

Early Learning & Childcare Improvement Programme Final Evaluation Report

October 2025



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Appendix 1: Case studies

Executive summary

In June 2025, the Care Inspectorate commissioned Blake Stevenson Ltd to evaluate the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Improvement Programme, which supports funded providers to meet and sustain the National Standard. The evaluation builds on the 2022 study and assesses the Programme's reach, accessibility, and impact, alongside its contribution to continuous improvement across the sector.

The evaluation had three objectives:

- assess programme delivery: how effectively the Programme has been designed and delivered, and whether services find it straightforward to access and apply;
- evaluate impact: the difference the Programme has made for settings, practitioners, children and families, including effects on inspection outcomes, staff capability, and improvement practice; and
- inform future planning: how the Programme could evolve, complement other improvement activity, and sustain its legacy.

Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, combining online surveys of 109 ELC staff, interviews with settings, inspectors, local authority officers, the Improvement Team and Scottish Government, and observation of a bespoke session. This provided both breadth and depth of evidence across the three strands of support: targeted, universal, and bespoke.

Experience of the ELC Improvement Programme

Programme Reach

Since its inception in 2021, the ELC Improvement Programme has engaged services at scale across Scotland through three interlinked strands of support:

- targeted support has reached 573 services and 666 individual participants, with the potential to influence practice for nearly 38,000 children;
- bespoke sessions have been delivered in half of Scotland's local authority areas, with more than 1,000 participants to date; and
- universal resources hosted on the Improvement Hub recorded 4,343 visits between January and September 2025, while the accompanying YouTube bitesize videos have collectively surpassed 220,000 views.

Support provided

The Programme is viewed as highly valued, practical, and confidence-building. Across all strands, participants described the support as accessible, relevant and delivered by a knowledgeable and supportive team.

Targeted support was consistently praised for providing a clear structure through 10-week cohorts combining teaching, reflection, and one-to-one advice. In the survey, 93% of respondents reported improved understanding of quality improvement (QI) methods, and 94% had applied them in practice. Settings most frequently cited benefits such as stronger self-evaluation, better teamwork, and more confident leadership.

Universal resources were valued for flexibility and clarity. The most-viewed bitesize sessions like Introducing QI and Quick Wins, helped embed improvement principles across settings, including those not engaged in targeted support.

Bespoke sessions, delivered in partnership with local authorities, were seen as a highly effective way to connect inspection expectations with local priorities. The vast majority of survey respondents, 96% said the sessions improved their understanding of QI and promoted joined-up working. Many described introducing SMART aims, PDSA cycles, or revised observation and feedback processes as a result.

Impact

The Programme has made a clear contribution to improving confidence, capability, and consistency across Scotland's ELC sector. The blend of structured learning, practical tools, and supportive coaching has built momentum for improvement and helped settings sustain gains beyond direct participation. Success has been underpinned by:

- improved quality and outcomes: 67% of targeted survey respondents reported improved quality of care for children, 51% increased staff confidence, and 43% stronger relationships with the Care Inspectorate;
- enhanced inspection readiness: of those inspected post-programme, 80% said their ability to demonstrate quality improved and 69% reported higher staff confidence during inspection;
- sustained change: 61% of respondents said they had sustained or expanded their improvement work since completing their cohort; and
- stronger professional relationships: the Programme has helped reposition the Care Inspectorate as a partner in improvement rather than solely a regulator, with bespoke sessions fostering collaboration between local authorities, inspectors, and services.

Challenges

The main barriers identified were staffing constraints, limited time for reflection, and occasional difficulties maintaining momentum after the end of a cohort. Some respondents also suggested clearer communication about the relationship between strands and stronger alignment with other national improvement initiatives.

Recommendations

The evaluation makes the following five key recommendations for 2025–26 to strengthen the Programme:

- Recommendation 1: Maintain and resource the Improvement Programme model;
- Recommendation 2: Continue to enhance visibility and usability of universal resources;
- Recommendation 3: Ongoing collaboration with Care Inspectorate colleagues;
- Recommendation 4: Clarify communications about the Programme’s purpose;
- Recommendation 5: Broaden access through flexible formats and timing; and
- Recommendation 6: Enhanced collaboration with Education Scotland as part of the shared national framework for ELC.

Conclusion

The next phase of the programme will pilot a “test of change” integrating the NHS Education for Scotland (NES) Scottish Improvement Foundation Skills (SIFS) pathway. This will embed accredited QI learning within cohort delivery, offering recognised progression routes and strengthening long-term sustainability.

Overall, the ELC Improvement Programme continues to make a significant contribution to improving the quality and consistency of early learning and childcare in Scotland. It has equipped staff with the skills, tools and confidence to lead improvement; strengthened relationships between services, local authorities and the Care Inspectorate; and supported a shared language of improvement across the sector. Its continuation and development will be essential to maintaining national consistency, supporting providers to meet the National Standard, and securing positive outcomes for children and families.

1. Introduction

1.1 In June 2025, the Care Inspectorate commissioned Blake Stevenson Ltd to evaluate the Care Inspectorate's Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Improvement Programme. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the reach, accessibility, and impact of the Programme, and to provide recommendations for its future development.

1.2 The evaluation has three core objectives:

- assess programme delivery: to examine how effectively the Programme has been designed and delivered, and whether services have found it straightforward to access and apply;
- evaluate impact: to identify the difference the Programme has made for ELC settings, practitioners, children and families, including its influence on inspection outcomes, staff capability, and quality improvement practices; and
- inform future planning: to provide evidence and recommendations on how the Programme could evolve, how it complements other improvement activity, and what legacy or risks may arise should current funding end.

1.3 This report presents the findings from the evaluation.

Structure of the report

1.4 The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: Context and methodology;
- Chapter 3: Experience of the ELC Improvement Programme;
- Chapter 4: Impact of the Programme, success factors and challenges; and
- Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations.

2. Context and methodology

Background

- 2.1 High-quality early learning and childcare (ELC) is a central part of the Scottish Government's ambition to close the poverty-related attainment gap and improve outcomes for all children. Access to high-quality ELC supports children's development, learning, and wellbeing, while also helping to reduce inequalities. Alternatively, poor-quality provision can have a negative impact on children's outcomes and on parents' confidence in the system.
- 2.2 To promote consistency across the sector, the Scottish Government introduced the National Standard for ELC providers. The National Standard sets out eight quality criteria that funded providers must meet, including the requirement to achieve a minimum grade of "good" in Care Inspectorate inspections. These criteria underpin the Funding Follows the Child approach, which gives families the flexibility to choose from a range of high-quality funded providers. Ensuring that all providers meet and sustain the National Standard is therefore key to delivering both equity and choice for children and families.

Care Inspectorate

- 2.3 The Care Inspectorate is Scotland's independent scrutiny body and national regulator for care services in Scotland. Its role is to provide assurance that people of all ages experience safe, high-quality care that meets their needs, rights and choices. The Care Inspectorate carries out this role by:
- inspecting individual care services to evaluate their quality against national standards;
 - inspecting care across local systems to assess how services work together to meet people's needs; and
 - supporting improvement and driving up standards, working directly with services to promote best practice and build capacity for continuous improvement.
- 2.4 The Care Inspectorate's model of responsive regulation recognises that inspection alone is not enough to secure lasting quality. By combining scrutiny with improvement support, it can both provide assurance to the public and help services build their capacity for continuous improvement. The ELC Improvement Programme embodies this approach, linking regulation with practical support so that settings not only understand where improvement is needed but also have the tools to achieve and sustain it.

ELC Improvement Programme

- 2.5 The Improvement Programme is sponsored by the Scottish Government's Early Learning and Childcare division, which holds policy responsibility for supporting quality improvement in funded providers.

- 2.6 The Scottish Government views the ELC Improvement Programme as a central mechanism for supporting providers to meet and sustain the National Standard for funded ELC. It complements the roles of local authorities as guarantors of quality and aligns with wider national priorities to deliver consistently high-quality experiences for children. Government sponsors emphasised that while several partners contribute to quality improvement, including Education Scotland, SSSC and local authorities, the Care Inspectorate's Improvement Programme occupies a unique position because of its direct link between inspection evidence and targeted improvement support.
- 2.7 The first cohort of targeted support commenced in May 2021; there have been 12 cohorts in total, with the latest commencing September 2025. The Programme is viewed as a central part of national efforts to ensure that the National Standard for funded ELC is met consistently across Scotland, underpinning the wider policy ambition of high-quality provision to deliver positive outcomes for children.
- 2.8 While local authorities remain guarantors of quality, and other national partners provide professional learning and support, the Improvement Programme is recognised by Scottish Government as the key national support led by the Care Inspectorate. Its importance lies in its ability to reach settings at risk of or falling below the National Standard and to provide consistent, practical improvement support at scale.

Programme design and delivery

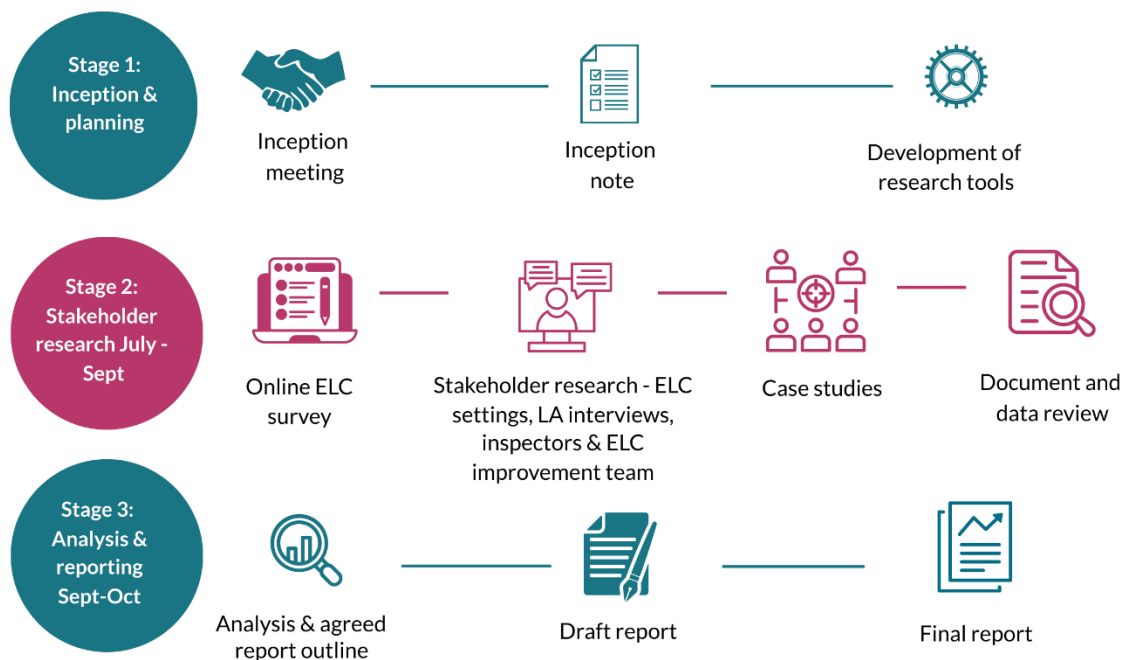
- 2.9 The ELC Improvement Programme operates through three interlinked strands of support, ensuring it can respond to different levels of need across the sector:
- 2.10 **Targeted support:** delivered to ELC settings that are not yet, or are at risk of not yet, meeting the National Standard. This support includes one-to-one support from the Improvement Team, structured learning sessions, project clinics, and opportunities to apply quality improvement (QI) methodology directly within the setting. Targeted support is designed to build confidence among staff and to accelerate progress where improvement is most urgently required.
- 2.11 **Universal support:** available to all settings, regardless of inspection grade. Universal resources include online guidance, self-evaluation frameworks, bitesize training materials, and examples of good practice. These resources are accessible via the Care Inspectorate's online hub and are intended to promote a culture of continuous improvement across the sector by providing practical tools that settings can adopt at their own pace.
- 2.12 The most recent addition to the Programme is **bespoke support** which is tailored improvement activity delivered in partnership with individual local authorities. This strand includes face-to-face training in the form of a two-day workshop, and collaborative sessions designed to strengthen their role as guarantors of quality. Bespoke activity allows the Programme to be responsive to local contexts.

- 2.13 Together, these strands ensure that the Programme not only addresses immediate quality concerns in individual settings but also builds sustainable improvement capacity across Scotland's diverse ELC landscape.

Evaluation approach

- 2.14 This evaluation provides an independent assessment of the ELC Improvement Programme as it enters a pivotal stage in 2025.
- 2.15 A mixed-methods approach of qualitative and quantitative data collection will address the evaluation aims and capture the breadth and depth of the Programme's impact. Figure 1 summarises the methodology. Further detail of the key elements is provided in the rest of the section.

Figure 1: Summary of the methodology



Local authority interviews

- 2.16 Interviews were conducted with eight local authority Early Years leads and improvement officers from five local authority areas and provided valuable context on how the Programme fits within wider local improvement activity and how it complements the support authorities already offer to ELC settings.

Survey of ELC settings and ELC staff

- 2.17 Two online surveys were distributed by the Care Inspectorate through contacts and regular communications; these were designed to capture the perspectives of those who accessed targeted support and those that accessed universal support.

- 2.18 The surveys gathered quantitative and qualitative data on the experience of accessing and engaging with the different programme strands including the bespoke support sessions; perceptions of the accessibility, relevance and usefulness of support; application of improvement methods in practice and impacts on staff confidence, team collaboration, and inspection experience.
- 2.19 The survey was open for six weeks; 67 people responded to the targeted support survey and 42 people responded to the universal support survey.

Interviews with Care Inspectorate staff

- 2.20 Group interviews and individual discussions were held with Care Inspectorate inspectors and team managers involved in ELC scrutiny. These conversations explored inspectors' understanding of the Improvement Programme and its relationship to inspection activity; how the Programme influences services' readiness for inspection and their capacity to evidence quality and reflections on collaboration between inspection and improvement colleagues.
- 2.21 Ten inspectors and team managers were interviewed and these discussions helped to understand how the Programme has impacted on working relationships within the Care Inspectorate and across the wider ELC system.

ELC settings

- 2.22 In-depth interviews were conducted with four ELC services which were selected as they had taken part in targeted support. These discussions focused on how settings experienced the training and support; how improvement methods were implemented; the effects on staff confidence, teamwork and leadership; and any observable changes in quality, practice or inspection outcomes. These case examples added depth to the survey findings, illustrating how the Programme translates into practice at setting level.

Interviews with Improvement Team and the Scottish Government

- 2.23 Interviews were conducted with four members of the Improvement Team to examine the design, delivery and evolution of the Programme. These discussions covered:
- the development and delivery of the targeted, universal and bespoke strands;
 - learning from successive cohorts and feedback from services;
 - the rationale and implementation of the test of change (cohort 12); and
 - reflections on challenges, successes, and future priorities for the Programme.
- 2.24 These interviews provided an operational and strategic perspective on how the Programme is implemented and adapted over time.
- 2.25 The interviews with the Scottish Government as the sponsor of the ELC Improvement Programme explored the policy context and rationale for the Programme and its

contribution to national priorities wider early-learning, education and improvement frameworks.

Observation at a bespoke session

- 2.26 The evaluation team also observed one of the bespoke improvement sessions delivered to a local authority. The session involved local authority staff, ELC providers and Care Inspectorate staff working together to explore improvement methods and local priorities. The observation provided direct insight into the delivery approach, facilitation style, and participant engagement, illustrating how improvement and scrutiny colleagues collaborate in practice.

Analysis and reporting

- 2.27 All quantitative data from the surveys were exported from Snap Surveys and analysed using descriptive statistics to identify overall patterns, variation across strands, and relationships between key variables (such as type of setting, level of engagement, and reported impact).
- 2.28 The qualitative data gathered from the discussions and the secondary data collected by Care Inspectorate were analysed in line with the key evaluation aims. This involved a process of coding responses to identify key and recurring themes as well as any differences in viewpoints and experiences across projects.
- 2.29 An internal team meeting to discuss the key emerging themes was held before producing the report outline. The outline was shared with the Care Inspectorate for comment before the draft report was produced. The results of the analysis are presented in this report.

Challenges and limitations of the approach

- 2.30 The evaluation was carried out during a busy time for the Improvement Team and the settings and as with all mixed-methods evaluations, some limitations should be acknowledged:
- response rates: while surveys provided rich qualitative feedback, the number of responses was lower than anticipated, limiting the extent to which findings can be generalised to all ELC settings; and
 - self-selection bias: participation in interviews and surveys was voluntary, so respondents may represent those most engaged or positive about the Programme.
- 2.31 Despite these challenges, the evaluation has yielded strong evidence of impact on individuals and ELC settings, along with valuable learning to inform future practice and investment.

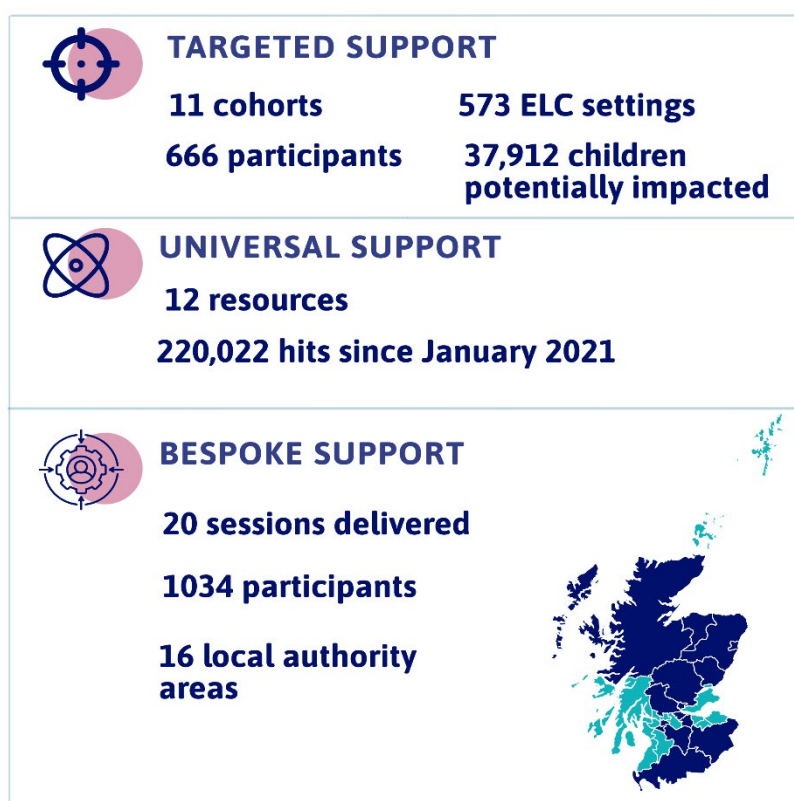
3. Experience of the ELC Improvement Programme

- 3.1 This chapter describes the experiences of services, local authorities, and staff who have taken part in the ELC Improvement Programme. It considers how the three strands of support have been delivered, the scale and reach of engagement, the experience of participants and how they have used the support, highlighting what has worked well and where challenges remain.

Programme reach

- 3.2 The figures summarised in the diagram highlight both the breadth and depth of the Programme. The impact of the first 11 cohorts was expansive, with more than 570 services engaging in targeted cohorts and over 1,000 participants engaging in bespoke sessions, the reach of the Programme extended across Scotland and potentially impacted nearly 38,000 children. The wide spread of bespoke activity also demonstrates that the offer is responsive to local authority needs, with sessions tailored to contexts ranging from urban Glasgow to the Western Isles.

Figure 2: Summary of Programme reach



Targeted support

- 3.3 Targeted support is provided through 10-week cohorts combining weekly teaching and reflect-and-review sessions, alongside 1:1 advisor support and project clinics to help settings apply quality improvement methods in practice. Cohorts function as learning

communities, with opportunities for peer exchange through breakout discussions and access to a closed Facebook group that continues after the Programme ends. Attendance is actively monitored, with local authorities involved in follow-up where needed. In addition, participants and alumni can join quarterly, virtual peer support sessions with local authority staff, covering themes such as inspection confidence, workforce wellbeing, and child participation, with recordings made available on the ELC Improvement Hub.

- 3.4 Since its launch in 2021, the targeted strand has been delivered across 11 cohorts, engaging 573 services and a total of 666 individual participants. Through these settings, the targeted programme has had the potential to influence practice for up to 37,917 children.

Experience of support

- 3.5 Engagement with the targeted support offer was broad with most respondents drawing on a range of programme elements. Around two-thirds (64%) reported using the Improvement Hub resources and a similar proportion (61%) participated in peer support groups. Engagement was lower with project clinics (30%), post-cohort peer sessions (28%) and 1:1 advisor support (22%).

- 3.6 Satisfaction with the core elements of support was consistently high. Among those who provided a rating, 1:1 support and post-cohort sessions were considered as good or excellent by all respondents, project clinics by 95%, Improvement Hub resources by 93% and peer support groups by 76%.

“The PDSA cycles gave us a structure we could all understand, it made planning improvements less daunting and more achievable.” (Survey respondent)

- 3.7 Learning was translated into practice. Almost all respondents (93%) reported an improved understanding of QI methodology (48% to a significant extent), and 94% had applied QI methods in their setting, with 75% finding this easy to do. Examples of implementation included routine use of PDSA cycle and SMART targets, tighter feedback and observation processes (such as cloakroom observations), and more structured self-evaluation. Many described how whole-team training and joint planning helped embed these approaches in everyday practice.

- 3.8 For those services inspected after participating in the Programme, they reported a more confident experience:

- 80% said their ability to demonstrate quality improved;
- 69% saw higher staff confidence; and
- 51% found it easier to show impact.

More broadly, respondents attributed tangible benefits to the Programme including improved quality of care for children (67%), increased staff confidence (51%), stronger relationships with the Care Inspectorate (43%) and a more positive inspection experience

(34%). Nearly two thirds (61%) report they have sustained or expanded their improvement work since completing the cohort.

- 3.9 Overall, barriers were largely operational, with the most frequent challenges cited as time and staffing constraints (shift patterns, vacancies, absences); variable staff engagement inciting change; and pace/clarity. A small minority felt the Programme was too broad or insufficiently tailored for their specific improvement aims.
- 3.10 When asked what would further help to embed QI in their service, respondents most often suggested:
- dedicated time/capacity for team reflection;
 - refresher prompts and post-cohort touchpoints (such as “where are we now?” peer sessions or an open channel for ad-hoc questions);
 - concrete examples (short videos of good practice in real settings; templates or samples for monitoring, QA tools, and self-evaluation);
 - targeted training for specific roles and topics; and
 - In-person visits where feasible to support implementation.

Universal support

- 3.11 Universal support is available to all ELC settings through the Care Inspectorate’s Improvement Hub, which hosts a wide range of resources including: Bitesize sessions (i.e. Introducing QI, Quality Inspection Framework, and Personal Planning) recorded peer sessions, and practical guidance and self-evaluation tools to aid continuous improvement. Content is refreshed and the Hub has been redesigned for easier navigation, with new materials developed specifically for childminders and school-aged childcare. Inspectors and local authorities actively signpost services to these resources, and many promote them through local newsletters to support staff development.

Uptake of resources

- 3.12 Engagement with universal resources has been strong, demonstrating ongoing demand for accessible improvement materials across the sector. Between January and September 2025, the ELC Improvement Hub webpage recorded 4,343 visits, while the Care Inspectorate’s YouTube bitesize series has now accumulated over 220,000 total views since launch.
- 3.13 The resource with the highest views (72,895) was Key Question 5 bitesize which was created to support service during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most frequently accessed sessions that are relevant to services now are Introducing Quality Improvement bitesize (59,787); and Quick Wins bitesize (47,306). These account for the majority of engagement, highlighting their value as practical introductions to core quality improvement concepts.

- 3.14 More recent additions such as Safe, Inspect, Monitor, Observe, Act (SIMOA) (9,946), the ELC Quality Framework (8,135) and childminder-specific content (846) indicate that new and more specialised materials are also reaching their intended audiences.
- 3.15 Services use the Hub to refresh understanding, orient new staff, and support self-evaluation discussions. Overall, the data point to a broad reach, confirming that the Improvement Hub remains a widely used mechanism for supporting quality improvement principles.

Experience of the support

- 3.16 The universal strand of the Programme was consistently viewed as accessible, practical, and relevant. For many settings, these resources provided a flexible way to engage with improvement approaches, either as individuals or collectively as a team.
- 3.17 Survey responses showed that around three-quarters of respondents rated the universal resources as useful or very useful. Over two-thirds reported actively using them in practice, most often to support staff training, reflective discussions, or to plan improvements.
- 3.18 As one setting explained:
“Very clear and useful resources, easy to take ideas back into the nursery.”
- 3.19 A key strength of the universal offer is its flexibility. Services can choose to use the materials, e.g. talking heads videos at a time that suits them. Nearly half of survey respondents highlighted that this feature was important in enabling wider sharing of learning across teams:
“We share the Improvement Hub videos with new staff as part of induction — it gives everyone the same starting point.” (Service interview)
- 3.20 The resources themselves were valued for being clear, practical and not overly technical. Settings described incorporating the materials into staff meetings and professional development sessions, often using them to introduce or reinforce improvement methods. Several settings noted that they had used PDSA cycles to structure discussions and plan manageable changes.
- 3.21 The fact that universal resources are free and available to all was also recognised as a strength, allowing settings who were not in a targeted cohort to still benefit from the Programme’s improvement approaches. Local authority staff also saw the resources as complementary to their own training and CPD offers, helping to reinforce key messages and create a consistent approach across the sector.
- 3.22 While the majority of feedback was positive, a small proportion of respondents (19%) raised challenges, either finding the volume of materials overwhelming or struggling to make time to engage. Suggestions for improvement included greater promotion of upcoming webinars and more examples from settings similar to their own.

Bespoke support

- 3.23 Bespoke sessions have been delivered across half of the 32 local authority areas. They are delivered in partnership with local authorities through face-to-face training, in the form of a two consecutive morning workshops currently focused on 'Observation and Communication for Improvement' which combine teaching, going back into settings to apply the learning and then follow-up reflection. Centred around the theme of observation, the content is tailored to local priorities in order to address areas for improvement previously identified by the LA and Inspection Teams. The sessions are often co-delivered with scrutiny and assurance colleagues to promote consistency and strengthen relationships. Information sessions for local authority teams are also provided and ensure alignment with their role as guarantors of quality.
- 3.24 Of the 109 targeted and universal survey respondents (25 respondents (23%) reported attending a bespoke session.
- 3.25 Satisfaction with bespoke sessions was generally high. Nearly all participants (96%) said the sessions improved their understanding of quality improvement, either "to a great extent" or "somewhat". The same proportion (96%) felt they encouraged more collaborative working across roles, and that the sessions prompted reflection or change in their own practice:
- "Having the CI team and our LA improvement officer in the same room made everything clearer. We left feeling we were all on the same page." (Survey respondent)
- 3.26 Application of learning was also widespread, as 80% reported making changes in their setting afterwards. Examples of these changes included introducing SMART aims and PDSA cycles, restructuring staff training and feedback, embedding more systematic observations and moderation, and reframing staff-child interactions to increase positive engagement. Several respondents described sharing learning across their staff teams or linking session insights directly to service improvement plans (SIPs).
- 3.27 The sessions also helped to clarify the Care Inspectorate's role. A majority (72%) said the training made the distinction between the Improvement Team and scrutiny/assurance clearer.
- 3.28 When asked what could make bespoke support sessions more useful in the future, respondents most often highlighted:
- different delivery structure as some found consecutive days difficult to schedule around;
 - greater tailoring to local needs, with direct survey/consultation on desired areas of focus;
 - more resources such as practical examples of effective QA forms, as well as an increased focus on self-evaluation; and
 - closer integration with Inspection Teams, to better understand expectations and how improvement work feeds into inspection evidence.

“I felt the sessions had a great mix of teaching and partnership working through the groups. Talking to other settings in a similar position to ours was great and allowed us to feel we were not alone in this position. The leaders were fantastic. It was great that the expectation was to complete tasks for the next session and this definitely helped build up confidence to improve in small manageable steps.” (Survey respondent)

Summary

The experiences across the three strands of the Improvement Programme demonstrate a well-regarded programme that has reached a large and diverse range of services, delivered high levels of satisfaction, and provided staff with practical tools for improvement. Those who participated in the targeted cohorts have supported their settings to adopt QI methods and build confidence, universal resources have extended the reach of improvement approaches to a wider audience, and bespoke sessions have offered intensive, locally tailored support. Challenges remain around time and capacity, but settings consistently report that the Programme has equipped them with approaches they continue to use and share.

4. Impact of the Programme, success factors and challenges

- 4.1 This chapter sets out the impact of the ELC Improvement Programme on services that have engaged with its three strands: targeted support, bespoke support, and universal resources. In line with the evaluation objectives, the analysis explores how services have adopted improvement methodology, the extent to which inspection outcomes have changed, and the ways in which services have developed their capacity to self-evaluate and sustain improvement. Evidence is drawn from survey responses, interviews with services, inspectors and local authorities, and programme monitoring data.

Impact on ELC settings

- 4.2 The ELC Improvement Programme has had a demonstrable impact on participating settings, particularly through the targeted and bespoke strands. Evidence from surveys, inspector interviews and local authority discussions highlights three key areas of impact: the adoption of improvement methodology, improvements in inspection outcomes, and stronger capacity for self-evaluation and sustained change.

Adoption of improvement methodology

- 4.3 Settings repeatedly described the targeted strand as their first structured introduction to formal improvement approaches. Survey data show that 91% of respondents to the targeted support survey reported applying improvement methods in their service, with many highlighting the value of working step by step rather than attempting to overhaul practice all at once.

- 4.4 Inspectors confirmed this shift, noting how settings were beginning to apply continuous improvement methods with confidence.

“I’ve had three services in different cohorts. All have improved in the areas they worked on, and they now use improvement theory, particularly small steps and PDSA cycles.”
(Inspector)

- 4.5 This approach was also reinforced through bespoke sessions, where some local authorities observed immediate changes.

“The same afternoon they went back, did reflections, and produced an observation... By the time I visited, I could see improvements in practice.” (Local authority interview)

- 4.6 Universal resources played a role in embedding these practices more widely with the online resources described as accessible tools that could help services build improvement into day-to-day routines.

“The bite-size sessions are perfect for busy managers and practitioners.” (Survey respondent)

Changes in inspection outcomes

- 4.7 Evidence also shows a link between programme participation and improved inspection grades. Over half (56%) of targeted respondents had been inspected since their involvement, and many reported better outcomes as a result of their work on the Programme:

“We had an unannounced inspection which went well, and we were able to show the inspector the changes we had made using the Programme.” (Survey respondent)

- 4.8 The data confirms this, and inspectors echoed this impact, noting that focused improvements in one area often cascaded into broader changes in quality.

- 4.9 Universal resources also contributed to improved outcomes, with some services explicitly crediting them for helping to raise their inspection grades:

“Improvement guidance helped move on our CI gradings within the whole nursery... It was great for slowing down and involving all users.” (Survey respondent)

Capacity to self-evaluate and sustain improvement

- 4.10 Beyond inspection grades, services described how the Programme had given them tools and confidence to embed improvement in their everyday practice. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of targeted respondents said they had continued or expanded the work they started during the Programme, and 70% reported greater staff confidence to lead improvement.

“We continue to use the improvement plan we created during the Programme. Staff are now more confident to suggest and try out small changes.” (Survey respondent)

- 4.11 Inspectors observed similar changes, highlighting the importance of leadership within services to pass on learning and embed reflective practice:

“One manager cascaded learning across her team, so everyone understood improvement cycles. Importantly, they were brave enough to admit when something didn’t work and to try something else instead.” (Inspector discussion)

- 4.12 Local authorities also confirmed the impact on services’ capacity to sustain change. They emphasised that services were beginning to align programme activity with existing improvement plans, avoiding duplication and embedding approaches within wider local processes.

Impact on staff

- 4.13 The Improvement Programme has had an impact on the knowledge, skills, confidence and motivation of staff across early learning and childcare services. Evidence from surveys and interviews indicates that staff at all levels have gained practical tools for improvement, developed leadership capacity, and often felt more motivated and inspired in their roles.

Skills and knowledge

- 4.14 ELC staff consistently reported that participation gave them new skills and methods that could be applied directly in their day-to-day practice. Over three-quarters (77%) of survey respondents who had attended bespoke sessions said that they had improved their understanding of quality improvement as a result of their participation. While 70% of survey respondents who had participated in the target support element of the Programme identified staff development as one of the most valuable outcomes.

- 4.15 Those who had experienced the bespoke sessions described how it equipped staff with practical approaches to observation, reflection and planning.

“From my perspective, the training really sharpened my own observations... It gave me the language and confidence to feed this back clearly.” (Local authority interview)

“These sessions supported staff to gain knowledge in a variety of areas of practice, which in turn allowed them to provide high quality experiences for our children and families.” (Survey respondent)

- 4.16 Inspectors also observed that staff were using the methodology more confidently and systematically.

“Staff are using the methodology in all aspects of the nursery. They are reflective and are able to evaluate and measure the impact of changes.” (Inspector discussion)

Confidence and leadership

- 4.17 A consistent theme across all strands was the way the Programme increased staff confidence to lead and contribute to improvement. Survey data show that 70% of targeted respondents reported greater staff confidence to lead improvement, while many bespoke participants described feeling empowered to take ownership of changes in their practice.

“One manager cascaded learning across her team, so everyone understood improvement cycles. Importantly, they were brave enough to admit when something didn’t work and to try something else instead.” (Inspector)

- 4.18 Local authorities also recognised the impact on leadership capacity, particularly where managers were able to embed learning across their staff teams.

Morale and motivation

- 4.19 Beyond skills and confidence, the Programme also had a marked effect on staff morale and motivation. Many participants, particularly those attending in-person sessions described them as energising, inclusive and inspiring.

- 4.20 Local authority colleagues noted the importance of this motivational impact, particularly for services that had previously experienced challenging inspection outcomes or where staff were struggling with morale.

Impact on relationships

- 4.21 The Programme has also strengthened relationships between the Care Inspectorate, local authorities and settings. Inspectors and the Improvement Team increasingly collaborate, ensuring a consistent message about quality expectations.

“We’re building those bridges, settings now see the Care Inspectorate as a supportive partner, not just as a regulator.” (Improvement Team)

- 4.22 Local authority officers echoed this, noting that joint planning and co-delivery of bespoke sessions have enhanced mutual understanding and created continuity between inspection, assurance and improvement.

Changing perceptions of the Care Inspectorate

- 4.23 A key impact has been the way in which ELC settings perceive the Care Inspectorate. The Programme has helped to reframe that perception positioning the Care Inspectorate as a partner in improvement rather than solely as a regulator. Survey respondents highlighted how the training made interactions with the Care Inspectorate feel less intimidating:

“Very welcoming and inclusive course. Made the CI less scary!” (Survey respondent)

- 4.24 In bespoke sessions, inspectors acknowledged that change in how they were perceived.

“The bespoke sessions especially change how services see inspectors. They start to see us less as people who are there just to scrutinise, and more as part of a wider support system.” (Inspector discussion)

Strengthening collaborations with local authorities

- 4.25 The Programme has also enhanced alignment between the Care Inspectorate and local authority-led improvement activity. Local authorities described how the Programme created a consistent set of messages and approaches that supported their own quality assurance and improvement work.

“If we nominate a service, it’s already on a Service Improvement Plan. We encourage them to use one of their plan actions as the focus for the Programme.” (Local authority interview)

- 4.26 Local authority officers also valued the credibility that came from CI-led training, particularly when they were working alongside inspectors in supporting services:

Creating consistency across the system

- 4.27 Another impact of the Programme has been to bring greater consistency to the messages services receive from different parts of the system. Inspectors, improvement advisors and local authority staff noted that this reduced duplication and confusion, allowing services to focus more clearly on children’s experiences.

“Having both support teachers and managers in the room shows consistency: ‘We’re all giving the same message.’ That strengthens LA follow-up.” (Improvement team interview)

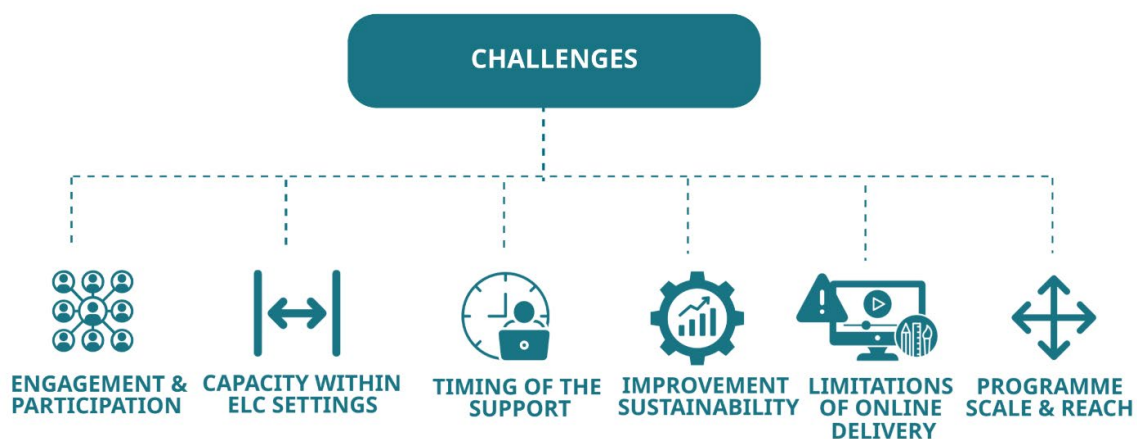
- 4.28 Inspectors and the Improvement Team also reflected on the value of the Programme for building context and understanding across different roles:

“When I spoke with the inspector, she said, ‘That makes sense. We’ve struggled with that provider not supporting the management team.’ It gave her crucial context.” (Improvement team interview)

Barriers and challenges to the Programme

- 4.29 While the Improvement Programme has been widely valued, participants, inspectors, local authority staff and the Improvement Team also highlighted barriers and challenges that affected its delivery and impact. These offer considerations for the future development of the Programme.

Figure 3: ELC Improvement Programme challenges



- 4.30 **Engagement and participation:** the targeted support element was well-attended across its cohorts, but securing and sustaining engagement was not always straightforward. In targeted support, some services nominated by local authorities could be reluctant to engage or occasionally did not sustain their involvement. Improvement team members described how some participants were cautious or could be defensive, needing reassurance that the Programme was about support.
- 4.31 **Capacity within ELC settings:** a consistent barrier was the limited capacity of services to engage fully with improvement activity. Staff shortages, turnover and workload pressures restricted the time available for reflection, testing and embedding new practices.
- 4.32 **Timing of the support:** the timing of targeted and bespoke support posed some issues. Sessions were scheduled during the daytime, which made them accessible for nursery and local authority settings but less so for other providers like childminders when daytime scheduling was their busiest operational periods. Services identified for targeted support following inspection outcomes ensures support reaches those most in need but also means that staff are often invited to participate at a sensitive time and readiness and capacity to engage is limited. In other cases, services referred for the targeted support had to wait for

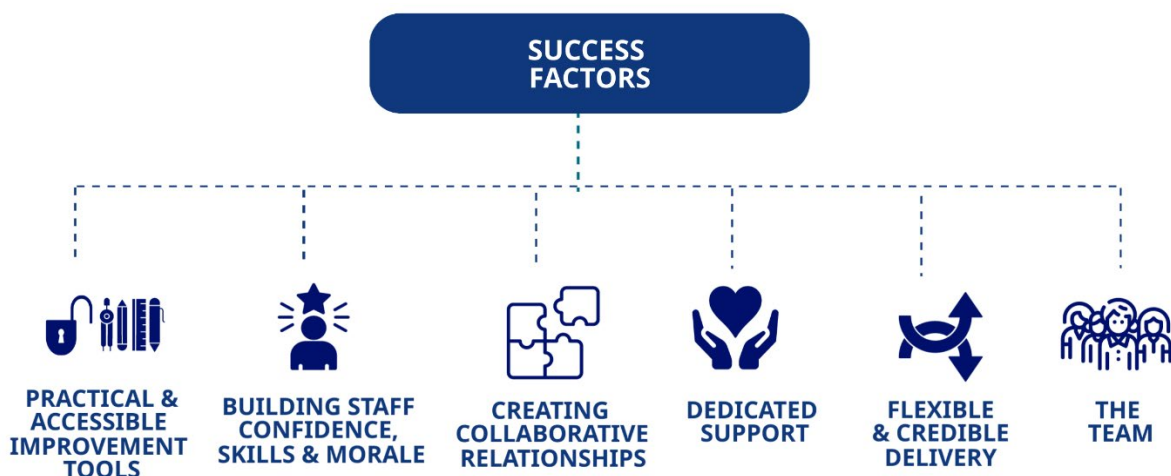
next cohort of participants. This time lag meant that circumstances could change or the potential benefits of the immediacy of the support could be reduced.

- 4.33 **Sustainability of improvement:** maintaining the momentum beyond the life of the Programme was another aspect that was flagged. While many services reported embedding learning into everyday practice, others were concerned that gains would be lost without ongoing support. Local authorities also noted variation in sustainability depending on the strength of leadership within services. Where managers were confident and proactive, learning was passed on; in other services, improvement sometimes stalled once programme support ended.
- 4.34 **Limitations of online delivery:** the online format of targeted support was valued for its accessibility and national reach, but it also presented some limitations. A small number of staff found it harder to engage in virtual sessions, citing screen fatigue or digital connectivity issues. Others said they missed the immediacy and networking opportunities that came with face-to-face delivery.
- 4.35 **Scale and reach of the Programme:** the demand for improvement support across Scotland presented challenges. With a small team and limits on the number of people accessing targeted support and opportunities to deliver bespoke sessions, not all services or local authorities could benefit directly. Inspectors and local authorities raised concerns that while the Programme had clear impact where it was delivered, lack of resources meant that its reach was uneven.

Success factors

- 4.36 Despite facing several barriers, the evaluation evidence highlights a range of factors that underpin the success of the ELC Improvement Programme. These factors explain not only why the Programme has had a demonstrable impact on services and staff, but also why it has been valued by settings, local authorities, inspectors and the wider system.

Figure 4: ELC Programme success factors



Practical accessible improvement methods

- 4.37 A central strength of the Programme has been its use of accessible improvement approaches that services could readily apply in their own settings. Targeted support in particular introduced services to structured approaches such as PDSA cycles and small-step testing, which were easily adopted and sustained in everyday practice. This accessibility was also important in bespoke and universal strands, where training and resources were designed to be concise and relevant to busy ELC settings.

Building staff confidence, skills and morale

- 4.38 The Programme's success also lies in the way it supported staff development. Participants described how training sharpened their professional skills and gave them confidence to identify and act on areas for improvement. Beyond skills, the motivational impact of the Programme was repeatedly emphasised which boosted confidence and morale encouraging staff to embrace change, particularly in services that had previously experienced poor inspection outcomes or low levels of confidence.

Creating more collaborative relationships

- 4.39 The Programme has contributed to more positive and consistent relationships between services, local authorities and the Care Inspectorate. Participation in the targeted support and bespoke elements of the Programme helped reduce anxiety about inspection and reframed the Care Inspectorate as a partner in improvement. The presence of inspectors and the improvement team together in bespoke sessions further reinforced credibility and strengthened trust

Dedicated support

- 4.40 The Care Inspectorate's Improvement Programme is positioned as support, distinct from but complementary to scrutiny; the ability of the Improvement Team to dedicate time and attention solely to supporting services was highlighted. Participants explained that they could engage with the team, consider new methods and reflect on progress without feeling rushed.

Flexible and credible delivery

- 4.41 The Programme's delivery model was another factor in its success. Each strand had a distinct format that added value in different ways. This flexible design meant that support could be matched to different needs: intensive, tailored input for services requiring improvement; capacity-building and knowledge-sharing through bespoke local authority sessions; and easily accessible universal resources for the wider workforce.
- 4.42 The Programme's national delivery by the Care Inspectorate also gave it credibility and authority. Services and local authorities recognised that the support was consistent with regulatory expectations and aligned to inspection frameworks, which reinforced their confidence to embed improvements.

The team delivering the Programme

- 4.43 A further success factor lies in the team themselves, whose authenticity, expertise and supportive style were consistently highlighted by services, inspectors and local authorities. All members of the improvement team come from early learning and childcare backgrounds, and three of the team are also inspectors. This gave them a strong sense of professional authority and relatability, with participants recognising that they were being supported by people who genuinely understood the realities of ELC practice.
- 4.44 The team's delivery style was also important. Services described the sessions as safe and inclusive spaces where they could reflect openly, even when their starting point could be a poor inspection outcome.

Alignment with wider improvement supports

- 4.45 The ELC Improvement Programme operates within a complex landscape of national and local improvement activity. The Scottish Government and Care Inspectorate both emphasised the importance of ensuring that the Programme complements rather than duplicates other supports.
- 4.46 Scottish Government sponsors emphasised that the Programme complements local authority responsibilities as guarantors of quality under the National Standard and supports delivery of national priorities on quality, equity, and outcomes for children. They noted the importance of continuing to strengthen the connections between the Care Inspectorate and other partners, particularly Education Scotland, to reduce duplication and provide clear, consistent messages to the sector about what high-quality practice looks like.
- 4.47 Local authority and inspector interviews also demonstrated strong examples of joint working particularly where bespoke sessions were co-delivered by Improvement and Inspector colleagues, or where local authority officers were directly involved in follow-up with targeted settings. The Improvement Team described this as "a more joined-up system of support" where "we're all talking the same language of improvement."
- 4.48 The Improvement Team has also been proactive in connecting its work with other organisations in the improvement space. They maintain regular communication with local authority quality leads, the Scottish Government's quality improvement policy team, Education Scotland and the SSSC. Through participation in national Quality and Improvement Network meetings and cross-sector events, they help ensure that the Programme's methodologies and messages are consistent with other improvement offers.
- 4.49 The team regularly shares learning and resources across agencies and collaborates with local authorities to align targeted support with other local initiatives. This cross-agency coordination helps to reduce duplication, promote coherence and strengthen the overall system of support for ELC services.

- 4.50 These partnerships demonstrate that the Programme not only supports individual services but also contributes to a more connected, system-wide approach to quality improvement in early learning and childcare.

What would happen in the absence of the Programme

- 4.51 Evidence from Scottish Government sponsors, inspectors, local authorities and participating services indicates that, without the ELC Improvement Programme, there would be a material gap in national improvement support and several negative knock-on effects.
- loss of the main national support for settings at risk of not meeting the National Standard: in its absence the local authorities would need to fill that gap which would be challenging in practice;
 - reduced capacity for intensive, improvement-focused follow-up after inspection: whilst inspectors do provide some improvement support they cannot routinely provide the dedicated time that the Improvement Team gives to services. Without the Programme, this capacity would not be easily replaced;
 - slower, less consistent adoption of practical improvement methods: the survey respondents reported gains in understanding and application of QI. Removing the Programme would most likely erode these gains and slow progress;
 - greater anxiety around inspection, with fewer mechanisms to rebuild confidence: the feedback highlights that the Programme helps reduce defensiveness after difficult inspections and clarifies expectations. In its absence, settings would be more likely to remain anxious and less able to evidence practice confidently;
 - loss of a shared language of improvement: the Programme's targeted and bespoke strands have created a shared vocabulary and common tools (e.g., PDSA) that services use to support change. Without the Programme, that collective momentum would fragment, reducing spread and consistency;
 - weaker national coherence in a busy landscape: the Programme aligns with local authorities and other partners to help reduce duplication; and
 - fewer routes to immediate, practical resources and local tailoring: universal resources and bespoke sessions were used to refresh knowledge, support reflection and align local priorities with inspection expectations. Removing these offers would narrow access to local support and reduce the national consistency valued by services.

Conclusions

- 4.52 The Improvement Programme has equipped services with practical tools such as PDSA cycles to plan changes, involve staff teams and evaluate progress. This has led to measurable improvements in inspection outcomes and strengthened services' ability to self-evaluate and sustain change.

- 4.53 The Programme has also built staff knowledge and confidence, boosted morale, and created what one local authority described as “a common language across settings,” enabling staff to share learning and reinforce good practice.
- 4.54 At a wider level, the Programme has contributed to a more open, consistent and collaborative culture across the ELC system. Services are less anxious and more constructive in their interactions with the Care Inspectorate; local authorities have been able to align programme activity with their own improvement frameworks; and inspectors and Improvement Advisers are increasingly seen as part of a coherent, joined-up system of support.
- 4.55 The Programme aligns closely with national policy priorities for high-quality, equitable early learning and childcare. It complements the statutory quality-assurance role of local authorities and fits within wider improvement activities alongside Education Scotland and the Scottish Social Services Council. The Improvement Team’s proactive engagement with these partners has helped to strengthen coherence and ensure that services receive consistent messages about what quality looks like.
- 4.56 Overall, the ELC Improvement Programme has achieved both practical and strategic impact. It has supported measurable improvements in service quality and inspection outcomes, while also fostering stronger professional relationships and a more connected improvement system. Without the Programme, the ELC system would lose a nationally consistent, practically oriented mechanism for supporting improvement, especially for settings below (or at risk of falling below) the National Standard.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

- 5.1 Across its three strands, the Programme has built the capacity and confidence of staff, improved practice, and strengthened relationships between services and the Care Inspectorate. The evaluation finds that the ELC Improvement Programme has continued to be a valued and effective part of Scotland's early learning landscape. Evidence from services, local authorities, inspectors, and the Improvement Team shows that the Programme has achieved its central aim: to help services embed improvement methods that enhance quality and outcomes for children.
- 5.2 Many services have achieved measurable improvements in inspection grades and have sustained these changes beyond the period of direct support. The Programme demonstrates what responsive regulation looks like in practice with a balance of scrutiny and support that builds trust while driving improvement.

What has worked well

- 5.3 A number of factors underpin the Programme's success:
- practical and accessible methods: participants consistently valued the hands-on approach, describing how the use of tools such as PDSA cycles and SMART aims made improvement "manageable and achievable";
 - dedicated and knowledgeable delivery team: the credibility, experience and relational approach of the Improvement Team were repeatedly highlighted as key strengths. Staff were described as approachable, supportive and skilled at helping services translate ideas into action;
 - peer learning and collective motivation: cohort structures, group discussions and follow-up peer sessions created a community of practice that helped sustain change;
 - flexibility of access: the range of entry points, from online resources to local bespoke sessions, allowed settings to engage in ways that suited their circumstances; and
 - shift in relationships and culture: the Programme helped reframe the Care Inspectorate's role, reducing defensiveness amongst settings and encouraging more open, constructive engagement with inspectors and advisors.

Ongoing challenges

- 5.4 While the evaluation found broad and consistent evidence of positive impact, some challenges remain:
- capacity and timing: time pressures and ELC staffing constraints will always be a challenge that affects participation and perceived readiness, and the daytime

delivery means that it is not possible for some services, like childminders, to access the support;

- sustainability: although many services have sustained changes, some reported difficulty maintaining focus once formal support ended; and
- awareness and reach: universal resources are valued but not yet fully utilised, a small proportion of services were unaware of the materials or unsure how to access them.

Recommendations

- 5.5 Building on the evidence gathered, the following recommendations are proposed to consolidate and strengthen the current Programme.

Recommendation 1: Maintain and resource the Improvement Programme model.

The relational, credible, and consistent approach of the team is central to the Programme's success. Sustaining this capacity or ideally expanding the team should remain a priority. Exploring options for multi-year funding would enable longer-term planning, secure staffing, and greater reach across Scotland.

Recommendation 2: Continue to enhance visibility and usability of universal resources.

Improve signposting to the Improvement Hub and continue to develop materials that are easy to navigate, are current and reflect contemporary needs and illustrated with real examples from ELC settings.

Recommendation 3: Ongoing collaboration with Care Inspectorate colleagues

Continue to support inspectors' understanding of the Programme through team meetings and joint working at the bespoke sessions to reinforce consistency between improvement and scrutiny.

Recommendation 4: Clarify communications about the Programme's purpose

Work with local authorities on their communication about targeted support, so that they frame participation as an opportunity for learning and support rather than as a corrective measure.

Recommendation 5: Broaden access through flexible formats and timing.

To expand the support to more settings the Improvement Team should consider the feasibility of evening, Saturday mornings or blended options and record these sessions to further increase access. Although not presently commissioned to provide support for registered childminders and school aged childcare services, the Team should explore how they could offer their expertise to these providers with the more accessible format.

Recommendation 6: Enhanced collaboration with Education Scotland as part of the shared national framework for ELC

With the new Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland joint inspection framework, there is potential to strengthen collaboration between the two organisations, opportunities for future joint learning events or webinars should be explored to show alignment and help reinforce consistent expectations.

Future direction

- 5.6 The Improvement Programme is now at a natural point of evolution. The current targeted support cohort 12 is a “test of change” represents a considered step forward, aligning the existing model with the NHS Education for Scotland (NES) Scottish Improvement Foundation Skills (SIFS) quality improvement learning pathway. This aims to provide a more structured, progressive approach to developing improvement capability.
- 5.7 Under this new model, the targeted strand will retain its cohort-based structure but incorporate relevant NES modules within the learning journey. Participants will complete foundational e-learning alongside the established teaching, reflection, and project-clinic components of the Programme. This will create a shared language for quality improvement and offer recognised progression routes for practitioners.
- “The benefit this brings is that there’s a recognised accreditation that comes with the Programme and a pathway for people who want to take their learning further.” (Scottish Government official)
- 5.8 The test of change will also refine the nomination and readiness process, ensuring participants and local authorities are prepared to commit the necessary time and resources. It will generate valuable learning about how national frameworks and sector-specific programmes can align to build improvement capacity across the early learning system.
- 5.9 While the test of change involves a smaller cohort, it provides an opportunity to assess how accredited, modular learning can enhance sustainability and create a stronger professional network for improvement across ELC.

APPENDIX 1: Case studies



Nursery A: Case Study

Overview

Nursery A is a full-day service in central Scotland caring for children aged 0-5, with capacity for up to 70 children at any one time. When the current manager joined, the setting had experienced a challenging period (including flood damage to the 3-5s space), low occupancy (around 24 children), and inspection grades at 1s and 2s across several themes. Following a programme of rapid stabilisation, the nursery joined the ELC Improvement Programme while they continued to receive close support from their local authority.

Experiences of taking part

The manager engaged mainly in the weekly online sessions with the Improvement Team, using breakout rooms to share progress and learn with peers. The Facebook peer group came online later than hoped, but Teams chat and shared resources filled the gap. The manager valued rotating breakout groups and continuity with an initial small group (tracking each other's progress and exchanging templates). The focus for the improvement project was outdoor provision. Despite extensive grounds, the garden was underused, particularly for babies. Using a structured improvement approach, the team:

- set an expectation that all children would access the garden regularly (free-flow for 3-5s, targeted weekly access for younger groups); and
- converted an underused, heated outbuilding into a weather-proof baby play barn, enabling daily outdoor experiences for the youngest children.

Alongside this, learning from the Programme was applied to other changes, notably re-purposing an empty room into a dedicated dining room to improve mealtime experience, flow, and safety.

"But it was just quite good... taking time to actually go and observe in the room and think about what can we do... It was making you think about the process more."
(Nursery A Manager)

Impact

On children:

- Outdoor access increased substantially across all age groups; babies now enjoy daily, weather-proof outdoor play in the new play barn.
- Mealtimes improved through the new dining room, reducing crowding and creating a calmer, more social experience.
- Continuous observation and review cycles mean changes are tested, refined, and embedded with a clear focus on children's wellbeing and learning.

On families:

- Parent engagement was rebuilt through open days, "Parent & Natter" meetings, and regular "question of the moment", prompts linked to the improvement plan.
- Families now receive monthly priorities (what we're focusing on and why), with invitations to contribute ideas and feedback, strengthening trust and transparency.
- Communication through a refreshed website and social channels has supported re-enrollment and community confidence.

On staff:

- Morale and confidence rebounded with long-standing staff (including 20+ years' service) welcomed structured change after a difficult period.
- Leadership roles were created around individual strengths; every team member holds a defined area of responsibility.
- Improvement methods (short, precise statements with owners and timelines) are now part of monthly staff meetings; practice is underpinned by targeted training, curated bite-size resources, and peer sharing.

On service inspection outcomes:

- The relationship with the Care Inspectorate is now open and constructive. Inspectors recognised clear links between the Improvement Programme and the nursery's quality assurance, self-evaluation, and evidence of progress.
- Inspection outcomes improved from 3s (Nov 2024) to 4s overall with a 5 for Leadership & Management (May 2025).
- Occupancy has recovered steadily, supported by visible, tangible improvements to the environment and practice.

Legacy and sustainability

The nursery has embedded an annual improvement cycle with clear, measurable priorities. For 2025–26, the plan focuses on literacy and numeracy, with champions identified across floors to ensure continuity (e.g., a communication champion and a maths lead). Monthly priorities are shared with families; observations, audits, and children and parents' feedback inform iterative adjustments.



Nursery B: Case Study

Overview

Nursery B is a non-profit, charity-run setting based in the south of Scotland. The service is registered for up to 38 children at one time. The setting joined the ELC Improvement Programme in early 2024, initially under its former manager, with the new manager, continuing in the later sessions. The Improvement Programme was taken up alongside targeted support from the local authority and their funded provider.

Experiences of taking part

the manager and the deputy engaged in a range of Programme activities, including weekly online sessions with the Improvement Team. They also drew on bite-sized online resources relating to schematic behaviours and environments for two-year-olds, as well as targeted in-person support provided by an Early Years teacher provided by the local authority.

A particular focus was placed on embedding a structured Plan–Do–Study–Act (PDSA) approach, especially around improving the lunchtime experience. Staff documented changes, used photographs and evidence, and reflected on what worked and what did not. Nursery B's manager described the support as invaluable in building her understanding of quality assurance:

"It showed me more that it's ok doing the audits... but it's what you do with the results of them. We were doing the audits, but we weren't analysing audits, and we weren't making the changes as much."

Impact

On children:

- The environment improved markedly, with the nursery moving from “weak” to “good” in this area. Renovated toilets and changing areas provided children with a dignified and safe environment.
- Children expressed excitement about the new facilities, reflecting the tangible difference the changes made to their daily experiences.
- The nursery expanded provision for two-year-olds, introducing two separate rooms, including a quieter space with a dedicated sleep pod.

On families:

- Parents were engaged through questionnaires and “stay and play” sessions, providing feedback on changes and helping shape a new set of vision, values, and aims for the service.
- Feedback emphasised that the environment felt cleaner, more inviting, and aligned with parental priorities such as kindness, safety, and care.

On staff:

- Staff reported reduced anxiety about inspections, with a better understanding that inspectors observe children's experiences rather than scrutinising staff.
- All staff are now close to full qualification, and greater involvement in setting routines and redesigning spaces has fostered ownership and confidence.
- The deputy and managers direct participation in the Improvement Programme has enabled learning to cascade across the team.

On service inspection outcomes:

- In March 2024, a year after their inspection, Nursery B has improved their grades to a score of 4 (good) in quality of setting, and 3 (adequate) in the remaining categories.
- Nursery B has strengthened its relationship with the Care Inspectorate, shifting from a “fear factor” to an open, constructive dialogue.
- The nursery has already met four of five inspection requirements set in 2023, with an action plan in place to address the remainder.
- Quality assurance processes are now embedded through a detailed calendar of audits and action planning, supported by mentoring from a senior Early Years officer at a local school.

Legacy and sustainability

the manager and deputy continue to engage with members from their cohort and feels better prepared for future inspections. The manager reflected that the Improvement Programme has been particularly important for her as a new leader, providing reassurance and clarity about 'doing it the right way'.

Changes to the environment and routines have been sustained, and the setting has developed stronger links with both parents and the Care Inspectorate.



Nursery C: Case Study

Overview

Nursery C is a standalone private nursery serving a small rural community in the southwest of Scotland, with strong local links (sheltered housing, park, shops and a day-care centre). The service is registered for 50 children (12 babies, 15 two-year-olds, and the remainder three-to-five).

At inspection in April 2024, the nursery was graded adequate (3) across themes; the setting then joined the ELC Improvement Programme, alongside local authority support.

Experiences of taking part

The team engaged in weekly online sessions, breakout discussions and the peer Facebook group, with access to 1:1 advice which was used early to agree scope and pace. The manager also attended a local authority bespoke session and shared their learning.

The chosen focus area was transitions (an inspection recommendation), consolidating refreshed policy and embedding practice through the peak settling period. Key tools included PDSA cycles and a deliberate "tortoise, not hare" approach to slow the pace and sequence changes to keep the whole team on board with the improvement journey.

Impact

On children:

- Transitions are more consistent and child-centred, with settling, moves between rooms, and nursery-home links better planned and reviewed.
- Practice has shifted from adult-led to child-led learning. Staff now respond to children's interests in the moment, while retaining light-touch adult scaffolding.
- Improved environments and resources (with owner buy-in) have enhanced quality of play and learning experiences.

On families:

- Families are better informed and involved in transitions; feedback is captured and used within PDSA reviews.
- Communication around what we are changing and why has strengthened trust and continuity.

On staff:

- Confidence and morale improved through clearer pacing and tailored support. Staff understand that it is acceptable to need different levels of input and time.
- The team routinely uses PDSA and the STAR approach for observation and evaluation, with a practical QA folder evidencing cycles, outcomes, and next steps.
- Leaders plan to send deputies/team leaders to forthcoming observation training to sustain and spread the skills.

"With the staff quality and skills, I think they're learning a lot more because we're going at a slower pace. So, they are taking a lot more on board and it's a lot more individual to them"

(Nursery Manager)

On service inspection outcomes:

- The manager reports being inspection-ready, able to articulate the improvement journey, evidence, and ongoing work.
- The programme reframed the relationship with the Care Inspectorate as supportive; the setting feels confident to seek advice proactively.

Legacy and sustainability

Improvements have been sustained beyond the cohort through:

- continued use of short, precise improvement statements with owners and dates;
- regular review of transitions and planning, recognising that some processes (e.g., planning) require a longer runway and iterative tweaks; and
- ongoing engagement with the post-cohort refresh sessions (every 2–3 months) and local authority support.

"It's ok to just take it slow. There are some things, like if we've got a requirement, where we do need to go a bit quicker with that. But it's ok to be on a journey and the journey doesn't need to be done in two or three months."

(Nursery C Manager)



Nursery D: Case Study

Overview

Nursery D is a long-established nursery in the north of Scotland. The setting has capacity for up to 37 children, including 10 under the age of two. The service has been part of the local community for over 35 years. The manager, who has worked at Nursery D for 19 years in a variety of roles, participated in the ELC Improvement Programme's targeted support strand.

Experiences of taking part

Staff mainly engaged with targeted support through group sessions delivered online. These sessions introduced quality improvement tools, frameworks, and processes, including writing precise improvement statements that clearly outline responsibilities, timescales, and intended impacts. Breakout discussions with other settings were particularly valued, as they enabled managers of different settings to share experiences, provide advice, and learn from one another:

"It was actually really good. I stayed in contact with another manager afterwards and we shared documents and resources to help each other." (Nursery D Manager)

The online format worked well for the manager, making participation easier and more accessible, while visual resources and examples provided during the sessions reinforced the learning.

Impact

On children:

- Improvement planning is now more focused, with changes tackled one at a time and monitored for impact.
- Outdoor provision was a major area of focus. Using a structured improvement statement, staff, parents, and children collaborated to transform the garden. Children were actively involved in clearing, measuring, and planning, while parents helped select new equipment. Engagement in outdoor play rose from around 50% to 100%, and the space is now a vibrant part of the nursery.

On families:

- Parents have been involved throughout improvement cycles – from early planning, to providing feedback mid-way, to evaluating outcomes.
- Families were actively engaged in decisions about new outdoor equipment through surveys and in-person discussions.
- The process strengthened the sense of community and reinforced parents' trust in the setting.

On staff

- Staff confidence has grown, with the manager sharing learning from the programme through training, resources, and regular staff meetings.
- All staff now have individual areas of focus within the nursery, and improvement tools are used consistently to structure their work.
- The team feels more empowered to implement and sustain changes, with a shared understanding of the improvement cycle.
- Leaders plan to send deputies/team leaders to forthcoming observation training to sustain and spread the skills.

On service inspection outcomes:

- In June 2025, after participating in the ELC Improvement Programme, each of the four graded categories increased to a mark of 4 (good).
- The Programme gave the manager greater confidence in her leadership and in speaking with inspectors.
- Staff felt more prepared and less anxious, with clear evidence of improvement to share.

Legacy and sustainability

Nursery D has embedded improvement planning into day-to-day practice. Each monthly staff meeting includes a focus on quality improvement, and changes are implemented in a way that is designed to be sustainable over time. The garden project in particular has become a model for how to involve staff, parents, and children collaboratively. The manager reflected that the programme restored her confidence following a difficult inspection period:

"It [the ELC Improvement Programme] gets everyone working towards a common goal. I don't feel like at the moment we need anything, but it's good that it's available as well, should we need it."

(Nursery D Lead)