



Early learning and childcare (ELC) Improvement Programme

Programme Evaluation

December 2023





**Keeping The Promise at
the heart of what we do**

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Executive summary

We are an independent scrutiny body which supports improvement. That means we look at the quality of care in Scotland to ensure it meets high standards. As part of this remit, we deliver the early learning and childcare (ELC) improvement programme.

The overarching aim of the ELC improvement programme is to support funded settings across Scotland to improve the quality of ELC and meet the National Standard. The programme focuses on providing targeted support for those settings currently, or at risk of, not meeting the National Standard through a programme of sessions and peer support opportunities. In addition to this, the programme provides a range of universal resources to support all settings with improving quality.

We have been requested by Scottish Government to conduct a self-evaluation of the programme to inform future funding decisions about the value and future potential of the programme.

Evaluation methodology

Surveys and interviews were undertaken to gather the views of participants of the programme and our stakeholders.

The findings outlined in this report cannot be taken as fully representative of the sector, however the high participation rate detailed within the report gives a robust snapshot of current views of the ELC improvement programme.

Experiences of taking part in the ELC Improvement Programme

Feedback on the programme is overwhelmingly positive with services citing accessibility and the opportunity to engage with other participants across the country as highlights.

“It’s been great to hear similar views and experiences and to know they are not alone.”

(Inspector)

“It’s been very isolating recently and even just being validated by Vicky, Hillary and Linda has taken a weight off their shoulders.”

(Inspector)

We offer support to services through weekly teaching sessions and alternate reflect and review sessions which are scheduled over a 12-week period. Drop-in project clinics and one-to-one support are also offered to ensure that all learners find the programme accessible and engaging.

The programme enjoys an average. 85% attendance rate across both our teaching and reflect and review sessions.

Participants told us:

“touching base online and the dialogue and support during sessions has been particularly helpful.”

“I have loved the regular opportunity for support it really helped to keep us on track and ensure we were carrying out the methodology properly.”

Bitesize sessions and resources in relation to good practice and legislative requirements are accessible through The Hub and valued for their simplicity and accessibility.

Since the team introduced universal ‘bitesize’ resources in January 2021, we have received 208,405 engagements with these resources.

“The new framework and quick wins are a great starting point for our new providers. I liked the video format which made the information easy to understand and appealed to my visual learning style. I have also found the resources useful and have signposted providers to these. “

(Service)

Resources need to be regularly reviewed to ensure they are kept up to date and relevant to all service types.

“It’s quite difficult to focus on training during the day as children are with us and we do not get time off the floor to attend training. So online pre-recorded training that we can access in our own time is preferable.” (Childminder)

“They are short, easy to understand and relatable for most daycare of children services.”

(Service)

The programme facilitates peer support through the structure, and during quarterly stand-alone sessions to former programme participants and local authority support staff. These sessions support the sharing of learning, provide opportunities to collaborate and support a resilient workforce. Participants told us the benefits they find from these sessions:

“Hearing from people in our industry who have had to overcome issues.”

“A mix of information, real life experiences and networking opportunity too.”

Impact of the ELC improvement programme

It is important to note that the impact of quality improvement methodology takes time, with the biggest change in services now meeting the criteria of the National Standard having participated in earlier cohorts of the programme.

Using comparable data of 35 participants from cohort 1-4, we evidenced that 25 (71%) are now meeting the National Standard. Out of the remaining 10 services, 9 have shown an increase in some of the key question evaluations.

From 35 services who have not participated or completed the programme, only 9 (26%) are now meeting the National Standard. Of the remaining 26 services 9 show improvement in one or more of the key question evaluations.

Using our key performance indicator data we measure participants confidence in using quality improvement methodology on completion of the programme.

Prior to commencing the programme 34% of participants were confident in using quality improvement to improve outcomes for children in their service.

Following completion of the programme 96% of participants were confident in using quality improvement methodology to improve outcomes for children in their service.

Learning and development sessions delivered to local authority teams support a shared understanding of quality improvement science and methodology. These sessions focus on 'observation and communication for quality improvement' and are very popular with the demand increasing. Four face-to-face sessions have been delivered with requests for more increasing. The inclusion of scrutiny and assurance team managers and local inspectors at the point of delivery ensures consistency and supports collaboration and relationship building.

Feedback from these sessions tells us:

"Really great content and very relevant to the needs of the authorities. - Lots of opportunity for discussion. - Having the practical element took the content from abstract to concrete. - Good links to research to strengthen messages."

(Local authority quality support staff)

"I think this is going to be very helpful in moving the team forward in their quality assurance and quality improvement roles. The self reflection and developing self awareness will also support the team's interactions and feedback in settings."

(Local authority quality manager)

Key success factors

- Simplicity of language supporting quality improvement in an ELC context.
- Flexibility and creativity to adapt and change to the needs of the programme participants and the sector.
- Valuable connection between the sector and scrutiny and assurance colleagues, promoting positive relationships which emphasises the focus of working together to ensure the best outcomes for children and their families.
- Peer support offers the opportunity to collaborate nationally and supports the building of a resilient workforce.
- Strong collaboration with other agencies, in particular close partnership with local authorities.
- Face to face delivery of learning and development sessions to central staff teams to support the improvement of quality and a shared approach.

Conclusions

Feedback on the national targeted and universal support delivered through the programme continues to be overwhelmingly positive. Data gathered from a random sample of 35 participants from cohorts 1-4 evidenced that 25 (71%) are now meeting the National Standard. Out of the remaining 10 services, 9 have shown an increase in some of the key question evaluations. In direct comparison from 35 services who have not participated or completed the programme, 9 (26%) are now meeting the National Standard. Of the remaining 26 services only 9 show improvement in one or more of the key question evaluations.

Demand for support amongst eligible settings continues to exceed the number of places available on each cohort. This is a barrier to some settings being able to take part.

Feedback continues to indicate that a wider group of settings would also benefit from participating to ensure high quality care for all. Surveys completed by childminders shared with us that from the 232 respondents 97% indicated that they wished to learn more about quality improvement methodology and how it could be applied within their own settings.

The evaluation clearly demonstrates that there is a continuing growing demand for the support provided by the ELC improvement team. Without continuation of funding, it is very likely that many settings will struggle to make the level of improvements to the quality of care which has been realised through this ongoing programme. To continue to support settings to drive up the quality of care for children, through targeted, universal and peer supports an extension to the funding of the current programme is essential.

Recommendations

The following recommendations will ensure that the programme continues to build on the success it has to date:

Recommendation 1: Continue to offer targeted support to all eligible ELC settings to support the improvement of quality and positive outcomes for children and their families.

Recommendation 2: Extend the offer of a targeted ELC programme to all eligible ELC, childminder and school aged childcare settings.

Recommendation 3: Increase the size of the ELC Improvement team to offer targeted support to services who do not meet the eligibility criteria, supporting continuous quality improvement for all.

Recommendation 4: Provide increased opportunities for face-to-face training and development to support consistent, high-quality child-centred care.

Recommendation 5: Continue to build and develop our universal quality improvement support resources to ensure the topics and context are relatable and easily accessible.

Introduction and context

We are the independent scrutiny and improvement body for care, social work and child protection services and has a significant role in improving services for adults and children across Scotland. As part of this remit, we deliver the Scottish Government funded early learning and childcare (ELC) improvement programme.

We know that high quality ELC can make an important contribution to children's outcomes and life chances, particularly when they are growing up in disadvantaged circumstances. The overarching aim of the improvement programme is to support funded ELC settings across Scotland to improve the quality of ELC provision and meet the National Standard. The link between high quality early learning and care, and positive outcomes is well evidenced. The programme focuses on providing targeted support for those settings currently or at risk of, not meeting the National Standard. Additionally, the programme provides a range of universal support that ELC settings can access to improve quality.

The National Standard for ELC settings comprises of ten quality criteria that ELC settings who offer funded childcare places are required to meet (including a minimum grade of good from our quality evaluations: care and support, environment, management and leadership and staffing). Achieving these standards is particularly important in the context of Scottish Government's 'Funding Follows the Child' and the expansion of funded hours, to promote consistent high-quality provision across all setting types and therefore enable families to have a genuine choice of high-quality settings for their children.

Early learning and childcare improvement programme - Overview

Our ELC improvement programme offers targeted and universal support.

Our targeted learning communities comprise of ELC setting from across Scotland. These communities encourage and promote the development of learning networks. Learning communities are made up of funded provider settings, who have been nominated by the local authorities who commission their services. Local authorities, as the 'guarantors' of quality', are asked to prioritise services they believe would benefit most from our programme of support. Information sessions are offered to local authority support staff to ensure consistent messages are delivered. This supports better outcomes for children, families, and staff within their local area.

Peer support is a significant aspect of our work, the value of which is well documented. We offer peer support not only through the delivery of our programme but during quarterly stand-alone sessions to former programme participants and local authority support staff. These sessions support the sharing of learning, provide opportunities to collaborate and support the building of a resilient workforce. Topics covered to date have included inspection confidence, Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) resources and workforce wellbeing.

Through our universal support programme, we provide a range of universal resources to support all early learning settings across Scotland with the aim of improving quality. Resources are made available through the ELC improvement section on The Hub.

Programme evaluation

Targeted support

Cohort 5 of our programme commenced late April 2023. Attendees are services who were on our waiting list compiled during the selection process for cohort 4 participants in September 2022. Due to inspection activity, some services on the waiting list since September 2022 have been regraded, leading in some cases to evaluations falling below three (adequate). Where these evaluations fell below three, we opened up conversations with the service inspector to establish their suitability or ‘readiness’ to participate within the programme.

The delivery format has evolved. We carried out our own ‘test of change’ following feedback from the external evaluation (September 2022) around the effectiveness of ‘breakout rooms’. We now offer 12 improvement advisor led sessions alternating between core ‘teaching’ sessions and ‘reflect and review’ sessions. In addition to this, we offer 1-1 support during our project clinic sessions with services encouraged to ‘book an appointment’ as and when needed, to discuss their projects. We have already noted benefits of this change through an increase in engagement, understanding and attendance.

- Cohort 4 average attendance – 78%
- Cohort 5 average attendance – 85%

We are currently working with cohort 6 of the programme. We wrote to all 32 local authorities to offer targeted improvement support. Spaces are limited so we asked local authorities to submit a list in order of priority, including those on their own local authority improvement plans. Recruitment again was processed through discussion with inspectors and in some cases with local authority ELC leads.

Any service which has not been allocated a place on this cohort has been directed to the ‘universal’ quality improvement support held on The Hub.

The team are in the process of collecting nominations for Cohort 7 of the programme which will commence in January 2024.

Number of services and individuals who have participated in targeted improvement support:

	Cohorts 1-4	Cohort 5	Cohort 6
Number of services	267	40	43
Number of participants	290	65	56
Number of children potentially impacted	17,734	2,899	3,271

Impact of programme attendance

Although we are unable to link all improvements made to the work of the programme, we can see, using comparable data, that services who have attended and completed the programme have made better progress towards meeting the National Standard than those who have not.

Summary of a sample of 35 services from cohorts 1-4 show:

Services now meeting the National Standard of those services who attended and completed the programme.
25 out of 35 services (71%)

Summary of the sample of those remaining 10 services who attended cohorts 1-4 and completed the programme who do not meet the national standard this shows:

Services showing increased evaluations in at least one key area	Services showing decreased evaluations in at least one key area	Services stayed the same in at least one key area	Services cancelled
9 out of 10 services	3 out of 10 services	8 out of 10 services	0 out of 10 services

Note: Some of the services listed above have increased in some of the key question evaluations as well as decreased or stayed the same. Therefore, some services can appear in multiple columns and have been included more than once.

Summary of a sample of 35 services who did not attend or complete the programme show:

Services now meeting the National Standard of those who did not attend or fully complete the programme
9 out of 35 (26%)

Summary of the sample of the remaining 26 services who did not attend or complete the programme who do not meet the National Standard:

Services showing increased evaluations in at least one key area	Services decreased evaluations in at least one key area	Services stayed the same	Services cancelled
9 out of 26 services	13 out of 26 services	12 out of 26 services	4 out of 26 services

Note: Some of the services listed above have increased in some of the key question evaluations as well as decreased or stayed the same. Therefore, some services can appear in multiple columns and have been included more than once.

Using our key performance indicator data, we measure participants confidence in using quality improvement methodology on completion of the programme.

Prior to commencing the programme ,34% of participants were confident in using quality improvement methodology to improve outcomes for children in their service.

Following completion of the programme, 96% of participants were confident in using quality improvement methodology to improve outcomes for children in their service.

Programme feedback cohort 5

The inspection plan is dynamic. While inspections are planned for the year these are often changed to accommodate inspections on a risk and intelligence basis.

33 services attended and completed cohort 5 of the programme, as of 12 October 2023, 20 inspections have been carried out. It is however important to note that the impact of quality improvement methodology takes time to embed with the biggest changes in service evaluations noted for those services who participated in earlier cohorts.

Services now meeting the National Standard of those inspected services on cohort 5.
7 out of 20 (35%)

Summary of the remaining inspected services on cohort 5 who are still not meeting the National Standard:

Services showing increased evaluations in at least one key area	Services decreased evaluations in at least one key area	Services stayed the same	Services cancelled
12 out of 13 services	4 out of 13 services	1 out of 13 Services	0 out of 13 services

Note: Some of the services listed above have increased in some of the key question evaluations as well as decreased or stayed the same. Therefore, some services can appear in multiple columns and have been included more than once.

Qualitative feedback from cohort 5 participants.

“I just wanted to thank you all for allowing us to participate in this improvement programme, we have found this extremely informative and helpful, and we will take this methodology forward in the future to make additional improvements across our setting.”

“It is really helpful to see the level of engagement from our settings. I have had discussions with some of the settings who have participated, and they have certainly felt it a worthwhile programme and it has provided them with knowledge and confidence to use the quality improvement approach in other aspects of their improvement work.”

“I was speaking with two of my services this week that are involved in this cohort. I wanted to share how excited and inspired they sounded after their sessions! None of this was provoked, I believe they were genuinely keen to share their experience with me! They’ve said ...”

“It’s absolutely fab.”

“Breakout rooms are great. They love that these will be consistent, and they can build relationships with other people throughout the six sessions.”

“It’s been great to hear similar views and experiences and to know they are not alone.”

“It’s been very isolating recently and even just being validated by Vicky, Hillary and Linda has taken a weight off their shoulders.”

“It was great to hear about the improvement methodology and how they can break things down into smaller, more manageable tasks ... The penny has dropped from what was raised at inspection (This one excited me most!).”

Case Studies

Study 1: A local authority setting within North Lanarkshire Council area

Overview

The nursery class is registered to provide care to a maximum of 40 children aged from two years to those not yet attending primary school. Of those 40 children, no more than four should be aged two years to under three years old.

The service is based in North Lanarkshire Council and was nominated to attend the ELC improvement programme for cohort four (22/23) having recently received evaluations below the National Standard.

The service was inspected again in May 2023 and as a result clearly demonstrated very good outcomes for children. Their evaluations were increased, meaning they now meet the National Standard.

Experience of taking part

They embraced the quality improvement programme from the start, following the step-by-step approach and applying this to their service. They very much valued the opportunity to engage with their peers nationally who were on their own improvement journeys, sharing ideas and learning. This supported a recognition that it was 'okay to improve at your own pace.'

One of the key learning points was around the importance and impact of involving everyone in the journey, gathering feedback and perspectives, and evaluating these effectively before then planning how to move forward.

The service leadership team recognise 'the team' as key to the improvement journey, having everyone on board and working towards the same thing. This has impacted positively on confidence in roles at all levels, resulting in an 'infectious enthusiasm' throughout the nursery.

"We are all excited for coming back after the summer break."
(Nursery Leadership Team)

Learning the importance of smaller steps and focussing on changing one thing at a time, has led to a confident team who embrace change in a structured and focussed manner. The wider 'ripple' effects of this approach are evident throughout the nursery.

"It is better to do one thing really well, with quality, than do ten things mediocre." (Nursery Leadership Team)

Quality improvement methodology is now applied to every aspect of the nursery, utilising the PDSA model to plan and evaluate small changes, identifying what works and supporting staff to understand the value in learning when something doesn't work.

"They participated in the improvement programme and absolutely valued every element of it. They chose planning children's experiences as their improvement project and the difference it has made to children's experiences has been fabulous." (Inspector)

Impact

There is now a continual cycle of quality improvement embedded throughout the team and setting. Staff critically reflect on practise and their own knowledge and skills, identifying gaps in this and accessing appropriate training to develop and improve children's experiences.

External stakeholders' opinions and feedback are actively sought to contribute to the team's ongoing reflection and cycle of quality improvement. Staff take forward the feedback using quality improvement methodology to plan and test out their change before implementing and embedding the improvements.

"We set realistic, achievable targets and work on small changes all the time." (Nursery Leadership Team)

Staff mindset has changed from one of 'we can't do this', to 'let's find a way to do this!' This has resulted in creative solutions being found to previously insurmountable problems. This has led to an increased confidence throughout the team, and alongside robust, effective evaluation, supports professional discussions and requests to continually improve the setting.

Staff are consistent, reflective practitioners with a clear idea of how they want to move forward. Staff communicate with confidence, demonstrating strong leadership skills and a passion to deliver the best outcomes for their children and families.

"Through the project they have transformed the environment, the quality of children's play and learning and the skills of staff".
(Inspector)

Parents and children are genuine partners in the ongoing development of the nursery. Children's views are valued and respected, empowering them to lead and plan their day.

"The nursery is forever making improvements and are very open with parents in shaping changes." (Parent)

"The management team have encouraged feedback from parents and carers and have taken any feedback on board and made changes". (Parent)

Future

The team are currently utilising this model to evaluate and review the settings vision, values and aims. As is now common practise, everyone is involved in this in order to develop a vision that that is truly reflective of the aspirations of the whole nursery, reflecting the ethos of collaboration, nurture and respect.

Study 2: A private setting working in partnership with Perth and Kinross Council

Overview

The setting is registered to provide a day care of children's service to a maximum of 100 children not yet attending primary school at any one time. Of those 100, no more than 27 are aged under two years, no more than 25 are aged two years to under three years and no more than 48 are aged three years to those not yet attending primary school full time.

The service provides funded early learning and childcare for Perth and Kinross Council.

The service was nominated for the ELC Improvement Programme by Perth and Kinross council, and they participated in Cohort two in 2021/22. At the time they were nominated they had not yet been inspected as a new service.

Experience of taking part

The nursery manager found the opportunity to link with peers nationally and 'look outward' in terms of practise was of great benefit. This also provided reassurance that they weren't alone in some of the issues faced by the ELC sector. They also found the 'touching base online' and the 'dialogue and support' during sessions particularly helpful throughout the improvement journey.

They chose to work on planning as their improvement project to develop it to be more responsive and reflective of children's individual learning.

The manager reflected that their biggest learning from the programme was what they described as 'the slowing down process'. This allowed for critical reflection and the beginning of robust quality assurance and self-evaluation processes to be embedded across the setting. The recognition of the significance of bringing the staff team along with you, whilst being mindful of realistic expectations for an already busy team, was another key aspect of learning.

Impact

The first inspection of the setting took place in May 2022, and they were given evaluations below the National Standard. The service was inspected again in May 2023 and as a result of improved outcomes for children, their evaluations increased meaning they now meet the National Standard.

The inspector commented that the key difference they identified at the second inspection was the approach to quality assurance and focussed, planned evaluation for improvement. This had a significant impact on the staff team and their understanding, which was visible through their motivation, enthusiasm, and commitment to providing quality care, play and learning for children.

"By developing a focussed plan for improvement, and monitoring progress through self-evaluation, the whole team became involved and could see the impact on the service. Involving the team in this way greatly developed staff confidence and improved their motivation to learn." (Inspector)

The service worked closely with the local authority support team throughout their improvement journey, building relationships at all levels to develop honest and open communication. They worked at the pace of the staff team, and through regular contact and support they saw the confidence of the staff increase.

The reflection on training needs helped them to identify and embrace the training on offer to upskill their knowledge, ensuring a clear early year's focus. These training opportunities also brought the chance to collaborate with more colleagues from across the sector. Reflection and 'looking outwards' have been key developments across the team.

"They wanted to succeed for the benefit of their children and families." (Local authority)

Since completion of the programme the manager had developed their coaching skills and approach to bringing the team along with them every step of the way. The improvement process within the nursery was shared with the team from the start with the message 'you are all part of this journey'.

"As a whole team we learnt to 'see beyond the next inspection' and understand that sustained improvement takes time to embed."
(Nursery Manager)

The use of robust self-evaluation and quality assurance processes provide a 'safe boundary' in which staff can 'evaluate and learn'. The staff team have moved from a place of 'fear of failure' to one of 'critical reflection', with consistent evaluation in order to develop and improve.

Staff's commitment to their ongoing professional development, skills and knowledge is reflected in their shift in practice, which is now individualised, and outcome focussed, rather than task orientated.

"The lightbulb moment for me was seeing all the processes come together and the impact it was having on the team and families as a whole, just like finding all the pieces to complete a jigsaw. This is when I felt I had a great understanding of the journey I was on and the outcomes I wished to achieve." (Staff member)

The increased staff confidence and enthusiasm has resulted in an improved level of engagement from parents. The staff are keen and excited to share with parents what they are doing and actively involve them in the nursery.

"Children had enriched experiences which supported their stage of development and needs. Families were more involved in their child's learning and in the improvement of the nursery. Both children and families were experiencing enhanced nurturing relationships, and the positivity, commitment and motivation of the staff team was benefitting everyone within the service." (Inspector)

Future

There is now an ethos of continual quality improvement in the nursery, underpinned by an entire team evaluative, solution focussed approach. All achievements are consistently celebrated, no matter how small, providing praise and encouragement to everyone.

As an entire staff team, they now understand the ‘golden thread’ that sits behind all the quality assurance processes and the manager highlights this as ‘the glue that holds everything together.’

“It feels exciting again” (Nursery manager)

Universal support

Universal support is available to all ELC settings regardless of their participation in the programme.

The team regularly communicate with our scrutiny and assurance colleagues and programme participants to identify emerging themes from which universal support is developed.

The table below demonstrates the range and uptake of universal support developed and delivered by ELC Improve.

Video developed	Release date	Number of hits
Scrutiny and Assurance during Covid-19 bitesize	January 2021	1,359
Key question 5 bitesize	February 2021	72,895
Quick wins bitesize	March 2021	46,938
Introducing quality improvement Bitesize	April 2021	59,787
Quality inspection framework Bitesize	July 2021	9,955
Personal Planning Bitesize	January 2022	4,275
Covid 19 Bitesize	February 2022	2,732
Talking heads video 1	May 2022	1,467
ELC quality framework	July 2022	8,135
Talking heads video 2	February 2023	862

We published a short survey of our own to obtain feedback on the resources available through our ELC improvement HUB. The results of which have been overwhelmingly positive. Some of the feedback we received is as follows:

“The new framework and quick wins are a great starting point for our new providers. I liked the video format which made the information easy to understand and appealed to my visual learning style. I have also found the resources useful and have signposted providers to these.” (service)

“Always useful and easy to understand.” (service)

“Especially used these to support staff training” (service)

“Directed in an easy-to-understand way that supports development and offers ideas.” (service)

The survey also asked respondents to identify any topics or themes for future recordings. The ideas suggested cover a range of topics and we are working with our colleagues in scrutiny and assurance to identify the areas which we all believe will have the biggest impact in supporting our services in improving outcomes for children and their families.

Peer support

As the programme has developed, so too has our approach to peer support. We facilitate peer support not only through the structure of our programme but during quarterly, stand-alone sessions to former programme participants and local authority support staff. These sessions support the sharing of learning, provide opportunities to collaborate and support the building of a resilient workforce. Subjects covered to date have included inspection confidence, SSSC resources and workforce wellbeing.

Our most recent session was on the topic of ‘Planning for Effective Quality Assurance’. In addition to input from us on quality assurance and effective time management, the session also included input from a former programme participant. They shared their experience and the improvements they have made to their quality assurance activities as a result of participating in the programme. This was well received with participants keen to hear improvement journeys from others, which highlighted some of the challenges experienced across the ELC sector. This also resulted in independent connections being made to support ongoing improvement discussions.

Feedback from this session included:

“Lovely to hear the honest journey.... very useful.”

“I took a lot from them; they made me feel positive about how I can change things.”

“I want to explore stronger quality assurance processes and am excited by the shared practice.”

“Hearing from people in our industry who have had to overcome issues.”

“A mix of information, real life experiences and networking opportunity too.”

In response to comments made in the ELC Quality Improvement Group by a member of the Children and Young Peoples Improvement Collaborative (CYPIC),

we have developed our programme to introduce relevant quality improvement tools and signpost further learning to support services in the ongoing practical use of formal QI tools.

During 2023/2024 we introduced a private social media page to allow participants to share their thoughts, ideas and make connections with others. This replaces our previous Yammer page. Early indications through the monitoring of posts tells us that this has been a very positive. Engagements through likes, shared links, comments, and questions have increased, especially during the summer holiday break. The current cohort of the programme has an uptake of 86% of participants on the social media page.

The private social media groups will remain open to promote peer support following the conclusion of the cohorts. We will continue to monitor these and share any relevant best practice documents as they become available.

Bespoke local authority support sessions

The programme has delivered 4 face-to-face sessions to local authority central staff teams. The focus of these have been 'perspectives' and 'observation and communication for improvement' to support the training of staff in improving quality. The sessions have been well received, with two more planned for local authorities throughout the year. Planning is underway to deliver a large-scale session to headteachers and managers from the Forth Valley and West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative in 2024 which will support the upskilling of their ELC workforce.

This approach is proving to be a very popular as we have an increasing number of local authorities contacting us to discuss the support we can offer through this piece of learning and development work. These bespoke sessions provide increased opportunities to connect with the ELC workforce and provide the input and training to ensure that there are skills across the sector to deliver consistent, high quality, child centred care.

Responses to our session evaluation questionnaire included:

“Really great content and very relevant to the needs of the authorities. - Lots of opportunity for discussion. - Having the practical element took the content from abstract to concrete. - Good links to research to strengthen messages.”

“I loved it all. We will definitely go back as a team and as a RIC and pledge to put this into action.”

“Presenters in tune with the participants and acknowledging their contributions thoughts and feelings. Good balance of input and discussion. I think this is going to be very helpful in moving the team forward in their quality assurance and quality improvement roles.”

“The self-reflection and developing self-awareness will also support the team’s interactions and feedback within the settings.”

Feedback from an inspector who attended our session and carried out a subsequent inspection in a service whose staff attended told us:

“I valued the opportunity to meet with services out with the inspection focus, to build relationships and hear their thoughts and discussions. Being able to correlate this to observations of practice in the setting was beneficial in terms of identifying what learning they had taken from this training session.”

“During inspection we could begin to see the impact of the training in the quality of observations carried out, and the rich information identified.”

Following this session, we received an email to thank us for our input:

“I just wanted to say thanks again for the invitation to attend the session on Wednesday. On reflection, I have to say that it has been the best bit of CPD I have done in a long time and has given me much food for thought in terms of developing within my own role and how I can support settings going forward.” (Local authority – central staff team member)

This addition to our programme is developing. We will provide ongoing evaluation of its impact in due course.

Collaboration with other agencies

The programme team has a very close working relationship with scrutiny and assurance colleagues, sharing information to inform inspection as well as to explore themes for our universal resources.

There are good working relationships with Education Scotland, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and the Children and Young Peoples Improvement Collaborative (CYPIC) and meet on an ad-hoc basis to share and signpost each other's work.

The team meet with colleagues from The Scottish Childminder's Association (SCMA) to share the work undertaken and to find out about the improvement work already being delivered through the SCMA. A survey was carried out, through our Childminder Provider Update and our social media channels, to establish whether childminders would welcome quality improvement input from our team.

97% of the 232 respondents indicated that they wished to learn more about quality improvement methodology and how it could be applied within their own settings.

Collated results will be shared with the SCMA in a further meeting to ensure any work undertaken moving forward avoids any unnecessary duplication.

Sustainability and support of fluctuating grades

During a deep dive of the data available, we identified a small number of services who increased their evaluations following participating in the programme, however subsequent inspections have seen their evaluations decrease. In most cases this dip in evaluations may be attributed to a change in management and leadership. In the case of one service, they dropped out mid-programme when their evaluations

increased and have since been re-nominated by their commissioning local authority recognising the impact the programme has.

To support services in making sustained changes, attendance is encouraged across all sessions regardless of a change in evaluations. Attendance is shared with the service, local authorities, and inspection teams. Peer support sessions, to which all previous programme participants are invited, have been further developed to re-visit aspects of the programme, explore quality improvement tools not covered in the programme, and to signpost further learning through CYPIC and the NHS TURAS sites.

Should the programme secure funding and capacity allow, we would like to invite individual cohorts back to a 'revision' session to revisit learning from the programme, contributing to increased sustainability in terms of outcomes for children.

Follow-up to recommendations from the external evaluation

In May 2022, sponsors requested that an external evaluation of the programme was commissioned. The evaluation brief was 'Measure and understand in greater depth the efficacy and impact of the early learning and childcare (ELC) improvement programme.

Feedback on both the targeted and universal support offered through the programme was overwhelmingly positive with all research participants welcoming the programme and are keen to see it continue. The report recommended: 'in order to continue to provide support to settings to drive up the quality of care for children and to work with a wider spectrum of settings, additional capacity and longevity of support to the programme will be essential'.

The programme also made recommendations to ensure the programme continues to build on its success. The link is available to download from The [Hub](#).

Strategic recommendations

Recommendation 1: Grow the capacity of the ELC improvement team to enable it to meet existing and future anticipated demand for support for eligible settings. Assurances with regard to longevity of funding will be important to enable the programme to develop effectively.

We secured funding to continue the programme until the end of March 2024. Demand continues to be high and there is a waiting list. Also, new services continue to be recorded as not meeting the quality aspect of the National standard. A further business case will be submitted in November 2023 for additional funding beyond this date to deliver further learning and development opportunities and to broaden the reach of the programme - ongoing.

Recommendation 2 - Consider expansion of current provision of support through the ELC improvement programme to include settings not currently eligible for support, including settings achieving the National Standard but with potential to improve the quality of their services; childminders; and out of school childcare provision.

Due to the volume of services who are not currently meeting the quality evaluations in the National Standard, the programme, due to staff capacity and Scottish

Government directive, has been unable to include services who wish to improve the quality of their service from good to very good.

The team have been working with our colleagues across the wider quality improvement team, scrutiny and assurance and Scottish Government to explore the potential in working with funded childminders. A questionnaire has been developed to ascertain the type of support childminders would like and delivery methods in collaboration with colleagues from the Scottish Childminding Association (SCMA).

The potential to work with our colleagues delivering out of school childcare provision has not been explored due to capacity within the team. Should staffing increase this would be explored as part of the 2024/25 workplan.

This will be monitored as the programme continues – ongoing.

Recommendation 3: Continue to develop relationships between settings, inspectors, the improvement team, and local authorities, exploring opportunities to ensure a seamless package of support is available to settings.

The team enjoys a very good relationship with our scrutiny and assurance colleagues, with clear pathways of communication to ensure that inspectors are fully aware of the services who are or who have participated in the programme. Information is shared both pre and post inspection. Some local authorities were hesitant to engage with the programme, however as the programme has been embedded and is accessed widely this is no longer the case. The team deliver programmes of quality improvement to local authority support staff to ensure clear and consistent quality improvement messages are being delivered - ongoing as part of the programme.

Operational Recommendations

Recommendation 4: Explore opportunities to collect more data in relation to the impact of universal support. This could be in the form of an annual survey of all settings.

A survey was issued through our 'Provider Updates' which is sent to 7,298 recipients. The survey was open to all daycare of children, children and young people and childminder services and subscribers. Using some of the information gathered, we have been able to identify themes for future universal resources. Universal support survey opened 11 July 2023 with responses collated August 2023.

Recommendation 5: ELC improvement team to work with local authorities to ensure that settings are clear about the reasons for their referrals ahead of taking part in the programme. Local authorities have an important role to play in ensuring that they adequately brief settings about the reason for their referral and what they should expect from taking part in the programme. This may encourage settings to take part and address any reticence to engage with the programme.

The majority of local authorities do engage in discussion with the services to inform them they have been nominated for the programme. When local authority leads are

emailed with a list of services who have places on the programme, they are asked to contact their services before the programme team get in touch – completed.

Recommendation 6 – The peer support groups facilitated through Yammer have the potential to be a useful and sustainable forum for the exchange of good practice, but settings are not fully engaged with them. Explore further with settings how these could become more valuable, and what is required to make them sustainable in the longer term.

The engagement through Yammer was not as good as it could have been. Yammer was an additional resource which needed to be downloaded and could be tricky to navigate. Due to the feedback, a ‘private’ social media group has been trialled. This has proved to be very successful with services posting questions, links to resources and supporting their peers when their improvement projects are not going to plan. Trial continues to include a closed social media group for our current cohort participants – ongoing.

Recommendation 7 – Continue to develop the programme, adding to resources by building on feedback from participant settings, including suggestions included earlier in this report.

The programme develops across each cohort acting on feedback from our surveys, plenary sessions, and discussions with wider stakeholders from outside agencies. For cohort 5 we have changed our delivery method offering alternate teaching and reflect and review sessions over a twelve-week period - ongoing across all subsequent cohorts.

Recommendation 8 – Continue to raise awareness of resources available, particularly the universal resources that are available to all settings and ensure that these continue to be easily accessible.

Direct links to the ELC improvement page on The Hub are available through a QR code on our email addresses. Provider updates contain reminders and links to ‘bitesize’ resources and links are shared through our social media accounts - ongoing throughout the programme.

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