

## Collaboration to Support the Development of Inclusion: Reflections on a Strategic Change Initiative

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### Abstract

Including all children in education is one of the biggest challenges facing global systems (Ainscow, 2023). This paper presents research findings of a strategic change initiative (SCI) that both recognises and addresses the challenges of the inclusion of children with additional support needs (ASN) within the Scottish educational context. In Scotland, pupils learn in both mainstream and specialist provisions. Scottish Government (2023a) data shows year on year trends that more children and young people are being identified with ASN. In the local authority (LA) context presented, data analysis indicates rising referrals and requests from mainstream to specialist provision for pupils with ASN, stressing the challenges of including these learners in mainstream and the dilemmatic nature of placement in learning. Furthermore, recent financial restraints on education budgets in Scotland (The Scotsman, 2024) create further challenges for the inclusion of pupils, as reported by the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS, 2019)

This study examines the first year of a three-year SCI led by a depute head teacher (researcher) at a Scottish mainstream primary school with a co-located additional learning needs provision. The paper outlines how, in the first year of the SCI, within-school collaboration has enhanced ASN learner inclusion across school settings. Evidence demonstrates that strategic leadership (Johnson, 2013; Quong & Walker, 2010) and practitioner collaboration (Ainscow, 2023; Hargreaves & O'Conner, 2018) have positively impacted learner inclusion and the development of inclusive teaching practices. In the second year, within-school collaboration will continue with an advancement towards between-school collaboration. The objective to fully embed both collaboration models will be achieved in the third year.

The findings suggest that the SCI model is both financially viable and scalable and provides school leaders with a framework that can be replicated locally to address current challenges to inclusion in educational settings.

*Keywords:* inclusion, strategic change initiative (SCI), practitioner collaboration, co-located provision

## Introduction

### The Current Scottish Context

Scottish Government has produced numerous consultations and discussions on Scottish education over the past few years (Kennedy et al., 2023; Scottish Government, 2020a, 2022, 2023b). A recent publication, the *Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill* consultation (Scottish Government, 2023c), has highlighted many concerns regarding the inclusion of learners with ASN in education. Scottish Government have chosen not to introduce this bill to parliament before the 2026 Holyrood election (Scottish Parliament, 2024). An increasing number of children in Scotland are identified as having ASN (Scottish Government, 2023a). Long- and short-term factors constitute an identification of ASN, ranging from life-long conditions such as autism and Down's syndrome to the effects of bullying or being identified as a young carer (Scottish Government, 2016). In Scotland, although mainstream schooling for all pupils is the basis for inclusive education (Scottish Government, 2019), there has been an increase in the number of children placed in special schools and units – the terminology of *special* is used in policy (Scottish Government, 2019). At the last data capture in 2023, 7,742 children were learning in special schools (Scottish Government, 2023a). Special schools encompass stand-alone establishments for pupils with ASN and "units or bases" within mainstream schools (Scottish Government, 2019, p18).

Local policies in Glasgow City Council (GCC) deliver Scottish Government policy expectations – that most children should receive their education in mainstream schools within their local communities (GCC, 2016; GCC, 2023). Policy suggests that inclusion encompasses four essential components: support, presence, participation, and achievement (Scottish Government, 2019, p. 4). However, analysis indicates that GCC data aligns with national statistics - an increase in the identification of pupils with ASN, many complex, and a rise in the number of pupils enrolled in alternative provisions (GCC, 2024a, p. 6). Furthermore, in line with local authorities across Scotland, there is a substantial increase in the number of referrals to specialist provisions from education establishments and families (GCC, 2024a, p. 6). This is a challenge for a sector that is considered a finite resource and is relatively full (GCC, 2024a). Previous media speculation suggesting financial cuts across LA education budgets in Scotland (Hepburn, 2023) has been actualised. Education Services in GCC alone require delivering £8.6m million in savings in 2024/25 (GCC, 2024b, p. 15). Teacher numbers and resources for children with ASN are expected to be impacted and unions have highlighted this as a significant challenge that contributes to practitioner stress (EIS, 2019).

### School Context and Culture

This research examines a primary school's response to current educational challenges, with a specific focus on the impact on ASN learners.

The pupil population is as follows:

- 311 attend the school, learning over thirteen classes
- 29% live in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (Scottish Government, 2020b) Decile 1 and 2
- 86% belong to ethnic minority groups
- 16% have identified disabilities or health needs
- 74% have English as an Additional Language, recognised as an ASN in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2016)

The school is a Roman Catholic denominational school and most families are of Islamic faith. There has been a general increase of children attending the school identified with ASN in recent years. The school is one of only 20 primary schools in GCC that combines a mainstream setting with specialist provision, designated as a *co-located additional learning needs provision*. Primary one to primary seven pupils are placed over three classes in the co-located provision through local authority (LA) processes. Historically, pupils in the co-located provision identified with a variety of ASN; the current 22 children are identified with disability and health needs. This includes conditions such as language or speech disorders, autism spectrum disorder, Down's syndrome, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Almost all children in the co-located provision are learning at the pre-early or early stages of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (Education Scotland, n.d.).

Recent research by LA educational psychologists, based on the work of Florian (2015) found that the school's inclusive practices align with the principles of "education for all" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994). Findings indicate strong advocacy for the inclusion of all children among stakeholders across the school community, which is essential for fostering an inclusive approach. Additionally, the co-located provision was identified as a valuable resource that enhances inclusive practices throughout the school. Despite these positive insights, the senior leadership team's self-evaluation process identified key areas where inclusive practices could be elevated from *very good* to *excellent*. Data underscored the need for further analysis of the inclusion of children from the co-located provision accessing the mainstream setting for learning experiences. This had decreased in recent years as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Children Accessing Mainstream from Co-located Provision (2018 vs. 2022)*

Year	Total Number of Children	Number Accessing Mainstream	Percentage Accessing Mainstream
2018	13	7	53.8%
2022	21	5	23.8%

This trend aligns with statistics in Scotland, showing a steady increase since 2007 in the number of children attending special schools without access to mainstream provision (Scottish Government, 2023a). Further evaluation of HGIOS Quality Indicator 2.4 (Education Scotland, 2015) assessed practitioners' confidence in providing personalised supports for learners. As shown in Table 2, these evaluations identified the rise in ASN and the need for one-to-one support for several pupils across the school as challenges for inclusive teaching.

**Table 2**  
*Teaching Staff Comments on Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners*

Comments
<i>Staff meet the needs of children and differentiate very well in terms of poverty, family history, health, etc., however, some work is needed on ALN.</i>
<i>The needs in some classes are so diverse that it is impossible to be offering challenge and support to all children at all times when you have children who need 1:1 support.</i>
<i>The work is certainly planned to be varied and active, and differentiated, but we have such a variety of individual needs within a class that it is difficult to say if we are getting it right 100% of the time and for everyone. We thought that this is also linked to the amount of support available to teachers as so many children now seem to need individual support from a Support for Learning Worker (SFLW).</i>
<i>We try to do our best on a day-to-day basis. We plan to present our learners with variation, differentiation, activity, support, and challenge using the support staff allocated to us. However, it is really difficult to ensure it's happening all of the time—particularly in classes where needs are already quite diverse.</i>

Based on these evaluations and school data, the senior leadership team identified two key areas for improvement:

1. Addressing the inclusion of ASN learners from the co-located provision in the mainstream setting.
2. Strengthening the supports and strategies available to mainstream teaching staff to meet diverse learner needs.

### **Literature Review**

Prior to leading the SCI, the researcher conducted a literature review to address the school's development needs, critically examining the dichotomy between mainstream and specialised placements for pupils. In anticipation of cross-departmental work, the researcher also explored the role of collaboration in fostering inclusive practices. Additionally, Scotland's local and national policies on placement and collaboration were reviewed to establish the political context.

### **Dilemma of Difference**

Decisions around placing learners in mainstream or specialist provision are complex and widely debated (Ainscow, 2024; Norwich, 2010; Warnock, 2010), with approaches varying internationally (Hatch, 2022). Regarding placement in learning, Norwich's (2010) interpretation of Minow's (1990) "dilemma of difference" is a relevant theoretical concept to consider. Norwich (2010) maintained that specialist placements create better access to resources for learners, however, can cause a feeling of exclusion from peers. Conversely, mainstream settings may foster a sense of inclusion but may

lack specific supports for some learners. Ensuring their child's individual needs are met in special provision versus their equal rights in mainstream schools is a dilemmatic decision for many families (Ainscow, 2024).

In Portugal, the curriculum and provision have been expanded to facilitate mainstream schooling for learners with disabilities, with 98.9% of students with ASN enrolled in mainstream schools (Alves & Fernandez, 2023). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022) highlights two main strengths of this approach: (1) the substantial resources allocated to support children within mainstream settings, and (2) the collaborative efforts and school networks that promote inclusive practices (Alves & Fernandes, 2022).

### **Practitioner Collaboration**

Chapman and Ainscow (2019) maintain the importance of collaboration and describe it as a means for fostering the development of inclusion and inclusive pedagogies - removing obstacles that prevent learners from learning (Mittler, 2012). According to Ainscow (2023a), within-school collaboration can challenge preconceived beliefs about learners' abilities and allows sharing of practices that encourage approaches to engage pupils. Fundamentally, this promotes a more inclusive environment. Collaboration within a school setting can also assist in determining the most suitable learning environment for a child (Ainscow, 2023a).

Between-school collaboration – practitioners collaborating across different schools - can significantly enhance the ability to meet diverse learner needs. It is suggested that this approach is beneficial for pupils who are often marginalised and those whose academia raises concerns (Ainscow, 2023a). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015) have suggested that between-school collaboration could drive system-wide improvements in Scotland. The literature reveals ongoing debate around inclusion, with research highlighting both the challenges and potential of mainstreaming for learners with ASN. Collaboration, both within and between schools, is positioned as a powerful strategy for fostering inclusive practices and addressing the diverse needs of learners.

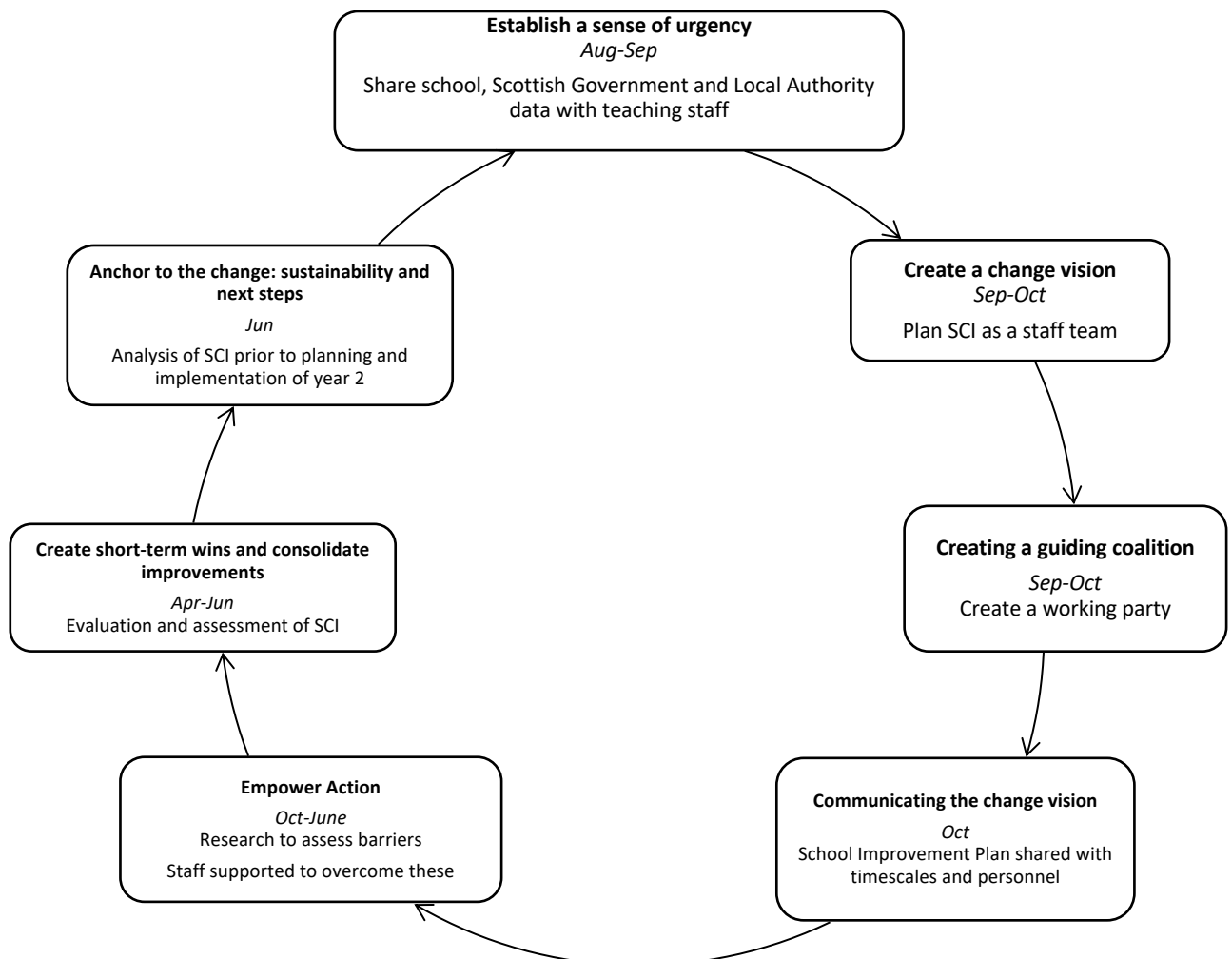
## **Findings and Discussion**

The following outlines how the literature review coupled with diverse data evidence guided the researcher in leading the first year of the SCI. The implementation of the SCI focused on two key objectives:

1. Addressing the inclusion of ASN learners from the co-located provision in the mainstream setting.
2. Strengthening the supports and strategies available to mainstream teaching staff to meet diverse learner needs.

An analysis using Kotter's stages will provide a comprehensive examination of the developments of year one of the SCI. Figure 1 displays Kotter's "Eight-step Process in Leading Change" (1996). The process supported the change development and was utilised to design and implement the SCI in the school establishment.

**Figure 1**  
Process in Leading Year One of the SCI



### Establish a Sense of Urgency

Kotter (1996) proposed that urgency levels be raised to promote change. As part of the effort to drive change within the school establishment, the researcher and senior leadership team shared data with teaching staff. This included:

- Comparison of children accessing mainstream from co-located provision data (Table 1)
- Evaluations of HGIOS Quality Indicator 2.4 - Personalised Support (Table 2)
- Trends that show an increase in pupils identified with ASN locally and nationally

Based on this information, the two key objectives to address inclusion in the school were shared with staff:

1. Addressing the inclusion of ASN learners from the co-located provision in the mainstream setting.
2. Strengthening the supports and strategies available to mainstream teaching staff to meet diverse learner needs.

According to Rincón-Gallardo (2020), effective action requires a combination of efficacy, willingness, and capacity to impact learners positively. Evidence suggested that staff in this establishment possess both the confidence and enthusiasm to make a positive impact on pupils. Indeed, the researcher anticipated a committed response to the objectives of the SCI. Providing capacity for practitioners to drive change would rest on the school's senior leaders.

### Create a Change Vision

Practitioners were consulted in the initial planning stages of the SCI. The researcher accepted that staff must work together to create a shared understanding of the vision and need for change to avoid the risk of opposition (Zenger & Folkman, 2016). Therefore, to address the identified challenges and key areas, teaching staff were asked to rank which supports would be most beneficial in fostering the inclusion of learners. Practitioners average ranking from first choice to last choice were:

1. Collaboration with co-located provision staff
2. Training on specific needs
3. Training on planning for pupils with ASN
4. Training on an inclusive environment
5. Additional staffing
6. Meetings with SLT
7. Training on tracking pupils with ASN
8. Additional resources

The researcher noted the low ranking of additional staffing and resources to support inclusion. Given the current climate of budget cuts and staffing reductions in education, practitioners may have recognised these supports as unattainable. Table 3 below provides some additional comments from teaching staff.

**Table 3**

*Teaching Staff Comments on Strategies to Support the Inclusion of Pupils*

Comment
Collaboration with the provision staff is vital in my opinion. This can improve the rest of the supports and should be carried out before looking at the other supports.
Working closely with all staff is key to the success of inclusion in any environment.
I find it valuable to learn from someone else and listen to their experiences.

The provision/DHT have a wealth of knowledge to tap into. I would ask the teacher for what works strategies and the DHT for pastoral support. So, my first port of call will be to talk to them first. Then I would improve my skills, knowledge, and confidence on the diagnosis by attending training on their specific needs.

I believe the best way to learn as a professional is to work alongside experts in a given area. Close collegiate interactions around pupils moving between mainstream and enhanced provision is key to getting it right for the learners. While training is important, I believe it sits under learning from colleagues.

In recognition that within-school collaboration can challenge views about learners' abilities and the importance of staff sharing their own expertise (Ainscow, 2023a) the researcher, with senior leadership colleagues, agreed that formalised collaboration of teaching staff could be an effective means to support inclusion in the establishment. Collaboration could address both objectives - the inclusion in mainstream for children who learn in the co-located provision, and the development of supports and strategies. The researcher also recognised the potential impact of collaboration with other schools on promoting inclusion. Indeed, LA policy advocates for this, suggesting staff with specialist skills support colleagues across the city (GCC, 2016).

### **Creating a Guiding Coalition**

"People Wisdom" (Davies & Davies, 2006) supports effective leadership when school leaders know their team and who can effect change. The researcher has worked in the school community for ten years, has developed a strong understanding of colleagues' skills and drivers for change, and recognises that the cultivation of these furthers school developments. In the research school, senior leaders acknowledge that they determine the demonstration of leadership and maintain distributed leadership as a style that has supported change (Day et al., 2007; Landoli & Zollo, 2007). Staff across the school do adopt various leadership roles and responsibilities, and effective leadership of change was evidenced in the school's HMIE findings.

A working group was therefore established, comprising staff members with the interest and skills to support the objectives of the SCI. The working party included the depute head teacher (DHT) (researcher), principal teacher (PT), and mainstream and provision class teachers. During the planning of the SCI, evaluations evidenced that mainstream practitioners viewed co-located practitioners as more skilled to support children with ASN. Kerins (2013) research does suggest that mainstream systems credit staff in specialist provisions as more skilled in meeting the needs of children with ASN. The working party recognised this as a challenge to overcome and agreed that there would be limited impact in collaborating across mainstream and co-located provision if mainstream practitioners did not also identify their own skillset and capabilities. It was agreed that the SCI developments should ensure all staff receive support in demonstrating their capacity and capability in supporting ASN learners.

### **Communicating the Change Vision**

The researcher communicated the change vision to the teaching staff through the School Improvement Plan (SIP), created with the working party. To clearly articulate the plan, the involved personnel, timelines, and methods for evidencing impact were outlined. The SIP detailed how the key priorities would be achieved:



### Year 1: Within-school collaboration

- Inclusion meetings with relevant teaching staff would enable a discussion of the inclusion of pupils from the co-located provision into the mainstream setting. Staff would collaboratively develop personalised targets for each pupil, identify required resources, and establish methods for monitoring progress.
- Case study spotlights, led by teaching staff from both mainstream and co-located provision, would focus on specific strategies to support pupils. These spotlight sessions would allow staff to collaborate, share practical approaches, foster the inclusion of learners with ASN and build their own capabilities and capacity.

### Year 2: Between-school collaboration

- Working collaboratively with other schools would allow observation opportunities across, resource sharing, and professional dialogue with colleagues.

### Empower Action

Formal and informal dialogue with staff revealed that almost all were empowered to develop inclusion and were encouraged by the collaboration element of the SCI. To further empower action the researcher accepted that barriers to the SCI's developments had to be removed. Time and capacity for staff were identified as a significant barrier for practitioners (EIS, 2019). Teachers in Scotland are face-to-face with pupils more than in most other countries in the OECD (2021). To combat this, the Scottish National Party's manifesto (2021, p. 4) declared their intention to "...recruit 3,500 additional teachers and classroom assistants, allowing teachers more time out of the classroom to prepare lessons and improve their skills", if they should win the election and be elected to government.

However, a recent report has advised Scottish Government not to proceed with targets for increasing teacher numbers to allow class contact time to be reduced to 21 hours (Scottish Government, 2024).

The researcher and senior leaders accepted that time for practitioners to partake in inclusion meetings and develop case studies was a priority. Ainscow and Messiou (2018, p. 26) are of the view that "time is the currency used within schools to determine what is important". Strategic decisions to release teaching staff from class-commitments were made to evidence the importance of the SCI. The outcome being senior leaders covering classes. Hargreaves (1994) maintains this practice is prevalent in schools with collaborative cultures. The researcher recognised that fostering collaboration among teaching staff would necessitate an initial increase in senior leaders' workload. However, moral leadership—defined by MacBeath (2003) as adhering to what is right—played a crucial role in the senior leadership team's drive to further efforts to support pupils' inclusion. Mitigating time constraints significantly empowered action to allow mainstream and co-located teaching staff to achieve the priorities presented in the SIP.

### Create Short-term Wins and Consolidate Improvements

Positive outcomes towards the priorities of the SCI were achieved through strategic actions and collaborative efforts. The following examples illustrate how the SCI promoted effective practices, enhanced staff capabilities, and improved inclusion for ASN learners.

**Increasing Pupil Mainstream Inclusion:** Collaboration between a mainstream P1 teacher and a teacher from the co-located provision produced a positive outcome for a learner. Practitioners met, during the ring-fenced time, to discuss the mainstream inclusion of a child from the co-located

provision with Down's syndrome. Dialogue around this child's needs concluded that planning a weekly 30-minute health and wellbeing session in the mainstream P1 class would support their inclusion. SMART targets, created collaboratively, focused on fostering peer relationships. Both teachers assessed the experience as beneficial to the child, noting an increase in the child's socialisation and development of a friendship.

Positive feedback was received regarding the inclusion meetings focused on including children from the co-located provision into mainstream classes, primarily due to the allocated time for these discussions to take place. Inclusion meetings were observed across the staff team as an effective way to include pupils from the co-located provision in the mainstream setting.

**Building Practitioner Confidence:** One instance highlighting the importance of positive relationships in the SCI's development involved a mainstream staff member who initially felt reluctant but was encouraged to present a case study to the entire team. The case study focused on a pupil with sensory sensitivities, detailing adjustments such as a standing desk, sensory toys, and access to safe spaces when needed. The insights from this case study proved beneficial across the teaching team, and the presenting staff member acknowledged a newfound confidence in their abilities afterwards.

All staff rated sharing case studies as highly beneficial to their practice. The sharing of learning strategies from teaching staff through case study spotlights was seen to help colleagues enhance practices and better include learners. A teacher commented that learning about real-life scenarios from colleagues allowed them to implement new strategies with their own pupils.

Findings from a LA quality assurance review—conducted by Quality Improvement Officers, LA Inclusion Team members, Educational Psychologists, Headteachers, and DHTs—provided the researcher with a robust evaluation and consolidation of the SCI's improvements. Using HGIOS 4 Quality Indicators (Education Scotland, 2015), the LA review produced a positive evaluation of the school's practices and the SCI's impact. In conjunction with the LA review report and the school's evaluations of the SCI and quality assurance processes, the researcher evaluated the first year of the SCI, concluding that:

- A systemic and responsive approach was being taken to support all pupils in being supported, present, participating, and achieving.
- Inclusion meetings supported staff to have strong professional dialogue around ASN.
- Case study spotlights created capacity and capability building of staff across the school and supported the inclusion of learners with ASN.
- Prioritising time to collaborate led to empowered action from practitioners.
- The number of children in the co-located provision who could effectively access mainstream learning increased from five to seven.
- For children in the co-located provision who were not participating in mainstream learning, collaboration of practitioners determined that this was appropriate.
- The researcher observed a general increase in collaborative working relationships between practitioner colleagues in the form of spontaneous and voluntary collaboration.

### **Anchor to the Change: Sustainability and Next Steps**

The sustainability of the SCI was tested during the school year as the DHT and researcher leading the initiative moved to a short-term seconded post in another school. The effectiveness of the distributed leadership embedded in the school was positively observed. The school's working party, willing to achieve the SCI's priorities, supported the continuation of the developments without the presence of the DHT. Through formal dialogue, emails, phone calls and unplanned coffee shop meetings, the team created a plan detailing next steps to ensure the SCI's sustainability in the absence of the DHT. This further cemented the presence of the school's collaborative culture, where a lack of hierarchical systems has allowed for a bottom-up model where staff involved are self-led (Hargreaves, 1994). This practice aligns with GCC Education Services' promotion of an education system where all staff have collective agency (GCC, 2024b).

In year one of the SCI, there was some success in supporting other schools with inclusive practices by sharing resources and professional dialogue through the LA outreach model. There was also evidence of the impact on self-perception and practice for the teachers who took part in working with other schools (Muijs et al., 2011). However, Ainscow (2023a) discusses successful between-school collaboration visits that allow for mutual learning among hosts and visitors. As the SCI advances towards authentic between-school collaboration in the second year of the SCI, it will be imperative for school leaders to facilitate an exchange of knowledge rather than merely focusing on dissemination. The DHT's secondment to a different school has opened opportunities for between-school collaboration. Plans are being made for the DHT and PT to work together to develop this.

Although teaching staff have been heavily involved in the SCI, the researcher has reflected on whose voices were heard in creating and implementing the SCI thus far. Harris (2009) proposes that all stakeholders participate in school development; otherwise, change will not be sustained. Looking forward to year two of the SCI, an identified next step is gathering more views from all stakeholders around the developments.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The growing lack of trust that mainstream education does not meet the needs of many ASN learners' needs calls for reflection from all education stakeholders in Scotland (Educational Institute of Scotland, 2023). Decision-makers must examine the barriers to inclusion and how they can be addressed with the available resources and skills (Chapman & Ainscow, 2019).

This study supports collaboration as one effective means to address these challenges and develop better inclusion within school settings. Through strategic leadership that promotes a clear vision for inclusion and prioritises collaboration, leaders have empowered staff within the research school to develop skills to support ASN learners effectively.

The dilemma in placement, which is complex, is observed in the school. Placement decisions may conclude that meaningful inclusion for certain pupils does not necessitate mainstream access but is better achieved within the co-located provision. Practitioners appear to recognise this complexity, and it is an on-going discussion. Collaboration between practitioners in a school with both mainstream and co-located provision has enabled flexible and successful inclusion for some ASN learners.

A leadership focus on fostering a collaborative culture has enabled sustainable, scalable practices. Additionally, given the constraints on educational budgets (GCC, 2024a), the SCI model is financially viable, achieved by utilising existing staff and resources, building capability and capacity to share expertise. While the collaboration practices presented here can be adopted by other educational

establishments, it is acknowledged that adaptations may be necessary for schools with different contexts.

Following Kotter's process guided the SCI developments, and the researcher would recommend adopting and adapting this process when leading change. However, the researcher recognised that leading change is more than processes and plans; it is also about supporting staff to be invested (Arar & Oplatka, 2022). Mobilising heads, hearts and hands (Rincón-Gallardo, 2023) was essential to leading the change.

The following recommendations outline actionable steps for implementing the SCI model.

School Leaders:

- Adopt Kotter's process to plan strategic change initiatives
- Nurture the expertise of practitioners to support the development of change
- Allocate time and resources to allow for collaboration

Policymakers:

- Enable schools to share resources and best practices for learners
- Ensure that professional development programmes emphasise the importance of strategic leadership in fostering inclusive education
- Explore collaborative initiatives as a means to reduce referrals to specialist provision

Future Research:

- The SCI is designed as a phased initiative, with future research planned over a further two years
- Explore the implementation of the SCI model in schools across different contexts to assess its adaptability
- Investigate the perspectives of ASN learners, their families, and support staff to gain a comprehensive understanding of the SCI model's impact

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