lack of challenge for some: seen as a waste of time, leading to issues with disengagement and demotivation.
 - the broadly traditional model in place does not develop appropriate skills/experiences to support all young people.
- There was little evidence of interdisciplinary or thematic learning coming through from some focus groups but there were suggestions that the pandemic had resulted a set-back in this regard and that some collaborative practices had not returned.
- Schools were not able to speak about current innovations, national expectations or significant national reviews such as 'Muir' and 'Hayward' and there was no recognition of the impact the recommendations of these reports will have of their sector. Significant need for professional engagement with national standards and activity.
- Digital/remote access to learning was not seen as a good option in terms of whole-course delivery: the human relationship is still the most important thing and some areas have poor broadband to support this approach.
- It was equally recognised that digital learning will play a critical role in future schooling and will be essential in maintaining a breadth of curriculum offer in many schools.
- Issues with repetition of content from Primary in S1 in some settings was identified, offset by the need to mitigate the 'loss of learning' over summer. Some felt that the 'summer loss' issue was a red herring, and the issue was more to do with demotivating and disengaging S1-3 curriculum offer and an assumption (without assessment) that learners would need to repeat learning from primary.
- Variance in the level and quality of curricular transition experiences dependent on which schools (not just which Local Authority) pupils belong to. How can discussions to support consistency happen with diverse associated school groups?
- Local Authorities and schools need to build on some of the strong partnership working to encourage all schools to review skills progression, career planning and DYW from an earlier stage within the BGE, ensuring there is a minimum offer for all young people.
- Both parents and young people feel that progression and assessment within S1-3 and beyond into the senior phase is hard to understand and makes decisions about future pathways difficult.
- Over thirteen years since Curriculum for Excellence was introduced, parents continue to report a lack of understanding of levels, assessment and reporting within the curriculum and they generally find secondary reporting uninformative and unhelpful. They also report that schools use too much professional language and educational abbreviations when speaking to and reporting to parents. Clear plain language is needed.
- Very few schools (staff, pupils and parents) could talk about effective recording, tracking and reporting of wider achievement. Several spoke of this being completely absent.

- Across all Local Authorities and schools, there was a lack of evidence of strategic policies on assessment.
- Moderation is lacking strategic direction and is far too focused on being in sectoral silos, and the focus in secondary is too greatly on senior phase (linked to provision of evidence for the Alternative Curriculum Model used for SQA assessment in 2022). A much stronger focus is needed on S1-3 moderation linked to primaries.
- It was very challenging to move teachers from focusing on the operational and procedural (e.g. tracking) to the principles, purpose and pedagogy of assessment and moderation. More focus is needed from Local Authority and school leaders to build this capacity.
- School staff use too much professional language and educational abbreviations when speaking to and reporting to parents. Clear plain language is needed.

7.3 The project team has considered the findings of the review and have identified the following areas as focus priorities for future improvement planning linked to the three sub-themes of the review:

1) The Curriculum Offer in S1-3

- Opportunities must be given for staff to engage with current national expectations in curriculum design and to consider the findings of recent national reviews affecting their sector. This should be a significant focus of professional learning. The curriculum should increasingly be skills focused rather than on imparting knowledge.
- Schools must work to give a strong and focused purpose and relevance to the S1-3 curriculum and most especially S3 to maintain engagement of learners and ensure they are ready for the senior phase.
- Schools need to evaluate their curriculum in terms of its inclusivity and ability to meet the needs of all learners, especially those that are able learners or have varying degrees of additional support need.
- Schools must focus on a curriculum review of S1-3 that includes revisit of design principles and purpose.
- Consideration must be given to evaluating the correct curriculum structure for each school. It should not be the case that historic curriculum models hide behind a façade of a modern CFE structure.
- Schools must embrace approaches to delivery of interdisciplinary and thematic cross-curricular learning in S1-3 and break down the artificial subject silos that are built on senior phase structures.
- Whilst there was some evidence of partnership working in curriculum delivery, there is significant scope to grow this work and have partners working alongside school staff to identify and plan learning.
- Whilst there were some concerns about equity of access to digital technologies, this area is recognised as being pivotal to the curriculum, both in terms of enhancing learners' digital skills and in broadening the curriculum offer, especially in smaller schools. This must form a thread of curriculum redesign in the BGE.

2) Curricular Transitions and Articulation Between Stages (P7-S1 and S3-S4)

- Whilst pastoral transitions are recognised to be very good, the same is not true of curricular transitions. Secondary schools and their associated primaries must work together to create more effective transitions in support of curricular progression. This is linked to the quality and use of transitional assessment information.

- It is recognised that planning and delivering effective P7-S1 curricular transition requires teachers to be given time for liaison, planning and delivery. Is there scope to develop more project-based transition work?
- The transition from S3 to S4 at the end of the BGE is very variable and is significantly dependent on the type and size of school. More focus must be given to learner pathways through the latter part of the BGE and into the senior phase, focusing on making learners more ready to progress. This is closely linked to the points above relating to BGE curriculum purpose and relevance.

3) Assessment, Moderation and Achievement in the BGE

- Schools need to develop consistent learning, teaching and assessment policies that set out clear expectations for how this will be delivered in S1-3
- Assumptions must not be made by secondary staff about prior learning in primary and the 'summer lag'. Effective use must be made of assessment information from primaries and relevant assessments conducted in S1 and beyond to ensure teachers are well informed about a learner's place in the curriculum progression.
- Schools must consider options for how assessment information and practices in gathering assessment information can work effectively across subjects and departments. This links closely to development of interdisciplinary working.
- There must be more systematic and collaborative approaches to moderation of teacher judgements in the BGE, and not just at the end of S3. More work must be done across subjects and departments to engage with the CFE benchmarks and in the understanding of standards, locally and nationally.
- Wider achievements, both with and out-with the school must be more recognised and celebrated. Schools should be tracking wider achievements and considering what they can do to create greater opportunities.
- Reporting mechanisms for learners and parents need to be reviewed with the intention of making information about learning and progress within CFE clearer and more informative. Clearer and less jargonistic language needs to be used in doing so.

7.4 In addition to the findings and feedback detailed above, the review provided specific feedback to Comhairle nan Eilean Siar about Gaelic language and Gaelic Medium Education in the context of the review.

- Staff, learners and parents recognised the positive opportunities provided by Gaelic language, bilingualism and Gaelic Medium Education and that a good immersive experience in the language in primary prepares them well for secondary education and opens up new and different opportunities for them.
- Learners taking Gaelic in S1-3 were recognised to do well in the subject and many saw it as a positive route to qualifications in the senior phase.
- Good work is being undertaken in the development of thematic transition projects in P7 across schools that allow children to meet and speak Gaelic together whilst undertaking relevant transition activities. This included common project work, such as the 'Metagama' project, the John Muir Award and sports events.
- The same is true of the curriculum in Gaelic as the general feedback provided above. It must be made much more relevant and engaging for young people, both in language lessons and in Gaelic Medium subjects across the curriculum.

- Learning in Gaelic was often described as being demotivating, dry and not interesting by learners. More use of interdisciplinary and thematic learning with contexts developed in discussion with young people would drive greater engagement.
- There was concern expressed by both learners and parents that the learners lose interest in Gaelic as they progress through the BGE and that curriculum and approaches to learning from primary are not sustained, resulting in disengagement and then loss of learners to other subjects. This must be addressed through the S1-3 curriculum offer.
- Learners spoke of an eagerness to be given both structured and informal opportunities to speak and use Gaelic beyond the formal learning environment of the classroom. Schools should explore more options to do so. Activities such as Deasbad and FilmG were recognised as positives but there was a sense of these opportunities being limited to ‘an elite few’.
- Whilst some schools had good systems for recognising achievements in Gaelic language, cultural or music events within and beyond the school, this was inconsistent and parents particularly were keen to see schools to more to promote these wider achievements as a positive benefit of Gaelic.

7.5 Findings of the review will be shared with senior managers across our primary and secondary schools and actions for delivery will be taken forward into the next iteration of our integrated LA Improvement Plan/National Improvement Framework Plan.

CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Participation in the Collaborative Review has allowed the Comhairle to receive high-quality collegiate feedback on its own work within the Broad General Education in secondary schools 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: **In the context of our island communities, how well does the secondary BGE curriculum engage and meet the needs of all learners, equipping them for learning, life and work?** The evidence points to important areas of good practice and a positive experience of transition and S1-3 curriculum for many learners but there are important areas of inconsistency within and across schools. There was a strong sense that the curriculum needs to be significantly refreshed to make sure its purposeful, relevant and engaging for all learners. It should also be increasingly interdisciplinary and skills focused. The S1-3 BGE needs to be seen as a curriculum with its own intrinsic value and merit in equipping pupils for future learning, life and work and not a second-class junior partner to the senior phase and national qualifications.
- 8.3 A third collaborative review is expected to be planned for the summer of 2024 to complete the cycle of reviews.