



## **NORTHERN ALLIANCE REGIONAL IMPROVEMENT COLLABORATIVE: PROGRESS AND CHANGES TO FUNDING**

Report by Chief Officer for Education and Children's Services

### **PURPOSE**

- 1.1 The purpose of the Report is to share with members the progress and impact report for the Northern Alliance for the period 2022-23 and provides an update on the potential future direction for Regional Improvement Collaboratives following an announcement by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills about education reform in November 2023.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 2.1 The Northern Alliance is one of six Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) representing all 32 Scottish local authorities. The Northern Alliance is a partnership of the eight authorities across the north of Scotland. Each RIC develops a Regional Improvement Plan to deliver common priorities. Phase four of the RIC Improvement Plan covers the period 2022-2025.
- 2.2 The Northern Alliance Progress and Impact Report 2022-23, included in appendix to this Report, provides a full and detailed update on progress made with delivery of year one of the improvement plan as well as summarising progress and impact with other key functions and workstreams across the Northern Alliance
- 2.3 At the end of the first year of the plan, it was agreed by the eight partner authorities of the Northern Alliance to significantly increase the focus on improving learning, teaching and assessment, making this the major priority for 2023-24 and beyond.
- 2.4 In an address to parliament on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2023, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills provided update on progress with the planned reform of education in Scotland. The address included an announcement that Scottish Government intended to significantly taper down funding for the RICs from April 2024, effectively curtailing their work. The same address confirmed the establishment of a Centre for Teaching Excellence, which is to be hosted within an existing university.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle:
  - a) consider and note the Northern Alliance Progress and Impact Report 2022-23: and
  - b) consider and note the Scottish Government announcement about changes to the future funding of RICs and the establishment of a Centre for Teaching Excellence.

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Background Papers:	<a href="#">Northern Alliance Phase Four Regional Improvement Plan 2022-2025</a> <a href="#">Cabinet Secretary Address to Parliament – 7 November 2023</a> <a href="#">Review of the Impact of RICs on Pupils &amp; Practitioners – 19 January 2024</a>
Appendix:	Northern Alliance Progress and Impact Report 2022-23

## IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	The tapering of funding from April 2024 will have an impact on Northern Alliance financial support for Digital DHT posts in e-Sgoil and the subsidising of collaborative development work across the authority partnership.
Legal	None
Staffing	The Comhairle currently has staff seconded to the Northern Alliance, supporting delivery of workstreams. The tapering of funding and ending of workstreams will result in return of secondees to substantive posts. The Northern Alliance provided partial funding of Digital DHTs within e-Sgoil. The loss of this funding will impact on the ability to retain these staff and this is being investigated by e-Sgoil management.
Assets and Property	None
Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	ES&CSSCL03 – e-Sgoil service reduces or stops.
Equalities	The Northern Alliance provided significant support for UNCRC, the implementation of the Rights Respecting Schools Award scheme and the promotion and embedding of children’s rights in education. The work of the Northern Alliance also provided support for well-being and participation for young people. The withdrawal from this work will require the Comhairle to consider how this can be progressed by other means.
Corporate Strategy	<b>Support Children, Families and Young People:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure schools and lifelong learning are at the heart of our communities, with particular emphasis on Gàidhlig, digital skills and new technologies.</li> </ul> <b>Support Caring and Resilient Communities and Quality of Life:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nurture the safety and resilience of our communities.</li> </ul>
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	None

## BACKGROUND

- 5.1 The Northern Alliance is a Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC) of eight local authorities, across the north and west of Scotland: Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Highland, Moray, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands, with a shared vision to improve the educational and life chance of our children and young people through collaboration.
- 5.2 RICs were established in 2017 to add value to educational improvement and to reduce inconsistencies across the system, by bringing together expertise from regional groupings of local authorities alongside Education Scotland regional teams. Six RICs were created in total, with the Comhairle being confirmed as part of the Northern Alliance.

- 5.3 The establishment nationally of RICs was inspired and influenced by an existing 'Northern Alliance' partnership between seven authorities that was first established in 2014 involving Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Highland, Moray, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. This informal and voluntary partnership initially focused on teacher recruitment and retention across the north of Scotland. Argyll and Bute joined the Northern Alliance partnership after the formal establishment of the RICs in 2017.
- 5.4 For information, the other five RICs are:
- **The Tayside Collaborative** (Angus, Dundee City, Perth & Kinross)
  - **The West Partnership** (East Dumbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, West Dumbartonshire)
  - **The Forth Valley and West Lothian RIC** (Clackmannanshire, Falkirk, Stirling, West Lothian)
  - **The South East Collaborative** (Edinburgh City, East Lothian, Fife, Midlothian, Scottish Borders)
  - **The South West Collaborative** (East Ayrshire, North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire, Dumfries & Galloway)
- 5.5 Since their inception, the RICs have received an annual grant from Scottish Government to support their improvement activities. The amount available nationally is around £6m and from this the Northern Alliance has received approximately £1m per year. In addition, the Northern Alliance has made bids to other funders for specific pieces of work to ensure sustainability. The grant funding received is mainly used to fund a very small core team to lead forward collaborative activity across the eight local authorities.

#### **THE NORTHERN ALLIANCE PROGRESS AND IMPACT REPORT 2022-23**

- 6.1 The Northern Alliance Progress and Impact Report 2022-23 can be found in the appendix to this report, and it sets out the work which was achieved during the first year of the Phase Four Regional Improvement Plan.
- 6.2 The Phase Four Plan was the most ambitious Regional Improvement Plan to-date and was developed following 22 live engagement sessions, involving 460 practitioners who provided over 1400 contributions from right across the Northern Alliance partner authorities.
- 6.3 Throughout the delivery of the Phase Four Plan, the Northern Alliance has continued to focus on increasing its reach and impact, mainly through the ongoing promotion of digital engagement. Over the course of 2022/23, this included 715 collaborative engagements, involving 5,918 practitioners from across the Northern Alliance area. In addition to this, there was an increase in sign-ups for professional learning interventions, predominantly from teachers, with 2,019 registrations for professional learning and over 1,000 attendees at professional learning events.
- 6.4 During the 2022/23 session, the education system saw the return of external school inspections and the findings of these inspections identified common themes across Northern Alliance schools. It was agreed that improvements to inspection outcomes could be made at scale through collaborative working of the RIC and by pooling our resources together. Work started between Northern Alliance LA senior leaders and senior HMI colleagues with a focus on improving consistency in learning, teaching and assessment across the north.
- 6.5 The prioritisation of learning, teaching and assessment over the last twelve months has resulted in refocusing of the strategic priorities for year two of the Phase Four Plan. All partner authorities have supported this change and agreed the development of a Northern Alliance Learning, Teaching and Assessment Quality Assurance Strategy and to make this a local priority within each authority area.

## EDUCATION REFORM AND FUTURE FUNDING OF THE RICs

- 7.1 As part of the Scottish Government Education Reform Programme, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills commissioned a 'Rapid Review' of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives with a specific focus on their impact on pupils and practitioners. The review was instructed on 22 June 2023 and expected to provide headline findings in late October. The full report of findings was published by Scottish Government on 19 January 2024 and a link to it is provided in the background papers to this report.
- 7.2 On 7 November 2023, before full publication of the findings of the RIC Review, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills made a statement to Parliament on education reform. This statement covered several areas that currently form part of the Scottish Government's education reform programme and, importantly, made significant reference to the future of RICs across Scotland. A link to the full text of the statement is provided in background papers.
- 7.3 In the statement, the Cabinet Secretary indicated that, whilst RICs had increased the improvement and leadership support they provide to the system since their inception, the impact of the RICs remained limited. She indicated that regional partnership was important and that RICs had allowed a culture of collaboration to be developed across local authorities. However, not all establishments or staff had been impacted by the RICs and the Cabinet Secretary was clear that Scotland needs a system which provides greater equity in access to improvement and professional learning support for teachers.
- 7.4 The Cabinet Secretary further announced that, from April 2024, funding would be tapered down for the RICs and Scottish Government would repurpose this investment to provide better support for teachers in classrooms. There was no indication given as to what the level of tapering would be and an update was expected following the Scottish budget in December but, at the time of writing, no further detail was available. The level of tapering is expected to be significant and may be as much as a 75% reduction.
- 7.5 Finally on 7 November, the Cabinet Secretary announced the creation of a new Centre for Teaching Excellence, to be hosted by a university and which would support leaders and teachers to grow professionally throughout their careers. It would fill an important gap in our national approach to education. At this stage, the proposed Centre for Teaching Excellence is a high-level concept and further detail is eagerly awaited. It is envisaged that it will operate similarly to CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence in Children's Care and Protection, hosted within the University of Strathclyde.
- 7.6 The announcement about the significant change to the future funding of the RICs has caused significant concern among the constituent local authorities. There remains a strong appetite to continue our collaboration although, at the current time, it is challenging to plan for the next year until there is certainty in relation to the tapered funding which will be allocated for 2024/25. It is currently expected that the majority of workstreams will have to end in March 2024 and secondments to the Northern Alliance will be ended, with staff returning to their substantive local authority posts. Until there is certainty about the level of tapered funding, planning beyond that cannot proceed.
- 7.7 The Northern Alliance Regional Improvement Forum (RIF), which comprises of Directors/Chief Education Officers from the eight local authorities in the Northern Alliance has agreed that any funding we do receive should continue to be focused on strengthening consistency in relation to learning, teaching and assessment in respect of the agreed priority already set for 24-25. There is a collective belief within the RIF Directors that, though building collective responsibility for improvements in this area, we will ensure greater benefits for our children and young people across the RIC.

## **CONCLUSION**

- 8.1 The Northern Alliance Progress and Impact Report 22-23 sets out in detail the scope, reach and impact of the work of the RIC over the reporting period. This report is shared in the context of the Scottish Government decision to taper down funding for the RICs from April 2024 in favour of the development of a Centre for Teaching Excellence, hosted within a university. The tapering of funding for the RICs will result in significant reduction in the work of the RICs and the scope and scale of collaboration between the partner authorities. The future of the RICs beyond 2024-25 is not known.