



ORKNEY
ISLANDS COUNCIL

Item: 13

Education, Leisure and Housing Committee: 2 April 2025.

Three Islands Collaborative Additional Support for Learning Review.

Report by Corporate Director for Education, Leisure and Housing.

1. Overview

- 1.1. 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.
- 1.2. The key role of cross-authority collaborative improvement work has been 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.
- 1.3. The Directors from Orkney Islands Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Shetland Islands Council agreed with representatives from ADES and Education Scotland that they would work together on three reviews.
- 1.4. The focus for the final three island local authorities Collaborative Improvement Review was agreed to be on Additional Support Needs (ASN) and Inclusion. The review was planned to link closely with the Review of Additional Support for Learning Implementation (2020), known as the Morgan Review, and the plan that arose from this for all professionals across Scotland.
- 1.5. The findings from the Three Islands Collaborative Additional Support for Learning Review will form the basis of a revised Support for Learning Strategy which will be brought forward for consideration later this year.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. It is recommended that members of the Committee:
 - i. Note the findings of the Three Island Authorities Collaborative Review of Additional Support for Learning carried out in conjunction with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and Education Scotland, detailed in Appendix 1 to this report.

3. Background

- 3.1. Lead officers from Orkney Islands Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Shetland Islands Council, worked with ADES and Education Scotland staff to identify and agreed focus on Additional Support for Needs (ASN) and inclusive education.
- 3.2. The theme of the review was mapped out in one key question:

‘In the context of island communities, how well does the provision for Additional Support Needs and Inclusion engage and support the needs and voices of all children and young people, equipping them for learning, life and work?’
- 3.3. This was explored in a series of key questions:
 - How do we define ASN?
 - What are our resources and how do we use them?
 - How effective are our pathways for both universal and targeted learners?
- 3.4. The theme and questions which the focus groups considered were consistent with the factors which ADES members had recognised as being central to decision making at all levels in the system.
- 3.5. Focus groups were established for each of the three questions and membership was drawn from the review team and a broad range of partners. Each authority also shared documentation to enhance the process.
- 3.6. Since May 2024, the lead officers from the three authorities have continue 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 islands as well as unique aspects relevant only to one partner authority.

- 3.7. Building on the three-day ASN review programme in May 2024, the lead officer group continues to grow in strength, progressing with key actions and areas of development. To date this has included shared three island opportunities in professional development including live streaming the two-day National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT) Inservice in November and more recently a November livestream engagement in keynote presentations from Education Scotland on Inclusion, equity and equality and Police Scotland on Safeguarding and Child Exploitation.
- 3.8. In 2025, the lead officer network plan further works on shared practice, including the inclusive schools programme in Orkney, promoting positive behaviour multiagency professional development programme and is extending to include three days annually for a practitioner network with each Island group taking the lead in this.

4. Key Strengths and Next Steps

- 4.1. Staff in Orkney, along with partners and parents, are highly committed to getting it right for children and young people with a range of additional support needs. They show enthusiasm, creativity and clear insight to the challenges and opportunities in supporting all children's additional support needs.
- 4.2. Schools and early years settings are developing universal resources and approaches – for example, implementing the [CIRCLE](#) resource
- 4.3. Specialists and central staff are collaborating to develop skills of staff and packages of support for schools and pupils
- 4.4. [The Promise](#) and analysis of data for Care Experienced Children and Young People (CECYP) is well-established
- 4.5. Where Trauma-Informed Practice is evolving similarly Nurture Framework and Relationships-based approaches.
- 4.6. A revised Support for Learning Strategy will be submitted to the Committee for consideration later in 2025.

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Implications of Report

1. **Financial:** Not applicable
2. **Legal:** Not applicable
3. **Corporate Governance:** Not applicable
4. **Human Resources:** Not applicable
5. **Equalities:** An Equality Impact Assessment is not required at this stage.
6. **Island Communities Impact:** An Island Communities Impact Assessment is not required at this stage
7. **Links to Council Plan:** The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Council Plan strategic priorities:
 - Growing our economy.
 - Strengthening our communities.
 - Developing our infrastructure.
 - Transforming our council.
8. **Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan:** The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priorities:
 - Cost of Living.
 - Sustainable Development.
 - Local Equality.
 - Local Population Health.
9. **Environmental and Climate Risk:** Not applicable
10. **Risk:** Not applicable
11. **Procurement:** Not applicable
12. **Health and Safety:** Not applicable
13. **Property and Assets:** Not applicable
14. **Information Technology:** Not applicable
15. **Cost of Living:** Not applicable

List of Background Papers

- The Muir Report (2022) Putting Learners at the Centre.
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/>
- Education Reform – Joint Agreement (2018).
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-bill-policy-ambition-joint-agreement/>

- OECD Report (2015) Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective.
<https://web-archive.oecd.org/temp/2015-12-16/380875-improving-schools-in-scotland.htm>

Appendix

Appendix 1: ADES/Education Scotland Collaborative Improvement in Three Islands, Orkney Islands Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Shetland Islands Council Review of Additional Support for Children and Young People (May 2024).

Appendix 1: Three Islands Collaborative Additional Support for Learning, Review

1. Introduction

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. Together, the group establishes the focus for the review then undertakes activities in the Local Authority that will result in an evaluative summary, identifying strengths and areas that may require further focus.

The approach to Collaborative Improvement was outlined in the Joint Agreement and is based on the call for a “strengthened middle” in the 2015 OECD report on Scottish Education. The approach is also intended to address the recommendation in Audit Scotland’s report on education that Councils should work with schools, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, other policy teams and partners, for example in the third sector, to reduce variability in outcomes.

The three island authorities of Orkney Islands Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, and Shetland Islands Council agreed to undertake their reviews in partnership, recognising the similarities, cross-cutting themes and issues of delivery of education in island settings. This collaboration was successful in delivering the first review in 2022 (the Senior Phase) and it was agreed to retain the same structure for a second review in 2023 (Broad General Education, S1-3).

This 2024 review is the final part of the cycle of three reviews and follows the same structure. 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 enable an improvement action plan to be developed upon completion.

Following on from the reviews in 2022 and 2023, and in response to a specific local and national challenge, the Directors of Education of the three island authorities agreed that the focus for the next collaborative review should be related to provision for children and young people’s additional support needs.

2. Context

The increased number of children and young people being assessed as having [Additional Support for Needs](#), across all three island groups, creates a requirement to provide resources to our schools to support these pupils to access their learning [in order that they achieve their full potential](#). Guidance on [the presumption to provide education in a mainstream setting](#) was published by the Scottish Government in 2019, and [Support for Learning: All our Children and All their Potential](#) (Morgan Review), 2006.

The wider landscape is one of reducing budgets and significant challenges in the recruitment and retention of staff whereby to ensure this duty is met, requests for alternative resources or equipment and additional learning support staff have increased significantly. Some children and young people with severe and complex needs may indeed require targeted support in the resourced provisions at Glaitness School and Kirkwall Grammar School, however, supporting children and young people to remain in their local community school is the principle aim.

Additional Support Needs has been an area of long-term growth, with a sharp rise being evident nationally in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The three Island authorities are resilient and confident, with established relationships, informal networks and a commitment to working collaboratively. The geography and location of services can throw up challenges, though in the main, the use of online networking is well established and used to overcome barriers of geography and location. Time and availability of the network of professionals is an emerging concern as is finding the opportunity to meet and then produce collaborative work.

2.1. Orkney Island Council, Additional Support Needs Data

School Sector	National*	Orkney Δ	Deviation
Primary	30%	38%	8%
Secondary	43%	56%	13%
All School	41%	46%	5%

* *Summary Statistics for schools in Scotland 2024*

Δ *School data return January 2025**

2.2. Orkney Island Council, Additional Support Needs Data, staged intervention levels

Additional Support Needs (number and complexity) can be captured using Stages of Intervention. (Stage 1 and 2 are those children and young people requiring universal (class based) interventions to access their learning within the school resource (see table below), while those at Stage 3 & 4 require targeted and potentially multi-agency intervention.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Total	Total Population	% ASN

Primary	128	182	211	42	563	1485	38
Secondary	280	214	147	72	713	1267	56
All School	408	396	358	114	1276	2783	46

** (January 2025*) This data is subject to verification.*

This data is a key part of the annual audit of need and will help to ensure equity in the annual allocation of the Support for Learning Assistant resource to schools.

1. Rationale

Lead officers from the three authorities worked with ADES and Education Scotland staff to identify and agreed to focus on additional support for learning and inclusive education. Specifically, the review sought to explore the following question:

In the context of island communities, how well does the provision for Additional Support Needs and Inclusion engage and support the needs and voices of all children and young people, equipping them for learning, life and work?

To help answer this question it was necessary the review considered 3 key subthemes: How do we define Additional Support Needs? What are our resources and how do we use them? How effective are our pathways for both universal and targeted learners?

These three themes that focus groups considered reflected the factors which ADES members have recognised as being central to decision-making at all levels in the system. There are unique strengths as well as challenges to the island's context and the collaborative improvement process helped staff and partners to better understand what's working well now and why, and what to build on for future collaboration.

3. Process

The lead officers from the local authority, ADES and Education Scotland began to plan, coordinate and identify a range of partners to join the team. The collaborative review took place over three days in May 2024, in a mixture of virtual environments and in person events, which included children and young people who met in their own school communities.

Focus groups were established and membership was drawn from the review team and a range of partners. Included were representatives from all stages (Early Learning, Primary & Secondary) and demographic areas, as well as professionals reflecting the partnership between Education staff and others (e.g. NHS; Social Work; 3rd Sector) that work together in meeting children's Additional Support Needs. A sample of parents and cares were included, representing all stages (Early

Learning, Primary & Secondary) and demographic areas Children as well as Young People representing Primary and Secondary stages.

In addition, over three days each authority shared relevant documentation to support the enquiry and reflections of the focus groups.

4. Findings

The following offers a generalised summary across the island authorities:

4.1. What is going well?

All staff, partners and parents are highly committed to getting it right for children and young people with a range of additional support needs. They showed enthusiasm, creativity and clear insight to the challenges and opportunities in supporting all children's additional support needs.

All three island groups are developing universal resources and approaches – with the intention to roll out the [CIRCLE](#) resource across all schools to have communication friendly schools.

The three island groups have a similar Educational Psychology delivery model and recognise their role in capacity building of staff skills and knowledge.

Specialists and central staff collaborate to develop skills of staff and packages of support for schools and pupils and where possible having specialist leads in schools.

[The Promise](#) and analysis of data for Care Experienced Children and Young People (CECYP) is well-established and could provide a model for extending data analysis for other factors which give rise to additional support needs.

Where Trauma-Informed Practice is being implemented (e.g. Western Isles) it's had a big impact on staff and children; similarly Nurture Framework and Relationships-based approaches mentioned by all 3 groups.

Where Digital Technology is in place (Western Isles strength) it makes a big difference to accessibility at all levels.

There is some use of some tools for tracking progress to know what's making a difference but see below, e.g. Wellbeing Profile; Milestones; National SQA awards; Participation Scale; Tracking spreadsheet of interventions and needs at secondary school with partners.

Children and young people reflected similar themes of [ambassadors for inclusion](#).

Island transitions are extended and good (e.g. to a residential facility and school).

4.2. What are the challenges?

Capacity

In common with colleagues across Scotland, island services are faced with the challenges of working to deliver on national and local policy priorities and meet the needs of service users during times of financial constraints.

Services generally have less reserve and resources to work collaboratively. As staff leave and posts are reduced to meet financial targets, the workload for remaining staff increases and the quality, responsiveness and effectiveness of service is tested. This has resulted in an increased desire for collaboration to support each other with a reduced capacity to engage in this. National policies including Getting it Right for Every Child and partnership working is also placed under pressure at a time when the priority is in providing resilient services.

The pressures on Support for Learning, Inclusion and Additional Support Needs services are immense and the capacity to respond to the demands of this area of Education rests on a small core and committed group of people leading the services. Where larger authorities may have a wider range of people to deliver their services, the islands are fragile and have had to develop operational approaches and strategies to meet the needs of children, young people and their families. Each island group relies on a small number of central staff to work across a wide range of responsibilities that fall within the remit of additional support needs or inclusion such as child protection, care experienced children and young people, home education, neurodiversity including dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism, child poverty, complex learning and medical needs, and many other areas including school counselling, emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Geography

Each island authority is unique in its environment however, they share many similarities and working in collaboration in the current political climate is key to ensuring our services are resilient and thrive. They face the challenge of developing ever evolving environments in a range of rural and remote islands. There is no standardised formula for the provision of Education Services in these operating environments and leaders need to be resourceful, able to capitalise on local opportunities, as well as be equipped with the necessary change management skills.

Connectivity

Digital technology and connectivity are essential tools for Island working and can present barriers to working collaboratively in the three Island authorities. The challenges present in many forms including shared documentation, email accounts and a variety of operating platforms which can be incompatible. Levels of access,

shared documentation, data protection, due diligence and protocols are identified areas of development.

Change

The constant drivers of national policy add to the demand on services who are already finely balanced, and any loss of skilled staff impacts on the service ability to respond effectively when systems are constantly resetting and working through cycles of change. This is even more acute in the Island communities. Across the three island groups, it was felt that the time ahead will be even more sensitive politically. In addition there is a shared risk relating to families with children who are seeking assessment or have identified needs which they perceive are not being met, and the likelihood of increased complaint and appeal against decisions by the local authority.

Demand

An increase in families with children with additional support needs was recognised as placing an additional pressure on the fragile island environments to deliver on services within times of financial and resource constraint.

Staffing

The islands face ongoing challenges of recruitment and retention of staff and this, coupled with the often-transient nature when families move on after a couple of years or ask for their children to have earlier access to hostels to attend larger schools adds to the pressures of service delivery in Island Authorities.

4.3. Specific Local (Orkney) challenges?

Local challenges include:

- Children and young people wanting staff to understand what they need and not to make them feel different.
- A desire for a more accessible curriculum in secondary schools.
- Delivering equity, wellbeing and inclusion for all pupils.
- Responding to changing need on an annual basis.
- Retaining staff and responding to need with limited resources and increased demand.
- Upskilling staff to meet national standards for pupils.
- Developing Inclusive School communities.

5. Next Steps

A key focus is responding to the challenges and opportunities of the Morgan review and upskilling staff and services to deliver on this. This involves leading change and developing robust systems and structures to ensure equity and accountability, which are open to scrutiny and challenge. Balance will be required if this collaborative review is to be productive. To embed effective change, the recommendations and objectives should be smart and reflect the operating context and unique challenges associated with the Islands context. This includes taking the time to assess current practice and develop services and provision with the pace and challenge that schools, and their communities are able to meet.

Collaboratively, the island groups will continue to explore the following:

- Sharing resources across the 3 Local Authorities on GLOW.
- Re-invigorating cluster-based working e.g. Orkney and Western Isles.
- Making more consistent use of meaningful measures for quality assurance and tracking progress to inform planning and interventions.
- Training and development on what's available vis-à-vis technology and other resources.
- Establishing shared priorities in improvement plans, e.g. CIRCLE.
- Sharing models of staffing allocation formulas and how they're implemented at school and cluster level.
- Workforce Planning to identify and advertise career pathways and opportunities for Support for Learning Assistants.
- Revisiting basics like Individual Education Plans, Co-ordinated Support Plans and sensory training.
- Monitoring the (National) Neurodevelopmental Pathway work as it is rolled out across the island groups.

5.1. Specific Local (Orkney) Actions

- Build the Neurodevelopmental pathways which are robust and effective.
 - Address digital technology opportunities – future proof?
 - Develop a multiagency forum for Children and Young People (CYP) which will include tracking, evaluating data and providing an overview of support.
 - Build a strong data set to support and upskill leaders to deliver this.
 - Refresh current policies in place so that they can inform our structures.
 - Develop robust systems and processes which are fit for scrutiny and challenge.
2. Work with Education Scotland professional development frameworks and Officers.
- Facilitate collaborative professional networks (practitioner to leadership levels).
 - Transitions: discuss how national frameworks support improvement planning.

- Upskill staff.
- Review and refresh of Staged Intervention levels and Moderation.
- Standardise data collection and Annual Additional Support Needs audit.
- Review communication and web-based information.
- Review and develop policy and procedure.
- Develop an Inclusion Group for advice and support.
- Review and build capacity within schools and support teams.
- Provide professional development for Support for Learning Assistants.
- Secure a place for inclusive practice within School Improvement Plans.

An action plan to address some of the collaborative actions will be drawn up once this report and those for the other two island authorities have been completed.

One of the actions already agreed is the establishment of the senior lead network to share practice and provide peer support. Throughout the planning, implementation and analysis stages of this collaboration, the understanding of each other's contexts has grown as have the working relationships between those senior officers. This has already been supportive and has potential to reduce workload and add consistency as well as to share resources.

Some of the actions specifically for Orkney will form part of a revised Additional Support Needs Strategy, to be presented to the Education Leisure and Housing Committee in June 2025 as well as be part of the next iteration of the overall service plan. Partnership activity will also be fed into the wider Children's Services Plan review and development process.

6. Conclusion

The issues/areas highlighted by the three Local authorities correlate with the national Additional Support for Learning Action plan and this will provide a framework for the collaborative work already taking place, thus avoiding duplication while developing cohesion and continuity to improvement planning.

The Additional Support for Learning Action Plan and National frameworks to support collaborative improvement alongside Education Scotland, Inclusion, Wellbeing and Equality professional learning framework, Additional support for learning planning guidance, the CIRCLE and strategic inclusive practice framework linking with How Good is Our School (HGIOS) 4.

Participation in the Collaborative Review has allowed Orkney to explore high-quality collegiate feedback within Additional Support Needs and inclusion and participate in peer evaluation of work in Western Isles and Shetland, finding areas of strength and good practice to develop locally. The collaboration has established links between staff across the three island areas and forms a platform for further networking and collaboration into the future.

The findings highlight many areas of good practice in our additional support needs provision and that these need to be recognised, celebrated and shared across the Three Islands Collaborative. The networking continues for professional collaboration, utilising training and upskilling practitioners across the three local authorities.

Partners are enthusiastic and committed to future development plans including a focus on improving universal support to fully embed inclusive practice and improve school experiences for all learners as well as reducing pressure on central resources. In line with UNCRC, staff are busy engaging with children and young people, seeking opportunities to enhance pupil voice to engage in governance activity. Finally, a future which provides and enhances opportunities for pupils with support needs in transition pre, during and post school is a key ambition for all.

7. Appendix 1: further information

7.1. Legislation

<https://education.gov.scot/learning-in-scotland/programmes/support-for-all/>

<https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/additional-support-for-learning/>

<https://education.gov.scot/resources/equality-act-2010/>

7.2. Three Island Collaborative

[Education is for All \(orkney.gov.uk\)](http://orkney.gov.uk)

[Staged Assessment and Intervention - CnE Siar](#)

[Support for Pupils – Shetland Islands Council](#)

7.3. Professional Development

<https://education.gov.scot/professional-learning/leading-professional-learning/inclusion-wellbeing-equalities-professional-learning-framework/>

<https://education.gov.scot/resources/circle-resource-to-support-inclusive-learning-and-collaborative-working-primary-and-secondary/>

<https://education.gov.scot/professional-learning/self-directed-professional-learning/pupil-support-staff-framework/>

7.4. UNCRC

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/funding-for-schools-in-scotland/>