Scottish Local Government
Peer collaborative improvement Guidance 2023

1. Introduction

Peer collaborative improvement is a critical component of Scottish Local Government's sector-led improvement model, with self-assessment and the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) as key cornerstones of this approach. It is designed to support performance improvement in areas of local authority activity and services that have been identified as needing further improvement. Our approach is loosely based on the well-established approach to peer collaborative improvement developed by ADES and Education Scotland. It also reflects learning from previous work the Improvement Service undertook on peer review.

Opportunities for peer collaborative improvement may arise from work being undertaken by the LGBF Board to adopt a more assertive approach to sector-led performance improvement. The LGBF Board has agreed to use the LGBF to focus on critical areas which are common priorities for all 32 local authorities and facilitate a deep dive identifying areas of progress and areas where improvement is required, and where peer collaborative improvement could be offered as an approach to help tackle those performance challenges which exist.

Equally, an individual local authority may put itself forward to host a peer collaborative improvement in a service area or area of activity it has identified as needing improvement, for example, based on self-assessment, the LGBF, other benchmarking activity, local performance management and reporting arrangements or service review.

It is critical to note that peer collaborative improvement is voluntary, and it is not an audit or inspection. It is a supportive and collaborative process facilitated by the Improvement Service, led by the host local authority and carried out by peer reviewers from other local authorities, and perhaps even partner organisations, who have the necessary subject expertise to understand and drive improvement.

Peer reviewers assume the role of 'critical friend', supporting the improvement process within the host local authority by:

- Providing a 'critical friend' assessment of the service or area of activity being reviewed;
- Identifying areas for improvement, based on their own knowledge and expertise;
- Sharing learning, ideas and good practice; and
- Supporting the host local authority to develop its capacity to achieve sustainable improvements.

Whilst the current operating environment for local government is characterised by challenges at multiple levels, all of which are well documented, different local authorities also face their own unique challenges as a result of their geography, demography and local priorities. Working together as a sector through peer collaborative improvement can help address specific challenges and variability in outcome and performance as reported through the LGBF. It can also promote a self-improving and empowered system, with local authorities adopting a more robust and assertive approach to sector-led improvement.

Who carries out peer collaborative improvement?

Peer collaborative improvement is carried out by a team comprised of the host local authority, the Improvement Service and peer reviewers. The peer collaborative improvement will be led by the host local authority, coordinated, managed and facilitated by the Improvement Service, and peer reviewers will be from other local authorities or partner organisations, who have the necessary subject expertise to understand and drive improvement.

Peer collaborative improvement combines the analytical and facilitation expertise of the Improvement Service with the wealth of talent and expertise within Scottish local government, and potentially the wider public sector. The value that peer reviewers bring is their excellent working knowledge of the legislative, policy and operational context within which the service or area of activity operates, enabling them to make realistic and achievable improvement suggestions.

Local authorities will be specifically identified and approached to contribute peer reviewers to each peer collaborative improvement, based on a combination of factors. This will include their performance in relation to the service or area of activity subject to the peer collaborative improvement, their ability to demonstrate good practice and their willingness to participate. Consideration will also be given to the demographics of local authorities (e.g. urban/rural, level of deprivation) and the potential use of LGBF family groupings.

How do I establish if there is a need for peer collaborative improvement?
In establishing whether there is a need for peer collaborative improvement, the following questions may be helpful:

- Are you aware of any other local authorities who have undertaken any similar reviews of this service or area of activity and if so, were the lessons from other reviews relevant and applied to your service?
- Is there a clear rationale and a defined business need for undertaking peer collaborative improvement in the service or area of activity? If so, is this based on evidence – for example, of current performance, policy changes, weaknesses in current business systems or processes, self-assessment findings etc? Is the service or area of activity a consistent outlier/under performer compared to peers? Would you expect the performance of the service or area of activity to be better? Do you understand what is driving performance levels in your service/area of activity and in peers?
- Is there scope for improvement in a service or area of activity that is key to the delivery of priorities within your Council Plan, Local Outcomes Improvement Plan, transformation plan etc?
- Do you have clearly defined objectives for the peer collaborative improvement work? Have you identified the issues that you wish it to cover?
- Do you have clearly defined outcomes that you are aiming to achieve from peer collaborative improvement?
- What will be the added value to the service or area of activity of hosting peer collaborative improvement?

What are the benefits of local authorities being involved in Peer collaborative improvement?

Benefits for host local authority
- Receives focused and specific support and challenge around those services or areas which have been identified as in need of development or improvement, from external colleagues with understanding and expertise in the local context and landscape.
- Provides an opportunity for the host local authority to engage in a 'deep dive' on a particular service/ area of activity outwith a formal inspection setting.
- Provides value-for-money, with local authorities helping each other to provide improvement support at a lower cost than is available through external consultancy.

Benefits for peer reviewers
- Facilitates peer reviewers to gain new insights on how other local authorities operate and to bring back learning to their own organisation in ways that both improve outcomes and drive efficiency.
- Assists with personal and professional development.

Benefits for local government
- Peer collaborative improvement is managed and delivered by the sector for the sector, and our ambition is for all 32 local authorities to adopt the approach as a key part of their improvement architecture. It supports local government to deliver sector-led improvement in a range of service/policy areas.
- Encourages a sense of collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole, with local authorities actively supporting each other to improve by sharing learning and practice.
- Helps build a national overview of common themes facing key service areas, which can feed into future policy-making and decision-making, including identifying opportunities for service transformation at a national, regional and local level.

2. Key Principles of Peer collaborative improvement

- The peer collaborative improvement process is led by the host local authority.

- In engaging in Peer collaborative improvement, each local authority remains responsible for its own development and outcomes. Peer reviewers will advise, support and challenge through a solution-focused approach to improvement.

- Sharing practice and learning across Scottish local government should help make best use of the expertise across the system to support improvement.

- As a sector, local government is facing significant and well documented challenges. Within the sector, different local authorities face their own unique challenges as a result of their geography, demography and local priorities. One of the opportunities of peer collaborative improvement is the chance to support each other in addressing these common issues, and improving the overall performance of the sector.

- Success is dependent on creating and sustaining high levels of mutual trust, confidence, cooperation and collaboration to allow effective peer-led improvement to take place.

- The peer collaborative improvement team will respect the confidentiality of all documentation provided by the host local authority, as well as the content of all meetings and focus groups.

- Local government's well-established approaches to the LGBF and self-assessment are key cornerstones of our peer collaborative improvement approach, in addition to internal council performance management frameworks.

- Peer collaborative improvement is one strand of Local Government's approach to sector-led improvement. It will sit alongside and complement other improvement work taking place locally, regionally and nationally.

3. Governance of peer collaborative improvement

The Improvement Service will facilitate and manage the peer collaborative improvement approach and will be accountable to its Board for the effective delivery of peer collaborative improvement. Given the critical role that peer collaborative improvement plays in the LGBF Board's ambition to deliver a wider and more robust Local Government led improvement approach, the LGBF Board will play an advisory role.

Improvement Service Board
Responsible for providing overall strategic direction to the IS peer collaborative improvement approach, monitoring progress and evaluating the impact/ success or otherwise of the approach. IS Board members will champion the peer collaborative improvement approach with colleagues in Solace and COSLA, to encourage buy-in and support from across local government.

LGBF Board
Responsible for:
- Disseminating the learning/recommendations arising from peer collaborative improvement across the local government family and particularly with Solace and COSLA.
- Providing advice on our approach and helping us develop, evolve and refine the approach.
- Helping champion the approach and securing buy-in across different local government professional associations (excluding ADES who have their own approach to peer collaborative improvement).
- Working with Audit Scotland, the Accounts Commission and other audit and inspection bodies to discuss the use of the outputs of peer collaborative improvement in audit and inspection work, and how the more assertive approach to sector-led improvement informs the future shape of scrutiny.
- Satisfying themselves that the LGBF is a cornerstone of the peer collaborative improvement approach and continuing to evolve and develop the LGBF so it continues to add value to peer collaborative improvement

4. Peer collaborative improvement Approach
The key elements of the Peer collaborative improvement Approach will be based upon the Public Service Improvement Framework (PSIF) that is widely used across local government and a range of public service organisations. PSIF is a self-assessment checklist tool that is used to identify strengths as well as identifying areas for improvement.

Once the area for review has been identified, the host local authority will undertake a self-assessment using the PSIF checklist tool to provide an evidence-based starting point for discussion about strengths and areas for improvement.

As the diagram below illustrates, the PSIF approach asks the area under review within the host local authority to consider its performance across the following six areas:

The six sections of the checklist include 61 statements based on the following areas:

1. Service Planning
This section explores how the service operates in relation to service planning and performance management. It leads you to consider how effective the service is at this and the role of customers, partners and stakeholders in this area. It covers:

- Strategy and Plans
- Empowering and Involving Communities, Customers and Stakeholders
- Performance Management.

2. Staff
This section refers entirely to the staff who work in the service – this includes full- time, part-time, fixed term, temporary, permanent and secondees. It covers:

- Planning and Managing Staff
- Developing Staff
- Involving Staff
- Staff Communication
- Recognising and Caring for Staff

3. Partnerships and Resources
This section looks at how the service works in partnership to support the delivery of improved outcomes and also how it manages resources in the most efficient, effective and sustainable way. It covers:

- Managing Partnerships
- Managing Financial and Information Resources
- Managing Assets and other Resources

4. Processes and Services

This section assesses how well the service manages customer needs and expectations and how customers are involved in reviewing and improving what you do. It will challenge you to explore if you are meeting the needs of customers and stakeholders and if you are doing so in the best way. It covers:

- Managing Customer Needs and Expectations
- Developing Services around Customer Needs
- Reviewing and Improving Service Delivery

5. Leadership

This section of PSIF assesses the effectiveness of our leaders. It explores how leaders plan for the future, create a positive culture and engage with our customers, partners and stakeholders.

- Planning for the Future
- Creating a Positive Culture
- Engaging Communities, Customers, Partners and Other Stakeholders.

6. Results

Results demonstrate what a service achieves. A service will decide which measures are the most appropriate and most useful. The service will be clear what measures it requires to manage the service and contribute to its success, whilst being able to share and learn from best practice elsewhere. A service will decide the right level for targets to be set and work towards those targets. It covers:

- Customer Results
- Staff Results
- Community Results
- Key Performance Results

In addition to the wealth of quantitative and qualitative information that will emerge from the self-assessment checklist, further evidence relevant to the host local authority should be gathered, such as KPIs, business and performance plans, recent reviews etc. This material will be shared with the Peer collaborative improvement Team by the host local authority and act as the basis of discussion between the host local authority, IS and peer reviewers during the Peer collaborative improvement.

5. Stages of Peer collaborative improvement

1. Getting ready

Relevant senior officers within the host local authority will meet with the Improvement Service to:

- Discuss the service/area of activity's motivation and aims for the peer collaborative improvement;
- Develop the Improvement Service's understanding of the key issues facing the service / area of activity;
- Consider the key areas for the peer collaborative improvement to focus on, which will likely develop from LGBF deep dives and/or the host local authority's own self-assessment, benchmarking, performance management and other improvement activity.
- Identify which local authorities, and potentially partner organisations, should be invited to contribute peer reviewers.

- Discuss the peer collaborative improvement approach and the arrangements that will need to be in place to facilitate the work of the peer collaborative improvement team.
- Agree a timeline for the peer collaborative improvement.

The host local authority, supported by the Improvement Service, will contact relevant Chief Executives to request that their local authority participates in the peer-led improvement by contributing a peer reviewer.

2. Pre-work

In advance of the peer collaborative improvement commencing, the PSIF checklist will be issued to those stakeholders relevant to the review. The stakeholders will be asked to self-assess the service/area of activity against the checklist. The host local authority will also gather relevant evidence, KPIs, etc. to further support the fieldwork and context setting process. The Improvement Service will support the host local authority in the analysis of the checklist as required.
This preparatory work will seek to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the area under review, identifying a number of areas for improvement (AFIs), which will act as the basis for improvement discussions in the peer collaborative improvement process.

The host local authority will draw together a succinct paper identifying what it is seeking to achieve from the forthcoming fieldwork, which will be shared with the peer collaborative improvement team and host local authority participants including all relevant materials, such as the checklist report and other evidence, such as business and performance plans, recent reviews undertaken etc. These outputs will be shared at least 2 weeks in advance of the fieldwork to ensure that everyone is up to speed and ready to engage meaningfully in the process. Preparation in advance of the session will be critical, to ensure that the host local authority is clear about what they wish to achieve through this process and the Peer collaborative improvement Team are clear about their role in providing peer support to achieve this.

3. Fieldwork

The host local authority will lead the fieldwork (approximately 2 or 3 days), which may be done in person, remotely or a combination of both. This will involve colleagues from the host local authority, peer reviewers and IS exploring priority areas and looking for ways to help address identified challenges.

There are three main phases of the fieldwork, albeit there will be flexibility in relation to these to suit needs of host Authority. The three phases are:
1. Context setting & prioritisation with host participants and the Peer collaborative improvement Team
2. Interviews & focus group discussions with stakeholders to identify ways to address identified challenges
3. Improvement Planning session following discussions to agree key actions

The first phase will begin with some context setting around the area under review with time spent on reflecting upon the findings that have emerged from the checklist and the implications emerging from the evidence gathered as part of this process. Group discussions around the AFIs identified through the self-assessment will allow the host local authority participants and the Peer collaborative improvement Team to consider, scrutinise and challenge the AFIs and look to achieve consensus on these going forward to the next stage, and forming the basis of interviews and focus group discussions.

The interviews and focus group discussions will allow the Peer collaborative improvement Team to probe further into those prioritised AFI's, and to work with host local authority participants to identify, explore and evaluate potential options which might be adopted to support improvement. This will provide an opportunity to build in potential learning from any relevant approaches adopted by the peer reviewer councils.

The improvement planning session will utilise the templates used in the PSIF sessions that have been tried and tested in front-line, middle manager and senior management levels. When the host local authority is comfortable to do so, improvement work will consider the following:

1. What key actions need to happen to make this improvement a reality?
2. Are there any risks or costs (financial or resource) associated with these improvement actions?
3. How can we measure or know that the actions have been implemented?
4. Overall Outcome.

It may well be that some areas identified as part of the fieldwork sessions require further work to be undertaken. Such flexibility needs to be built in to ensure that the Peer collaborative improvement Approach best suits the needs of the host local authority.

4. Capturing findings, recording and reporting
The host local authority is expected to produce a report based on the Peer collaborative improvement. The report should include a focus on action and next steps.

It is important that findings from the Peer collaborative improvement engagement are summarised in a report to which all participants are involved. The host authority will be responsible for finalising the report, which should reflect input from the peer reviewers and Improvement Service. It will be important that next steps are clearly outlined, with timescales identified where possible.

In drafting the report, the peer reviewers and Improvement Service should offer feedback.

It is very likely that colleagues from the host local authority involved will also want to share key messages from Peer collaborative improvement with Elected Members, through local committee processes.

5. Sharing findings
It is likely that learning and aspects of practice worthy of sharing will emerge in the peer collaborative improvement work, which could be applied in other contexts. It will therefore be important, wherever possible, to share this learning and practice across the system. If the host local authority is reluctant to share the full report publicly, it would be helpful for them to publish a summary report on the LGBF website. This will support Local Government to underpin improvement through capturing, sharing and encouraging faster uptake of its collective knowledge, innovative methods and learning practice. It will also encourage a culture within Scottish local government where seeking new knowledge and improved ways of working and minimising unnecessary duplication is the norm.

6. *Roles and Responsibilities*

Role of host local authority
- Lead the peer collaborative improvement process.
- Undertake necessary and relevant preparatory work in terms of considering its area of focus.
- Provide relevant and useful data, intelligence and evidence to inform the peer-led improvement (the assumption is that data should already be available, rather than be created only for this purpose).
- Oversee the smooth running of the process, including ensuring that the peer collaborative improvement team have access to all relevant documentation and data.
- Lead the fieldwork, which will involve colleagues from the host local authority, peer reviewers and IS exploring priority areas and looking for ways to help address identified challenges.
- Produce a report based on the peer collaborative improvement, which includes a focus on action and next steps and which reflects input from peer reviewers and the Improvement Service.

Role of Improvement Service
- Manage and facilitate the peer collaborative improvement process.
- Meet with the host local authority in advance of the peer collaborative improvement to agree how it will work (see getting ready section)
- Work with the host local authority to identify and approach three local authorities to contribute peer reviewers.
- Undertake analysis of relevant information and data, where available, to help inform the peer collaborative improvement, including LGBF data and family group analysis.

Role of peer reviewers
- Engage in purposeful discussion which supports peer collaborative improvement, for example, through reflective questioning to determine and or confirm the evidence-base in the host authority's self-assessment
- Facilitate change, by helping the host local authority identify areas for improvement and aid its capacity to change.
- Engage with a range of stakeholders through interviews and focus groups, and assimilating the key points made as part of the peer collaborative improvement work, to help inform the host local authority's report.
- Adopt the role of critical friend, providing supportive, robust and constructive challenge to help drive improvement.
- Apply their specialist knowledge and expertise to the host local authority, sharing exam
- ples of good practice for their own experience, and providing an external perspective.

7. *Timeline*
Peer collaborative improvement activity needs to be undertaken over an agreed and time-limited period. The period of involvement may vary from case to case – depending, for example, on the size of the relevant local authority, but should be over a relatively short, concerted period.

Appendix 1

Checklist of different stages in Peer collaborative improvement

The following form will be completed by the Improvement Service, in discussion with the host local authority.

Name of Host Local Authority: Initial meeting to discuss the process:
Date(s) of Collaborative Improvement
Focus of Collaborative Improvement:
Rationale for focus:
Names and contact details of leads from IS and host local authority:
Councils who will be approached to provide peer reviewers and rationale for their selection.
Team members from IS
Team members from host local authority
Date for team pre-meeting: (to take place at least 2 weeks before the main fieldwork)
Date for draft report to be circulated to the core team involved in Collaborative Improvement: (this is best done as soon after the fieldwork as possible e.g. within 2-3 weeks)
Date for meeting between leads from each organisation to discuss the draft report (within 4-5 weeks of the fieldwork)
Date for final reporting