

Additional Support Needs in Early Learning and Childcare Action Learning Set Session 2

The Relationship between Inclusive
Practice and Workforce Wellbeing |
Synthesis Report



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Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the emerging themes from the [second Additional Support Needs \(ASN\) in Early Learning and Childcare \(ELC\) Action Learning Set session](#), held in October 2026. It draws together insights from facilitated discussions, participant reflections and learning shared during the session, capturing key messages, areas of strength and opportunities for further consideration. The session created space for participants to explore the relationship between inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing, reflect on experiences within their own settings, services and localities, and consider the conditions that enable both children and practitioners to thrive.

Building on the findings from the first Action Learning Set session, discussions explored how leadership, culture, relationships, workload, professional learning and wider organisational conditions influence the sustainability of inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing. Participants considered examples of where these were being sustained well, examined the factors that support positive outcomes, and challenged assumptions about the opportunities and pressures facing the ELC workforce.

The findings highlight the importance of supportive relationships, visible leadership, trust, psychological safety, collaboration and access to learning and support in creating the conditions for inclusive practice to flourish. They also identify emerging challenges relating to workforce capacity, increasing complexity of need, professional isolation, access to specialist support and the emotional demands associated with supporting children and families.

The findings are intended to inform learning, improvement, and policy development across the ELC sector, Scottish Government, and key partners by identifying the conditions that support both workforce wellbeing and inclusive practice. This report forms part of a wider programme of shared learning that seeks to strengthen outcomes for children, families and the ELC workforce across Scotland.

Background

Early Learning and Childcare has a key role in children's lives. It is often where emerging needs are first identified, where relationships with families are built, and where early intervention can make a significant difference to outcomes.

At the same time, it is acknowledged that ELC Services across Scotland are responding to increasing levels of need and growing complexity. This creates both challenges and opportunities as we work towards ensuring children receive the right support, at the right time, in the right way.

Early Learning and Childcare, as set out in the National Standard and GIRFEC, promotes an inclusive and nurturing approach, alongside a clear focus on equitable access to funded ELC and the early identification and approach to additional support needs.

Methodology

Action Learning is an established development approach that is based on the idea that some of our most valuable learning comes from reflecting on real experiences and exploring them with others. It recognises that, particularly when working with complex issues such as ASN and inclusion, there are often no simple answers or single solutions. In this context, rather than focusing on finding immediate solutions, Action Learning encouraged participants to:

- Reflect on practice and experience.
- Ask thoughtful questions.
- Explore assumptions and different perspectives.
- Learn from colleagues across the ELC Sector
- Identify opportunities to influence change.

The second ASN in ELC Action Learning Set provided participants the opportunity to explore the relationship between inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing. The session was designed around a structured inquiry approach, and focused on two questions:

Think about your own setting, service, or locality, where are you seeing inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing being sustained well, and where is this becoming more difficult?

And

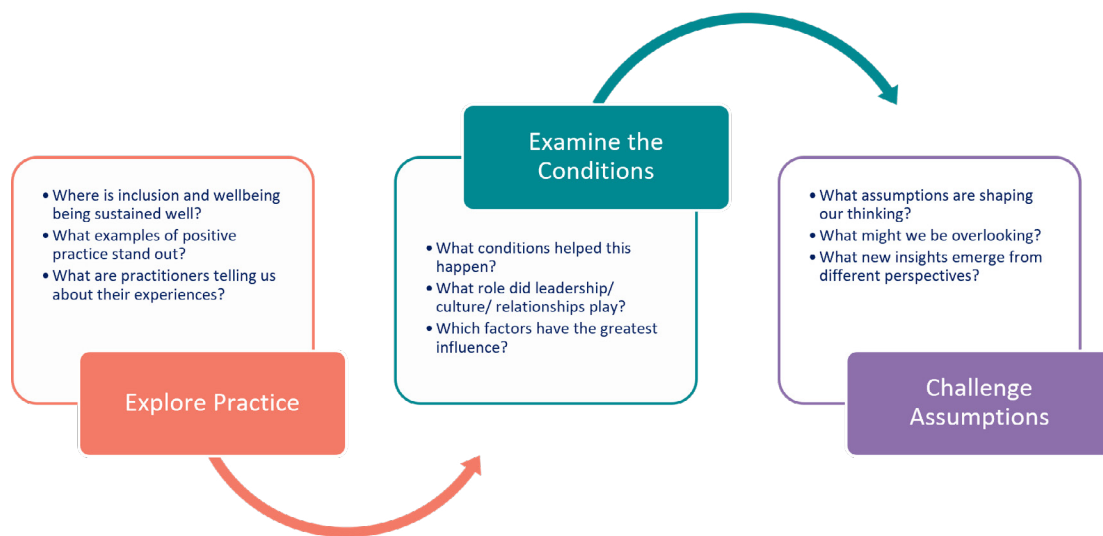
Reflect on today's discussion, what could strengthen workforce wellbeing, and where do we have the biggest opportunity to influence change?

The findings presented in this report draw on both facilitated discussions and interactive reflections. Contributions were reviewed and analysed to identify recurring themes, key learning, and opportunities for improvement. Particular attention was given to understanding the relationship between workforce wellbeing and inclusive practice, recognising that the conditions that support participants to feel valued, connected, and confident are often the same conditions that enable children and families to thrive.

As with the first Action Learning Set session, the findings are not intended to represent the experiences of the entire ELC sector. Rather, they provide insight into the experiences and perspectives of participants from a range of settings and contexts, highlighting areas for further reflection, learning and improvement. Alongside findings from future sessions, they will contribute to a growing body of evidence to support policy development, practice improvement and collaborative learning across ASN in ELC.

Exploring the conditions

Emerging themes, key learning, and opportunities for improvement.



The second Action Learning Set session explored the relationship between inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing in ELC. Participants consistently described inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing as mutually dependent. Settings were most successful in sustaining inclusion where the staff felt supported, connected, valued and confident in their role. Equally, workforce wellbeing was strengthened where staff felt equipped to meet the increasingly complex needs of children and families.

The discussions highlighted examples of strong practice already taking place across Scotland, while also identifying growing pressures linked to workforce capacity, complexity of need, access to support, and the emotional demands of the work. Through exploring practice, examining the conditions that enable success, and challenging assumptions about inclusion and wellbeing, several common themes emerged.

Theme 1: Leadership and culture shape inclusion and wellbeing.

Participants consistently identified leadership as one of the most important influences on both inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing. Settings were more likely to sustain inclusive approaches where leaders were visible, approachable, and understood the realities of ELC practice. Strong leadership was linked with cultures of trust, support, and open communication, where the workforce felt listened to, valued and confident to raise concerns. Participants also recognised that leaders and managers often carry significant responsibility for supporting others and may themselves require greater support, particularly when managing increasing workforce and service pressures.

Key Findings

- Leadership strongly influences workforce wellbeing and inclusive practice.
- Visible and responsive leaders help create cultures of trust, support and psychological safety.
- Leaders with an understanding of ELC practice are better able to support staff and children effectively.
- Leaders and managers also require support to sustain their own wellbeing.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Strengthen leadership development focused on inclusive and relational leadership.
- Increase opportunities for peer support and professional learning for leaders.
- Embed workforce wellbeing within leadership and organisational development.
- Ensure decision-makers understand the realities and pressures facing ELC settings.

Theme 2: Strong relationships and professional connections build resilience.

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of relationships in sustaining both inclusion and workforce wellbeing. Strong relationships with children, families, colleagues, and partner services helped the workforce feel supported, valued, and confident in their practice. Professional networks and opportunities to connect with others were also viewed as important sources of encouragement, learning and problem-solving. Across discussions, participants described connection and belonging as important protective factors against professional isolation, particularly for childminders and practitioners working in rural or more isolated contexts.

Key Learning

Building workforce confidence and capability contributes both to effective support for children and to longer-term system improvement.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Increase access to professional learning and development opportunities.
- Expand mentoring, coaching, and outreach support approaches.
- Strengthen workforce planning and capacity-building activity.
- Continue to consider the wellbeing and support needs of the workforce.

Theme 3: Workforce wellbeing is integral to inclusive practice.

Across all discussions, participants described workforce wellbeing and inclusive practice as closely interconnected rather than separate priorities. They reported practitioners felt that their ability to provide inclusive, responsive support was directly influenced by whether they felt supported, valued, and equipped to meet children's needs. Equally, settings that prioritised staff wellbeing were often described as being more able to foster inclusive cultures for children and families. Participants challenged assumptions that wellbeing is primarily an individual responsibility, instead highlighting the importance of organisational culture, leadership, relationships, and access to support.

Key Findings

- Workforce wellbeing and inclusive practice are closely interconnected.
- Practitioners are better able to support children and families when they feel supported themselves.
- The factors that support inclusion often also support workforce wellbeing.
- Wellbeing is shaped by organisational and system conditions as well as individual experiences.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Improve consistency of support pathways and processes.
- Strengthen inclusion of all provider types within local systems.
- Improve awareness and understanding of available supports and services.
- Develop a shared understanding of graduated approaches to support.

Theme 4: Increasing complexity of need requires earlier and better coordinated support.

Participants described growing complexity in children's needs and family circumstances, alongside increasing expectations on ELC settings to provide early and inclusive support. While early intervention was consistently recognised as crucial to improving outcomes, many highlighted challenges in accessing timely specialist advice, services, and resources. Delays in support pathways can leave practitioners supporting children and families for extended periods without additional expertise or capacity, placing increased pressure on staff and contributing to concerns about workload, confidence, and wellbeing. Participants emphasised the need for clearer pathways, stronger multi-agency collaboration and more timely access to support to ensure that emerging needs can be identified and addressed effectively.

Key Findings

- Children and families are presenting with increasingly complex and diverse needs.
- Early intervention remains critical to improving outcomes and preventing needs from escalating.
- Delays in accessing specialist support and expertise can place additional pressure on practitioners, settings, and families.
- Practitioners often provide sustained support while navigating complex pathways and waiting for additional services to become available.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Strengthen pathways for early identification, intervention, and support.
- Improve access to specialist advice, expertise, and services.
- Enhance coordination, communication, and signposting across services.
- Strengthen multi-agency working to provide more joined-up support.

Theme 5: Learning, collaboration and access to expertise build confidence.

Participants consistently highlighted the value of professional learning, collaboration, and access to expertise in supporting both inclusion and workforce wellbeing. Learning was viewed as most effective when it was practical, collaborative, and directly linked to practice. Coaching, mentoring, peer learning and communities of practice were frequently mentioned as valuable approaches for building confidence and supporting implementation. Participants also highlighted the importance of having access to specialist knowledge when responding to increasingly diverse and complex needs, while recognising that existing support can sometimes be difficult to access or navigate.

Key Findings

- Collaborative and practice-based learning supports workforce confidence.
- Coaching, mentoring and peer learning help translate learning into practice.
- Access to specialist expertise strengthens practitioners' ability to support children effectively.
- Existing resources and support are not always easy to access or navigate.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Increase opportunities for coaching, mentoring and collaborative learning.
- Create protected time for reflection and professional learning.
- Improve awareness of and access to existing resources and expertise.
- Strengthen whole team approaches to learning and improvement.

Theme 6: Workforce pressures are affecting wellbeing and inclusion.

While participants highlighted many examples of effective and inclusive practice, there was widespread recognition that sustaining this is becoming increasingly difficult. Recruitment and retention challenges, staffing pressures, limited time for reflection and increasing workloads were identified across multiple discussions. Participants also spoke about the emotional impact associated with supporting children and families, navigating difficult conversations, and managing increasing complexity of need. Compassion fatigue and burnout were recurring concerns, particularly where practitioners felt they were carrying significant responsibility without sufficient capacity or support.

Key Findings

- Workforce capacity pressures are affecting the sustainability of inclusive practice.
- Recruitment and retention challenges continue to impact the sector.
- The emotional labour involved in supporting children and families is significant.
- Compassion fatigue, stress and burnout are growing concerns.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Prioritise preventative approaches to workforce wellbeing.
- Create more opportunities for supervision, reflection, and peer support.
- Recognise and respond to the emotional demands of ELC practice.
- Identify ways to reduce avoidable pressures and create greater workforce capacity.

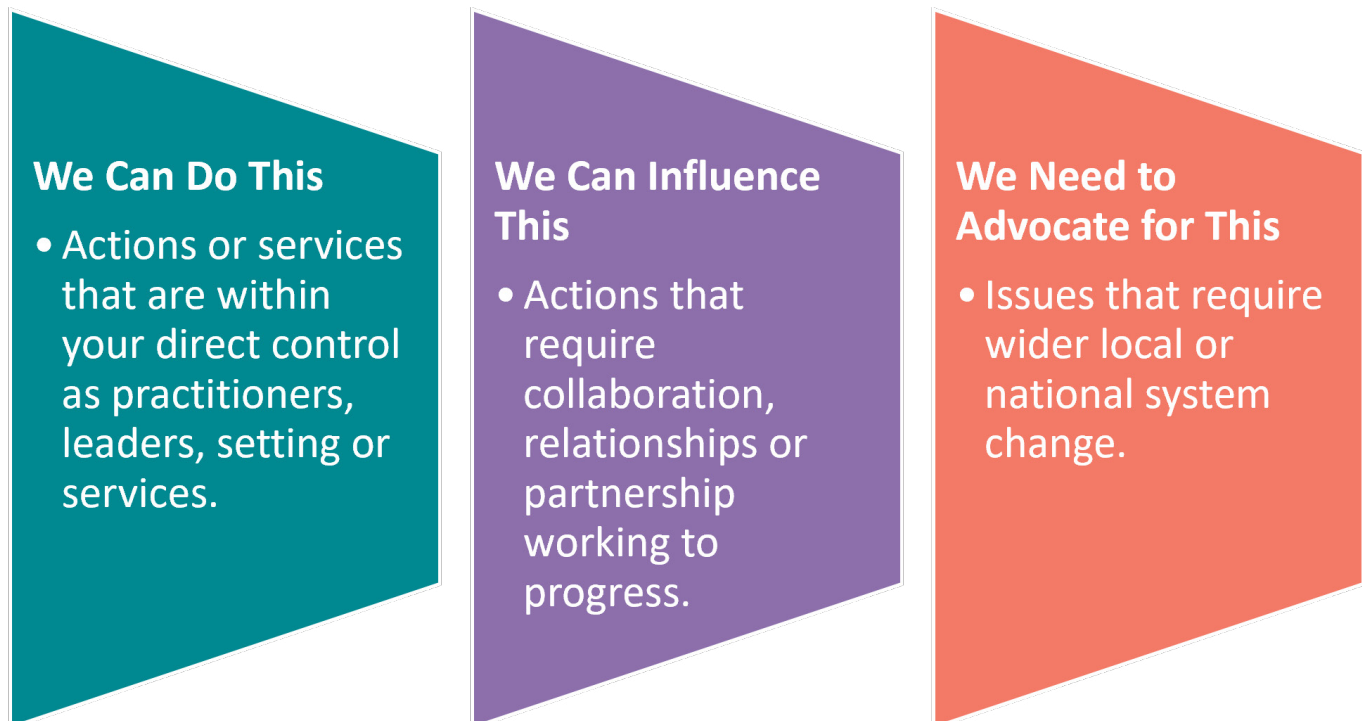
Summary

Collectively, these themes highlight both the strengths and challenges shaping inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing across the ELC sector. Participants described strong leadership, positive workplace cultures, supportive relationships, professional learning, and collaboration as key factors in sustaining both practitioner wellbeing and inclusive approaches. There was a clear recognition that workforce wellbeing and inclusive practice are closely connected, with many of the same conditions supporting positive outcomes for practitioners, children, and families.

At the same time, participants identified increasing complexity of need, workforce pressures, difficulties accessing specialist support, professional isolation and growing emotional demands as significant challenges. While these pressures are affecting the capacity of services to sustain inclusive practice, discussions reflected a continued commitment to inclusion, early intervention and improving outcomes for children and families.

The discussions reinforced the importance of strong leadership, connected and supported workforces, access to learning and expertise, effective multi-agency collaboration, and timely support for emerging needs. Together, the findings provide a valuable foundation for future Action Learning Set sessions and highlight opportunities to strengthen both workforce wellbeing and inclusive practice across the ELC sector.

Moving from insight to influence and action



Building on the discussions, participants were invited to reflect on what could strengthen inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing, and where there is the greatest opportunity to influence change. Using an interactive whiteboard, participants considered actions within their direct control, changes that could be influenced through collaboration and partnership, and areas requiring wider local or national action.

The reflections reinforce the themes emerging throughout the session. Participants highlighted the importance of supportive leadership, open communication, professional learning, strong relationships, and connected support network in creating environments where practitioners feel valued, supported, and able to meet the needs of children and families. At the same time, participants identified opportunities to strengthen collaboration across settings and services, improve access to support and expertise, and address wider workforce and system challenges affecting inclusion and wellbeing.

Across the three areas of influence, there was a clear recognition that sustaining inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing requires action at multiple levels. While many improvements can be achieved through everyday practice and local collaboration, participants also identified the need for wider structural change to ensure the workforce has the capacity, resources and support required to deliver high-quality inclusive practice and achieve positive outcomes for children and families. The key findings from these reflections are summarised below under the three areas of influence.

We can do this: Actions within our direct control.

Participants focused on the importance of creating supportive workplace cultures through everyday actions and behaviours. Suggestions included visible and responsive leadership, protected time for reflection, active listening, open communication, peer support and creating opportunities for staff to influence decisions. There was a strong emphasis on building trust, using shared language, and ensuring wellbeing becomes part of day-to-day practice rather than an additional initiative. Participants also highlighted the value of empowering staff to identify solutions, supporting colleagues through challenges and creating environments where people feel heard, valued, and connected.

We can influence this: Actions requiring collaboration and partnership.

Participants identified significant opportunities to strengthen workforce wellbeing and inclusion through stronger collaboration across settings, services, and organisations. Priorities included improving access to training and professional learning, sharing good practice, strengthening peer support networks, and enabling more joined-up approaches to supporting children, families, and staff. Participants also highlighted the importance of improving communication and information sharing across local systems, supporting leaders to remain visible and accessible, and creating opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, review and improvement.

We need to advocate for this: Changes requiring wider local or nation action.

Participants identified several systemic issues that extend beyond the influence of individual settings and services. These included the need for sustainable funding, adequate staffing levels, workforce recruitment and retention, and fair funding arrangements across all parts of the sector. Participants also highlighted the need for greater recognition and understanding of ELC practice among decision-makers, improved access to professional learning, stronger multi-agency support, and policy decisions that prioritise children's development and wellbeing. There was a clear call for national and local action to ensure the workforce has the capacity, resources and support needed to deliver high-quality inclusive practice and sustain workforce wellbeing over the long term.

Summary

Across all three pillars, participants reinforced that workforce wellbeing is shaped by a combination of individual, organisational and system-level factors. While many actions can be taken locally through supportive leadership, positive relationships and collaborative working, participants also recognised the need for stronger partnership working and wider system change. The discussion highlighted opportunities to build on existing strengths while advocating for the resources, capacity and conditions needed to sustain both workforce wellbeing and inclusive practice across the ELC sector.

Summary of participant actions and reflection

Participants identified a range of practical actions they intend to take forward to strengthen workforce wellbeing and sustain inclusive practice within their own settings and services.

Listening to and involving staff

Participants highlighted the importance of actively seeking staff views rather than making assumptions about what supports wellbeing. Proposed actions included using staff questionnaires, facilitating professional conversations, and creating opportunities for practitioners to shape wellbeing approaches and improvement activity.

Strengthening communication and feedback

Several participants committed to improving dialogue with staff, ensuring practitioners have opportunities to share their views, and providing meaningful responses to feedback gathered through meetings, training and professional discussions.

Building collaboration and professional learning

Participants recognised the value of working more closely with colleagues across settings, local authorities and the PVI sector. Actions included developing professional learning partnerships, creating networking and peer-support opportunities, establishing working groups, and sharing effective practice across services.

Developing leadership for wellbeing

There was a strong emphasis on the role of visible, values-led leadership in supporting workforce wellbeing. Participants reflected on how leadership approaches can influence workplace culture and identified opportunities to strengthen reflective and supportive leadership practices.

Reviewing and expanding workforce support

Participants identified opportunities to review existing wellbeing offers, assess their effectiveness with staff, and consider additional supports, training opportunities and collaborative approaches to workforce development.

Key reflections

Participants' reflections reinforced the importance of supportive leadership, open communication, protected time for reflection, and creating workplace cultures where staff feel listened to, valued and supported. Strong professional relationships, peer support and professional networks were viewed as important contributors to workforce resilience, confidence, and wellbeing.

Participants also emphasised the benefits of greater collaboration across settings and sectors, alongside improved access to professional learning, specialist expertise and timely support. At the same time, concerns were raised about workforce capacity, recruitment and retention challenges, sustainable funding, and the increasing demands being placed on the ELC workforce.

When asked:

“How confident are you that your setting/service currently creates the conditions needed to support workforce wellbeing and sustain inclusive practice?”

Participants initially reported an average confidence rating of 3.3 out of 5. When the question was revisited later in the session, the average score increased to 3.5 out of 5.

This increase suggests that the reflective discussions and sharing of practice helped participants recognise existing strengths within their own contexts while identifying practical opportunities to further strengthen workforce wellbeing and sustainable inclusive practice.

Overall, participants demonstrated a shared recognition that sustaining inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing requires action at multiple levels. Reflections highlighted practical changes that can be implemented within individual settings and services, opportunities for greater collaboration and partnership across the sector, and the need for continued local and national support to address wider systemic challenges. Collectively, the discussions reflected a strong commitment to creating more inclusive, supportive, and sustainable environments for children, families, and the workforce.

Next steps

Future Action Learning Set sessions will build on the themes emerging from discussions to date, providing opportunities to explore key issues in more depth, share practice and test approaches to addressing some of the challenges identified by participants.

As the programme progresses, learning from each session will continue to be garnered and linked to identify recurring themes, emerging priorities, and opportunities for action. This will help shape future discussions, strengthen collective learning across the sector, and contribute to ongoing policy, practice and improvement activity relating to ASN in ELC.

Conclusion

The second Action Learning Set session highlighted the strong and interdependent relationship between inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing. Participants consistently described both as being shaped by the same underlying conditions, including effective leadership, positive workplace cultures, strong relationships, access to support, opportunities for learning and the capacity to respond to children's needs. Where these conditions were in place, practitioners were better able to deliver inclusive, responsive support and sustain their own wellbeing.

The discussions also highlighted the significant strengths that already exist across the ELC sector. Participants shared examples of committed and reflective practitioners, supportive teams, collaborative networks, and inclusive approaches that are making a positive difference for children and families. These examples demonstrate the sector's continued commitment to ensuring that all children are supported to participate, belong, and thrive.

At the same time, participants identified several challenges that are making inclusive practice and workforce wellbeing more difficult to sustain. Increasing complexity of need, workforce pressures, recruitment and retention challenges, difficulties accessing specialist support, and the emotional demands associated with supporting children and families were recurring themes throughout the discussions. While practitioners remain strongly committed to inclusion, there was recognition that commitment alone is not enough without the time, capacity and support required to put it into practice effectively.

A key message emerging from the session is that improving workforce wellbeing and strengthening inclusive practice cannot be viewed as separate agendas. Supporting the workforce is fundamental to supporting children and families. This requires action at multiple levels, from everyday practice and leadership within settings, to collaborative approaches across services and wider local and national policy and system changes.

The findings from this session provide valuable insight into both the opportunities and challenges facing the ELC sector. They highlight the importance of continuing to invest in the conditions that enable practitioners to feel supported, connected, and confident in their role, while ensuring that children and families can access the inclusive, high-quality support they need. These findings will help inform future Action Learning Set discussions and contribute to ongoing learning, improvement, and policy development across ASN in ELC.

Additional Resources

[Additional Support Needs in Early Learning and Childcare Action Learning Set Session 2 – The Relationship Between Inclusive Practice and Workforce Wellbeing SWAY](#)

[SSSC Children and Young People Portal – Learning Zone](#)

[Early Years Scotland Wellbeing Hub](#)

[Educational Visitors blog](#)

[Additional Support Needs in Early Learning and Childcare Action Learning Set Session 1 Synthesis Report](#)

West Lothian Civic Centre
Howden South Road
Livingston
EH54 6FF

Email: info@improvementservice.org.uk
www.improvementservice.org.uk



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