Review of local authorities' actions to tackle unnecessary bureaucracy and undue workload in schools

September 2016

Introduction

In June 2016, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills asked Education Scotland to undertake a focused review of the demands placed on schools by local authorities in relation to Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), particularly around their arrangements for curriculum, planning, assessment and reporting in schools. This review was planned as one strand within a wider set of actions announced in the Government's 'Delivery Plan'[1] designed to eliminate unnecessary workload demands associated with the implementation of CfE.

The review took place in August 2016. Teams of HM Inspectors visited local authorities for one day, or in a few cases, a day and a half[2]. They met Directors of Education and local authority officers; representatives of teachers' professional associations and Local Negotiating Committees for Teachers (LNCT); primary and secondary headteachers; and primary and secondary teachers. Inspectors looked at arrangements, expectations and associated workload requirements for Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) placed on schools by the local authority, as well as any guidance and support provided by the authority to help minimise bureaucracy and workload. This report sets out the findings of the review.

Background

In carrying out the review, HM Inspectors took account of aspects of CfE which had been identified as causes of unnecessary bureaucracy and undue workload by the Ministerial Group on Tackling Bureaucracy; the CfE Management Board 'Reflections Group' which reported on the first two diets of new national qualifications; and the Ministerial Working Group on Assessment and National Qualifications[3].

Drawing on these reports, all of which were informed by evidence from inspections, the key themes identified were:
➢ forward and curriculum planning;
➢ assessment;
➢ self-evaluation and improvement planning;
➢ tracking, monitoring and reporting; and
➢ IT systems.

Inspectors explored the expectations, guidance and support which the local authority had in place for its schools in each of these areas They were particularly interested in the actions the local authority had taken to ensure that unnecessary bureaucracy was avoided, and that effective, streamlined practice was in place across all of their schools.

For the purpose of this report, unnecessary bureaucracy is defined as excessive paperwork or electronic form-filling, leading to unproductive workload for staff in schools. At the same time, inspectors were conscious of the fact that the absence of any useful guidance or support can also cause unnecessary workload as schools and teachers 're-invent the wheel'. The challenge at both national and local level has been to provide the right amount of support and guidance,

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[1] Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education
[2] Due to adverse weather conditions, the engagement activities with Shetland took place by video- and teleconference
[3] Links to the reports of these three groups can be found at Appendix B

while at the same time allowing schools and teachers flexibility and autonomy to meet their pupils' needs.

This review was clearly focused on the demands placed on schools by local authorities in relation to CfE, particularly around the themes listed above. Staff interviewed by inspectors often cited other issues which they believed were contributing significantly to high levels of workload pressure in their schools and which lay outwith the scope of this review. These issues varied but included, for example, SQA arrangements relating to the new National Qualifications and the volume of guidance provided by Education Scotland. Assessment of these wider issues has not been made in this report. As indicated earlier, this review forms one specific element within a much wider package of actions set out in the Government's Delivery Plan. Many of these wider issues are addressed directly through other elements of the Delivery Plan.

Forward and curriculum planning

Inspectors noted that forward planning has been a notable cause of workload in many primary schools. In too many cases, primary teachers have felt the need to produce large quantities of documentation to demonstrate, for example to headteachers and local authority officers, that they are covering all aspects of the curriculum with their pupils. To address this issue, around half of all local authorities have provided guidance on forward planning or broad principles to be followed, with the aim of reducing unnecessary paperwork. The creation of 'frameworks' in around half of the local authorities is supporting streamlined planning for curriculum areas, most frequently literacy, numeracy and aspects of health and wellbeing. As a result of advice in the reports of the Ministerial Group on Tackling Bureaucracy, there is increasing emphasis on professional dialogue around forward planning instead of written explanations and feedback. In more than a third of local authorities, however, teachers reported that variations in headteachers' interpretations of local authority advice was a cause of undue workload and have led to inconsistencies across schools.

In around half of all local authorities, local subject networks bringing together staff from schools across the authority are supporting secondary teachers effectively in planning their courses. Frequent changes to SQA examination requirements and multi-level classes were noted as causing additional workload in recent years when planning courses in secondary schools. With regard to planning the overall curriculum, secondary headteachers in around half of all local authorities said they are reviewing provision in S1 to S3, based on what they now know about the new national qualifications at the senior phase. Secondary headteachers in around a third of local authorities would welcome further guidance, both national and local, on curriculum progression pathways across the broad general education; the curriculum in S3; and transitions into the senior phase. Secondary headteachers in around half of all local authorities welcomed the autonomy they had to plan the senior phase of the curriculum to meet their local needs. In the majority of local authorities, headteachers' curriculum planning was supported by advice and challenge from local authority officers, and networks for sharing good practice. In around half of all local authorities, developments such as aligned timetables and timings of the school day; and various campus and consortium arrangements are allowing young people to benefit from a wider range of curriculum pathways. These arrangements are leading to increasing collaboration across schools. In a few local authorities, teachers felt that headteachers' autonomy over curriculum planning was leading to undue workload for their staff.

Assessment

Most local authorities have provided guidance for schools on assessment in the broad general education. In many cases, headteachers and teachers felt that the guidance has changed too often, lacks clarity or requires updating. Those comments related to guidance at national level from Education Scotland as well as more local guidance. Headteachers and teachers in over half of all local authorities reported that the use of standardised assessments is helping with their professional judgments about children's and young people's progress. Effective sharing of practice through partnership working and networking is helping teachers' understanding of assessment in around quarter of local authorities. Headteachers and teachers in around two thirds of local authorities felt that clearer advice, both national and local, was required on what evidence to gather in order to demonstrate that a learner has achieved a CfE level.

With regard to assessment at the senior phase, all secondary headteachers and teachers reported that new SQA examination arrangements had caused additional workload. Secondary school staff in around half of all authorities reported that, in introducing new SQA examinations, they had benefited from one or more of the following features of support, provided or facilitated by the local authority:

➢ productive links with the SQA;
➢ curriculum area and subject support groups;
➢ support for verification;
➢ allowing flexibility in introducing the new Higher examinations;
➢ ensuring the expertise of teachers who are SQA setters, markers or verifiers is shared effectively; and
➢ supporting teachers to attend SQA 'understanding the standard' events.

Self-evaluation and improvement planning

Most local authorities have taken effective action to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy in the areas of self-evaluation and improvement planning. Measures have included: advice on reducing the number of priorities in improvement plans, with maxima ranging from three to six; the local authority pre-populating school self-evaluation forms with key data and setting word restrictions on electronic forms; and advice on reducing the length of standard and quality reports.

In addition, a few local authorities have amended their approaches to school evaluation visits by cutting the number of days in school; reducing paperwork; and moving to a 'validated self-evaluation' approach. Headteachers and teachers have welcomed these changes.

Tracking, monitoring and reporting

Arrangements for tracking and monitoring learners' progress is a key area which requires improvement in most local authorities. This issue is often linked in part to the lack of a clear shared understanding amongst teachers about what is required to demonstrate that a learner has achieved a CfE level. A small number of local authorities have appointed a centrally-based officer to support the analysis of data, or support their schools with centrally-produced data analyses. Local authorities recognise that headteachers and teachers are looking for clearer guidance on tracking and monitoring, or an authority-wide system for doing so. In many local

authorities, schools have introduced their own systems for tracking and monitoring. This has led to inconsistencies and additional workload, and often requires teachers to enter the same data into two or more different IT systems.

Inspectors noted that reporting to parents has been a specific cause of workload in schools. This issue was mentioned frequently in discussions with representatives of teachers' professional associations and LNCTs about working time agreements. To address this issue, around a third of local authorities have introduced new, less bureaucratic approaches to reporting to parents. Their aim is to reduce unnecessary workload, while still ensuring parents get the information they need.

Emerging best practice involves:
➢ more frequent, shorter reports to parents, rather than one big end-of-session report;
➢ more oral reporting to parents at meetings;
➢ involvement of children and young people in the reporting process; and
➢ increased use of e-communication and social media.

IT systems

In around two-thirds of all local authorities, teachers highlighted problems with broadband connectivity which were causing workload issues and getting in the way of making best use of IT to reduce bureaucracy. These problems included a lack of broadband capacity in the school, instability of connections to platforms and difficulties accessing systems reliably from outwith the school.

In the same proportion of local authorities, headteachers and teachers highlighted issues with the school management information system SEEMIS, stating that, in their view, it was inefficient to operate and caused unnecessary work. Staff in a few other local authorities reported that SEEMIS works well for them. Secondary headteachers in around a third of local authorities felt that, with more training in its various applications, they could make better use of all aspects of the SEEMIS system.

Around a third of local authorities were reported as being proactive in supporting the use of IT in their schools more generally, including through improvements in Wi-Fi access, and provision of tablets and other devices. In around a third of local authorities, teachers want more professional learning so they can make better use of IT and social media. Teachers in around a third of all local authorities reported increased use of Glow for sharing good practice and otherwise supporting learning and teaching. These developments are helping to reduce workload in many cases.

Summary of review findings

The review found that all local authorities were committed strongly, in principle, to tackling bureaucracy and reducing unnecessary workload for their staff. However, the extent and the effectiveness of the actions they are taking to achieve this varies significantly. Many authorities need to do more to speed up progress in ensuring consistent good practice across the schools in their areas.

Just under half of all local authorities have been proactive in ensuring that bureaucracy and unnecessary workload are addressed effectively. This has involved ensuring that the guidance

they provide and the specific requirements they make of schools are appropriate. It has also involved taking active steps to ensure schools across the authority share effective approaches and that inappropriate practice in individual schools is identified and addressed where it exists.

These authorities:
- ➢ provide broad guidance for schools which allows for flexibility and autonomy at local level;
- ➢ involve teachers in the development of the guidance;
- ➢ ensure that networks are set up for professional discussion and the sharing of good practice;
- ➢ monitor the impact of the guidance provided; and
- ➢ make effective use of LNCTs to identify and address any issues at authority or school level.

In a range of other authorities, inspectors found that the workload demands and requirements placed on schools through central guidance and systems were generally reasonable, but that the authorities needed to do more to ensure best practice in reducing unnecessary bureaucracy was consistently adopted, and any poor practice addressed. In areas such as forward planning, assessment, and reporting to parents, these authorities have more work to do to ensure the right balance between central support and guidance, while at the same time allowing schools and teachers flexibility and autonomy to meet their pupils' needs.

In a small number of authorities, the impact of actions taken to address bureaucracy and undue workload was not yet sufficiently evident. Whilst specific local factors which have presented obstacles to making progress were recognised in each case, further improvement is now required.

Looking across the country, the areas in which the most progress has been made in tackling bureaucracy have been:

- ➢ forward planning in primary schools;
- ➢ reporting to parents;
- ➢ approaches to self-evaluation;
- ➢ planning for improvement; and
- ➢ whole-school reporting on standards and quality.

However, there is more work to be done to ensure consistent good practice in these areas across all local authorities and schools.

Across the country, the areas requiring most improvement are:

- ➢ tracking and monitoring of learners' progress, particularly in the broad general education; and
- ➢ the development of IT systems to support effective tracking and monitoring.

Next steps

Education Scotland will:

➢ through its Area Lead Officers, engage with local authorities to support improvement where appropriate at local level, and taking account of the best practice identified in this report;

➢ address the specific issues identified during the review around support at national level, namely streamlining the amount of national guidance on the Education Scotland website, and continuing to support teachers in assessing learners' progress in the broad general education; and

➢ share examples of good practice noted during the review on the National Improvement Hub.

Local authorities individually should:

➢ working with their LNCT, take action to address the areas for improvement highlighted to them in the specific feedback they received through this review;

➢ continue to monitor the impact of the support and guidance they have provided for schools to ensure it is supporting high-quality learning and teaching while also tackling bureaucracy and addressing issues of undue workload;

➢ take account of the best practice identified in this report;

➢ be proactive in ensuring schools take account of Education Scotland's statement on CfE, published in August 2016; and

➢ ensure their schools have access to sufficient broadband capacity and stable and reliable IT platforms.

Local authorities collectively should:

➢ through engaging with the SEEMIS partnership, consider how best to ensure all schools get access to efficient and effective tracking and monitoring system, which maximises the potential of an IT-based approach to minimise workload for staff.

Annex A

Based on assessment of the evidence gathered during our inspection visits, inspectors allocated individual authorities to one of three groups.

Inspectors judged that the following local authorities have been proactive in providing support and guidance that minimise workload demands for staff in their schools:

- Aberdeenshire
- Angus
- Clackmannanshire
- East Dunbartonshire
- East Renfrewshire
- Edinburgh
- Fife
- Glasgow
- Inverclyde
- North Ayrshire
- Perth & Kinross
- South Ayrshire
- South Lanarkshire
- Stirling
- West Dunbartonshire

Inspectors judged that the following local authorities have provided support and guidance that places reasonable workload demands on staff:

- Aberdeen City
- Argyll & Bute
- Dumfries & Galloway
- Dundee City
- East Ayrshire
- East Lothian
- Highland
- Midlothian
- North Lanarkshire
- Orkney
- Renfrewshire
- Scottish Borders
- West Lothian
- Western Isles

Inspectors judged that the following local authorities have not yet given sufficient support and guidance to prevent or reduce undue workload demands on staff, and further improvement is required:

- Falkirk
- Moray
- Shetland

Appendix B

1. Links to reports

Reports by the Ministerial Group on Tackling Bureaucracy

November 2013
http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0043/00438622.pdf

March 2015
https://scottishgovernment.presscentre.com/imagelibrary/downloadmedia.ashx?MediaDetailsID=3505&SizeId=-1

Reports by the CfE Management Board 'Reflections Group'

August 2014
http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/MBReportOnFirstYearofNewQuals_tcm4-837160.pdf

November 2015
Hard copies only. Contact: http://www.gtcs.org.uk/home/contact.aspx

Report by the Ministerial Working Group on Assessment and National Qualifications

May 2016
http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/WorkingGrouponAssessmentandNQs

2. Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91% – 99%
Most	75% – 90%
Majority	50% – 74%
Minority/Less than half	15 – 49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.