

Empowering teachers, parents and communities to achieve Excellence and Equity in Education A Governance Review

RESPONDENT INFORMATION FORM

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- Individual
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Excellence and equity in education – a governance review

Consultation response from Includem

Background

Includem is a specialist Scottish charity which provides intensive, personalised support for vulnerable young people and their families. We believe that no young person is beyond help and that with a responsive, consistent service at the time of most need we can rebuild relationships and deliver positive, sustainable outcomes.

Our work is focused on prevention – prevention of offending or reoffending, prevention of unnecessary accommodation away from home and prevention of exclusion from school. In all cases our framework of support consists of professional one to one relationships with a focused work to deal with the underlying needs and challenges in order to develop hope, aspiration, resilience and improved family relationships.

An increasing focus of our work is on earlier intervention through direct referrals from schools. We support young people and their families who are at risk of exclusion and who have poor engagement with school.

Overview of consultation response

Includem strongly welcomes the increasing focus on the attainment gap and on improving educational outcomes for young people. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the underpinning governance arrangements for schools.

We particularly welcome the recognition in the vision around ensuring every child has the same opportunity to succeed, and noting the importance of closing the poverty-related attainment gap. On that theme, whilst we recognise the importance of governance to the wider education system we would encourage a similar focus on the impact of life outside of school on the outcomes of children and young people.

We know from our evidence based practice that significant progress can be made towards closing the attainment gap by dealing head on with the underlying factors which lead to disengagement and exclusion from school and which prevent young people from being in an emotionally ready state to learn.

Q1: What are the strengths of the current governance arrangements of Scottish education?

Q2: What are the barriers within the current governance arrangements to achieving the vision of excellence and equity for all?

We do not have any direct experience of the governance arrangements; however, we do have experience of the education system which differs from local authority to local authority. Despite this there is a clear framework through which collaboration between public bodies (and others) can work.

There is an inherent challenge in trying to meet the twin aims of this review – excellence and equity for all are ambitious aims that are not necessarily directly linked. Our focus would be on equity of opportunity – ensuring those young people who are furthest from engaging now – and who are the most challenging to engage – are fully supported to do so.

We would suggest a key element of this is recognising the unique role the third sector can play in completing the role of schools in the education of young people. Not only are we able to provide a more flexible service at times of most need, but we have a greater degree of flexibility and in our experience are able to build a relationship with families who would otherwise refuse to cooperate with statutory services.

Q3: Should the above key principles underpin our approach to reform? Are there other principles which should be applied?

Yes. We would support the principles outlined in the review. We welcome the focus on transitions and on empowering children and young people and their parents. The latter is particularly important as we recognise the critical importance of families in achieving positive outcomes.

We raise a caution around the word ‘excellence’ which needs a more clearly defined context to ensure the approach taken to educational improvement isn’t driven by exam results only, but by the positive outcomes more generally achieved by young people.

As we explain in a number of answers throughout this consultation response, effective relationships are the cornerstone of our approach. We would suggest this could be factored into the principles underpinning the reform approach – as part of the work around collaboration perhaps. Although it may seem obvious that effective relationships are key to making progress, it is often the case that relationship breakdown is the root cause of the disengagement from education in the first place. Furthermore, professional relationships within school and with other statutory and non-statutory agencies could be improved to make the whole system work more efficiently and effectively.

Q4: What changes to governance arrangements are required to support decisions about children’s learning and school life being taken at school level?

From our practice experience we do not have a comment on this.

Q5: What services and support should be delivered by schools? What responsibilities should be devolved to teachers and headteachers to enable this?

Our work with schools is supporting those children and young people who are at risk of exclusion and who are not engaging with day to day school activities – including non-attendance. We know from the outcomes we have achieved that our flexible, personalised approach with young people outside school hours works and we would like to see a greater emphasis on this.

A critical success factor in our work with schools is an investment of time to discuss and understand the risk factors and needs for each young person and the purpose of the intervention. Schools report to us that this process, and our reporting back to them on each individual young person, helps them to manage behaviour and encourage increased engagement within the school. Some of the positive change they have seen in young peoples has been the result of having richer information and different perspectives from what is available solely within the confines of the school.

It is not clear at all that this would require any devolution of responsibilities to teachers and headteachers – it would simply require a change in approach at a local authority level. Where our model works best is in local authorities where there is a clear referral pathway, including the school as a key partner, but taking into account the unmet need across the authority – recognising some schools will be in need of a greater level of intervention than others.

Q6: How can children, parents, communities, employers, colleges, universities and others play a stronger role in school life? What actions should be taken to support this?

We are pleased there is an emphasis on improving the relationships between all those who have a role in education. Our own practice experience is focused around relationships – building or rebuilding stronger relationships within families and between family and school. These relationships are complex, and in many cases are predicated on generational cycles of negative attitudes towards school. We work with parents and carers who had a very negative experience of education themselves and without the proper support these views – and the challenging engagement which is the result, will continue.

Our experience points to the importance of building (and rebuilding) relationships as being the key underpinning to any approach. Many of the challenges facing families are entrenched and will not be easily overcome simply by schemes to involve parents in the life of the school. The approach needs to be outreach in nature – engaging parents, supporting them to create and sustain routines, providing practical help and guidance and being there when support is needed most. Using a strengthened relationship as part of a wider scaffolding of support then allows specific targeted interventions to facilitate re-engagement.

It is worth pointing out that our model of intervention is predicated on the notion that the young people and families we work with are unlikely to want our support from the outset and we will go through sometimes long periods of rejection. It is these families who are most in need of that support, and who often find statutory services to be hard to reach – not available when they need help most, and not willing to engage with them because of their chaotic lifestyle. Therefore any approach to engaging

parents more in the life of the school should recognise the time, patience and persistence required and not simply engage those who are already the most likely to engage.

Q7: How can governance arrangements support more community-led early learning and childcare provision particularly in remote and rural areas?

We would agree that quality, effective early learning opportunities are fundamental to supporting children and young people. Our practice experience is largely focused on those children already at primary and secondary school, however in our view, the core elements of effective early learning opportunities – of prevention and early intervention can be equally, and just as importantly, applied at these stages.

Q8: How can effective collaboration amongst teachers and practitioners be further encouraged and incentivised?

Our view is that collaboration amongst all those involved in the education of children and young people is critically important. We therefore would suggest the 'incentive' is improved outcomes for the young people in our collective care.

More broadly, our work with schools is most effective where there is a good working relationship between teachers and support staff and Includem project workers. When we are able to respond to emerging crisis within the school to prevent (formal or informal) exclusion we not only support the school to deal with the situation but improve the experience for the young person.

For example, one school we work in is able to call the assigned project worker whenever a young person begins to disengage from a lesson. Previously the young person would be removed from the classroom to a behaviour support base, but now the focused work being carried out by an Includem worker can slot into place alongside the class teacher and effectively deal with the underlying causes of the disengagement.

Effective partnerships in school and with all the agencies and organisations which support the school and the young people is key. Successful 'team around the child' meetings ensure not only that the best decisions are made efficiently but that the young person is always at the centre of the discussions. We would like to see an expansion of this model in other areas of school life.

Q9: What services and support functions could be provided more effectively through clusters of schools working together with partners?

We recognise there are situations where schools require flexibility to put in place a local solution that meets the needs of the local community. However our experience also shows that effective interventions work where schools can share a service and the good practice that comes from it. Our work in one local authority for example is with a number of schools who each make referrals into the service based on emerging need – one school may require it more than the others for a short period and then needs

might shift. This approach allows the service to remain in place but without any one school having to sustain it when it doesn't have a specific need.

The review notes the commonly understood definition of school clusters as being around primary schools and secondary schools associated with a defined locality. These types of clusters are crucial in ensuring the transition between primary school and secondary school is effective. We would suggest more could be done to make this transition more successful for young people at a very worrying and challenging time in their adolescent development. Relationships again are key – when most of the relationships young people have built up over seven years at primary school come to an end it may be useful to think of ways some professional relationships could be sustained so there remains some continuity in a period of otherwise continual change.

Q10: What services or functions are best delivered at a regional level? This may include functions or services currently delivered at a local or a national level.

This is not an area that our practice experience would provide us evidence to comment specifically on.

Q11: What factors should be considered when establishing new educational regions?

This is not an area that our practice experience would provide us evidence to comment specifically on. More generally however, we would make the basic point that whilst public sector reform has undoubtedly led to innovation of effective practice in some areas, it also creates pressures on those delivering services in an already fractured operating environment. There is also a danger that the professional relationships which are effective in particular localities, providing joined up working and sharing of good practice could be lost in any future restructuring. This should be carefully considered.

Where there is evidence of 'what works' we would like to see this amplified and recognised – if new educational regions are able to share that good practice and create a space for effective planning of services then this is to be welcomed.

Q12: What services or support functions should be delivered at a national level?

We welcome the commitment to take forward a whole system approach. We would agree that the role of government at a national level is to set the priorities for Scottish education in its broadest sense. We would suggest this should include the sharing of good practice of 'what works' locally so projects that have a proven track record of success can reach more young people.

There is already some useful analytical work being undertaken at a Scottish Government level around outcomes for children and families and we would like to see continued focus on this so we know outcomes are being achieved. As an organisation we put evaluation and evidence of progress towards

outcomes at the heart of what we do so we know we are providing a quality service for young people. This approach allows us to continually improve our services. A similar approach taken at a national level with a dashboard of indicators (but not a league table type system of particular schools) would be useful.

Q13: How should governance support teacher education and professional learning in order to build the professional capacity we need?

There has been an increasing focus in teacher education and professional development on recognising the complexity of needs some young people and families have. We would like to see a continuation of this, with a holistic approach taken to supporting the wellbeing of young people – not just thinking of the role within the classroom, but the wider framework of support that could be put in place to prevent disengagement and long term negative outcomes.

It is essential teachers are able and confident enough to identify those young people who are ‘struggling’ and who need additional support – and that schools are provided with the tools and resources to provide that support. There is a key role for the third sector in supporting this process and part of ongoing professional development should be around understanding what services are available out with the school and in the local community which can complement their pastoral role within school.

Q14 and Q15 - This is not an area that our practice experience would provide us evidence to comment specifically on.

Q16: How could the accountability arrangements for education be improved?

We would echo our comments in response to Question 12 around analytical frameworks and investment in evidencing of ‘what works’. While we recognise the importance of testing, we would emphasise the need to use the other tools available to measure progress against outcomes – especially through the SHANARRI indicators which take a more rounded view of the wellbeing of young people.

Q17: Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the governance of education in Scotland?

As previously stated, we recognise the importance of governance to the wider improvements in the education system in Scotland. However, we would caution against the suggestion that we can improve outcomes for children and young people by focussing solely on the school – we need to think beyond the school gates on this agenda.

Some estimates suggest upwards of 70% of the impact on outcomes for children and young people is by what goes on outside school. A holistic approach needs to be taken to address the currently unmet needs of young people who are or are at risk of disengaging and exclusion from school.

Includem has considerable practice experience in this area and we would be happy to share our model and our track record to further this conversation.

We have supplied one case study below to highlight the work Includem has been doing with schools to improve outcomes, attendance and attainment.

We would be happy to expand on any of these points and more generally on this theme going forward. We can also provide case studies and evidence of our work on reducing school exclusion and raising attainment. Please contact our Policy Manager, Michael Shanks, on michael.shanks@includem.co.uk for further information.

Case Study – Rory’s Story

Includem supported Rory to reduce his disruptive behaviour, strengthen his relationships at home and reengage with school. After eight months of support, Rory was back at school and looking positively towards the future.

Rory was referred to Includem through his school when he was 12 years old. His disruptive behaviour was escalating both in the classroom and at home and he was frequently not attending. His mum reported incidents of violence in the household and she recognised she was not able to manage his behaviour. He had no social work involvement.

Working with Rory and his family Includem put in place a support plan of three contacts per week and one joint contact with him and his mum to work on their relationship. The outcomes jointly agreed were:

- Enhanced parent/carer/adult/young person relationships (Healthy)
- Improved parent/carer confidence and resilience (Healthy, Nurtured)
- Better able to cope in crisis (Safe)
- Increased victim awareness (Responsible)
- Improved attendance and attainment at school (Included, Achieving)

Throughout Rory’s time with Includem our Project Workers liaised closely with his school providing updates on his progress so that a consistent approach could be taken during and outwith school hours. This allowed teachers to build on some of the work which Includem’s Project Workers had been doing and helped to build structure in Rory’s day.

Rory engaged well with Includem’s toolkit, ‘A Better Life’, completing focussed work around managing emotions, and ‘this is my life’ which focused on rebuilding his relationships with family members, mainly his mum. Joint contacts with Rory and his mum allowed them to explore some of the underlying reasons for their relationship breakdown, in particular to open up about Rory’s feelings towards things which had happened in his earlier years. This allowed mum to understand Rory’s perspectives and feelings on things that mattered to him.

Includem set manageable, short term goals for Rory and his mum to achieve – for example setting a time to be out the door to school each day, or a time to be off the internet at night. Proactive and sometimes unscheduled out of hours contacts with Project Worker’s reinforced these goals and supported mum to put in place routines.

After several weeks of this, Rory and his mum were able to access Includem’s ‘Young Person’s Fund’ to organise a small family trip together. This allowed them to enjoy some time together which was previously impossible due to the constant conflict in the household.

Rory completed his time with Includem by working on the ‘This is my future’ module. He explored what his future goals and ambitions were and how he wanted to get there. He recorded the journey he had been on and looked back at his emotions and attitudes at the start of his support with Includem to see the progress he had made.

After eight months of targeted support, Rory exited Includem’s programme having fully reengaged with school. He was positive about the future, with strong relationships at home and with his teachers.

Although he continues to present some challenging behaviours in class, he is better able to recognise the consequences of these actions and because he is more open about his emotions and frustrations he has not been involved in any aggressive or violent behaviour.

The name and some key details about this young person have been changed to protect his/her identity.