

Lessons learned from the Schools of Ambition initiative

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Introduction: *Curriculum for Excellence*: Context of Schools of Ambition

The successful strategies for improvement used in Schools of Ambition are well in line with the principles and purposes of *Curriculum for Excellence*. The Schools of Ambition programme has provided those schools involved with support and a focus for transformational improvement. Like all other schools, those in the Schools of Ambition programme have operated within the context of various local and national policies.

As *Curriculum for Excellence* moves into an intensive and important phase of implementation, all schools are involved in constructing a curriculum which provides high quality learning experiences to meet the needs of every young person. These learning experiences are informed by the values, purposes and principles of *Curriculum for Excellence*. What successful Schools of Ambition have achieved and how they have done so provides useful lessons for transformational improvement through *Curriculum for Excellence*. Successful Schools of Ambition are well placed to continue their own journeys towards achieving excellence for all.

Many successful Schools of Ambition recognise that transformational improvements have been brought about by successfully changing attitudes, beliefs and practices within the school. By addressing barriers to success and by developing the capacity for leadership at all levels, many schools in the programme have shown notable improvement.

1. How well do young people learn and achieve?

Of the 20 schools involved in the first tranche of the School of Ambition programme, over half were improving in some key indicators of performance in national examinations at S4-S6. In several, the behaviour of young people improved as they developed new skills and confidence. Improvements were also reflected in a decrease in the number of exclusions and referrals for misbehaviour. The number of young people who progressed to further education and other positive destinations on leaving school increased in some schools. In those and in other schools the increased numbers of young people staying on at school beyond the compulsory leaving age was possibly related to the wider range of more relevant courses which had been made available.

Almost all Schools of Ambition made considerable changes to their curriculum. Changes to the school curriculum offered young people more choice and flexibility in their studies. Schools provided greater opportunities for young people to gain success in a wide range of vocational, sporting and creative arts activities. Some were able to create specialist teaching areas, for example in hairdressing or construction, within existing school accommodation. These developments led to greater enthusiasm for learning. Some schools promoted young people's engagement in school and community events. Others enabled young people to work with business partners in a range of projects, for example growing and selling organic vegetables. Many young people, including those in need of more choices and chances, successfully developed skills in enterprise and sustainability and gained a better awareness of the world of work.

Enriching and extending the curriculum

The school is in an isolated rural area and not well served by public transport. Young people had been reluctant to leave their own community to work or continue with their education. A significant number did not see the relevance of their schoolwork, nor did they think their studies would help them in their future lives. Some behaved badly or stayed away from school. Some young people became unemployed when they left school and lacked the confidence to look for work or educational opportunities outside their own community. The headteacher believed that the School of Ambition programme could help prepare young people for work and encourage them to look outwards beyond their own area. The school decided to provide more vocational opportunities after it carefully considered the needs of its young people and wider community.

The school introduced additional work-related courses for young people at S3 and S4. These courses, which included care, metal working/engineering and motor vehicle engineering, were included in option choices. Young people were able to follow the courses without missing other subjects. The courses were regarded highly because they were open to all young people in those year groups. Around half of young people in S5 chose vocational courses too. They were able to gain qualifications in areas such as hairdressing, construction and sports and fitness.

Staff realised that they did not have the knowledge and skills to teach all aspects of the new courses, so they successfully built partnerships with colleges and businesses. College lecturers worked in the school to provide specialist courses such as motor vehicle engineering. From savings on travel the school was able to use more of its funds to buy specialised tools and equipment. For example young people and staff made very good use of a hydraulic car hoist funded from the School of Ambition budget. School staff and their college partners worked closely and flexibly to align matters such as the teaching timetables in each establishment. College staff became involved in other aspects of school life such as the sailing club. The college's commitment to providing able staff at no cost to the school was of great value and importance.

The school regularly reviewed how well its courses were working. Young people, parents, school and college staff and business partners were very positive. Within two years more than half of young people at S3/S4 were following at least one work-related course. Young people were more motivated by their learning and fewer of them were excluded from school. In three years the time lost through exclusion fell by 16%. Young people became more self-confident and ambitious. More of them were willing to look outside their own area to find work or to continue with their learning. The percentage continuing with education after leaving school went up from 17% in 2004/2005 to 40% in 2006/07. The greater availability of vocational courses improved the motivation and learning of significant numbers of young people. They behaved better and achieved more.

Key factors in this case study were the provision of specialist equipment, timetabled vocational courses provided through joint working with partners and available to all learners from S3 to S6, and regular review of the new arrangements.

Enhancing the curriculum

Staff wanted to raise the self-esteem, confidence, aspirations and achievements of the young people. They sought to strengthen provision in arts and sport and use the development of excellence in these areas to drive improvements in climate, motivation and achievement across the whole school. In order to bring this about, the curriculum was enhanced through the introduction of 'Peak Performance' and academies in art, dance and sport. Once a week, all young people in second, fifth and sixth year come together for a Peak Performance lesson. They can choose from various options including either participation in the dance, football or basketball specialist groups or in areas associated with school shows, for example music, drama (performance), media studies (production), art and design, technical education (practical), home economics (costumes) and business education (marketing). Each of these activities culminates in an end-of-session public event. The arrangements also allow young people at S5/S6 to take on leadership roles in supporting teachers and younger learners.

The interest and enjoyment experienced by many young people through Peak Performance at S2 is continued into S3 and S4 academies which have been established in art, dance, football and basketball. They feature as full options within the S3/S4 curriculum. Many young people take the Standard Grade art course and the art academy. Young people can also select one of the sports academies and/or a conventional Standard Grade course in physical education. Allowing more time within these curriculum areas and the emphasis on performance and 'deep learning' within the academies helps young people to develop their skills further. The needs of young people with talents or high interest in a particular area can be better met.

These curricular innovations have impacted positively on relationships within the school and the climate for learning. Young people and teachers are very positive about the Peak Performance activities and the academies. The enthusiasm of young people within the sports academies is very tangible and their sense of belonging is enhanced by the wearing of identifying kit. The specialisation offered through the academies has significantly increased engagement in learning in these areas. The wider range of public events including musical productions, fashion shows, dance festivals, art exhibitions and sports displays provides a platform for greater levels of achievement. These events have brought larger numbers of parents into the school and enhanced community links. Overall, young people's motivation and confidence has improved and most now take a greater pride and identity in their school. The Peak Performance programme is also providing a significant number of staff with valuable practical leadership experience. The school has been successful in achieving a steady increase in the number of young people who gain qualifications at increasingly high levels. There are encouraging signs that attainment and achievement levels will be raised further in the longer term.

Key factors overall were the provision of leadership opportunities for staff and learners, innovation through a focus on arts and sport to drive improvements in climate, the involvement of all learners at particular stages, an emphasis on deep learning, and enhanced community links.

At several schools, young people gained considerably in self-confidence through taking part in training to develop their leadership skills. They successfully made presentations at school assemblies and helped to develop a positive ethos in the school and its community. They participated successfully in training other young people to take on leadership roles and become more involved in the wider life of the school.

Improving Leadership – Improving the School

The new headteacher had recognised that the school was underperforming. Some young people lacked motivation and underachieved. She successfully involved young people, staff, parents and the wider community in actively improving the school. They helped decide what the school would look like in the future.

The headteacher believed that developing leadership amongst young people and staff would significantly improve the school. School of Ambition funding was used to involve two groups of young people and staff in the Columba 1400 programme. Young people and their teachers were strongly influenced by the experience. The school was aware that the cost of sending large numbers on the Columba 1400 programme would be too great. With the help of the Columba team, it created its own leadership academy. Those who had been on the programme trained groups of other young people including some from local primary schools. They used lessons and teaching materials they designed themselves. Importantly, they were effective role models in classrooms. Young people developed leadership skills and values in challenging situations at outdoor centres. The school was actively looking for other funds to meet the continuing costs of its leadership academy when the School of Ambition programme ended. It had been very active in making useful contacts throughout the business community. Improved leadership amongst young people benefited the school and its wider community. Young people led very popular and successful activities at lunchtimes and at the end of the school day. Others provided valuable support for the local Youth Café. They successfully persuaded a national businessman to match the money they had raised for the café.

The school invested heavily in programmes of staff training and support. All staff were strongly encouraged to be leaders. Some were enthusiastic and highly regarded coaches who passed on their knowledge and experience to colleagues. The local education authority was aware of the success of the school's work. It used school staff to coach its senior officials. It had invested resources in helping young people and staff to play a bigger part in improving the school and the learning that took place there. Young people and staff agreed that the shared values had greatly improved the school. Young people got on better with their teachers and with one another. Staff and young people were very positive about the shared values and the mutual respect in more classrooms. Classrooms and corridors were much calmer. Behaviour and achievement improved.

Key factors included an emphasis on developing leadership among staff and learners, acquisition of matched funding, and the use of coaching to spread leadership and other skills among staff.

In many schools, young people developed a range of information communication technology (ICT) skills. Improved access to ICT resources in the classroom extended their learning. The use of ICT helped learners to develop new skills in different contexts and to apply these skills in other areas of learning, for example, in recording and presenting poetry, and in capturing the performance of sports and dramatic arts. Schools linked the improvements to the confidence and achievement of young people in these areas and, importantly, more generally. In one school, all young people were issued with a laptop computer which helped develop their learning skills both in school and at home. In some lessons, live video links with other schools widened young people's perceptions and enabled them to collaborate with a wider range of people in taking their learning skills forward.

Schools of Ambition had introduced a wide range of approaches to enhancing learning and teaching, for example through:

- Greater curricular choice at S1/S2 to better meet the needs of young people.
- After-school classes to tackle demanding problems.
- Developing on-site facilities, such as a vocational education centre to provide space for young people to learn construction skills, cosmetology and hairdressing.

A few schools made changes to the timetable to allow young people to be presented for examinations at the end of S3. However, progression in some subjects did not always allow young people to make appropriate choices.

In a few schools, continuing professional development (CPD) enabled staff to discuss and learn more about good teaching practice. Young people reported that they had more opportunities to learn collaboratively and more choices in lessons. They appreciated where teachers learned new skills, for example in ICT, which allowed them to develop and practise their own skills in areas such as music recording and composition.

Learning and Teaching

Staff wanted to improve learners' behaviour and attitudes to education and enhance the level of their engagement. They realised that there would need to be a strong focus on improving learning and teaching. Specifically, the school sought to extend and embed *Assessment is for Learning* strategies, ensure that learning became more active and enjoyable with a stronger emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, and enhance the use of ICT to extend and support learning.

The school recognised the need for staff development and high-quality training. External providers were used where appropriate, and there was a strong emphasis on the sharing of good practice with peer-led in-service sessions. For example, to promote the use of ICT, teachers carried out training for their colleagues and showcased current practice. The examples of practice included filmed examples, departmental and whole school demonstrations and visits to classrooms. These professional development strategies complemented the increased provision of ICT hardware and software made possible through use of Schools of Ambition funding.

Active learning days were introduced to allow teachers to demonstrate formative assessment and active learning approaches to their colleagues in other departments. The culture of collegiality and sharing of good practice has promoted discussion among departments and teachers and has supported the introduction of well-designed interdisciplinary and thematic activities. Themed days and weeks, for example the anti-sectarianism day, the food day, the India week, the money and finance week have all helped promote the engagement of young people. Interdisciplinary work is growing. For example, a project involving art and English allows young people at S1 to use animation techniques to produce movies of various poems.

Teachers are more actively engaging young people about their learning. They are sharing learning intentions, providing focused feedback and agreeing targets for improvement. Young people are increasingly having the opportunity to comment on their lessons. They are more active in their learning and working regularly co-operatively in paired and group activities. The use of ICT, including the use of interactive whiteboards, classroom voting systems, content generator software, laptops, wireless keyboards, video-conferencing, podcasting and blogging, has made learning more interactive and interesting. For example, young people at S1 and S3 have discussed their writing with children in two associated primary schools through video links. Video techniques are used in technical education to enhance teacher demonstrations and provide support for individual young people to re-visit aspects of the lesson introduction. The school is aware of the importance of continued investment in staff development and the sharing of good practice. It recognises the need to monitor progress and determine staff development needs through systematic direct observation of learning and teaching.

Key factors included a successful drive to improve learning and teaching through more active learning, better assessment, more inter-disciplinary work and wider use of ICT. This drive was backed up by high quality CPD for staff which included the sharing of good practice, and provision of a wider range of up-to-date ICT equipment.

2. How well do staff work with others to support young people's learning?

In many schools, staff have worked well with others to provide more vocational courses. Links with local colleges have improved. In a few schools vocational courses are now being delivered in schools by college staff or other members of the community with relevant skills. A few schools have made good links with local universities to help them provide challenge to higher achievers.

In some schools, staff have worked well with specialists to provide more breadth and relevance in the curriculum. For example, local tutors, including college staff, who have relevant experience and expertise have delivered vocational courses including automotive engineering and rural skills.

Schools of Ambition have become very successful in forming productive partnerships with other schools. The formal and informal links, which they have developed

through the Schools of Ambition network and conferences led to close cooperation and effective sharing of good practice.

The wide range of specific cases of staff working with others to enhance learning in schools of ambition included:

- Staff working successfully with an external adviser to enhance their skills and expertise in preventing and tackling misbehaviour.
- Staff working well with a local university to provide opportunities for high achieving young people at S2 to attend an Easter class designed to challenge them and stimulate their learning.
- Opportunities to participate in craft training where young people at S5 benefited through gaining apprenticeships with the local council on leaving school.
- Improved communication with colleagues in primary schools which helped staff to plan young people's learning in mathematics more effectively leading to greater consistency in learning approaches across the sectors and an improved pace of learning.
- Staff widening the opportunities for young people to learn beyond the school and classroom, for example, to engage with local community groups and make effective use of the local environment leading to increased enthusiasm for learning.
- Staff working well with drama and dance specialists to illustrate scientific concepts in an innovative way to help young people link and apply different kinds of learning in new situations.
- Better curriculum progression at the transition from P7 to S1.

Working together in partnerships

The school is highly regarded in its community. Many of its young people go on to further and higher education. However the headteacher had recognised that it could do more for those young people who intended to leave school at the end of S4. Many of those young people wished to stay and work in the local area. Some of them felt that they did not benefit from their learning. A few were unenthusiastic about school. The school used some of its funding to help more young people develop skills that would lead to jobs in their own rural area. It developed valuable partnerships with local colleges and employers.

Important changes were made to the school timetable. The school provided a more flexible timetable for all young people, especially for those who wished to leave at the end of S4. The extra time was used well to let young people study topics in more depth. They had more time and opportunity to learn outside the school with partners in the local community. They also became more familiar with local rural skills and local culture. Effective partnerships helped prepare more young people for the world of work. Around 20% of all young people in S4 followed courses provided by local colleges. More than a quarter of young people in S4 were involved in a rural skills course in school and on a local estate. Overall, young people benefited from a wider

range of courses. Many were very positive about the skills they were developing in agriculture, land management, recreation and tourism.

The school developed a valuable partnership with a major local estate. The estate manager was very positive about the link and gave it his full support. The school used some of its funding to provide time for a teacher to support and develop the link. She worked closely with estate staff to make sure that arrangements were well planned and worked smoothly. Young people worked alongside estate staff to develop a range of valuable rural and conservation skills. They developed practical knowledge and experience of working with livestock. They gained useful qualifications. They used their knowledge to prepare and make presentations to other young people. They believed that their confidence had been greatly increased. The estate manager and the school were working to develop the partnership further. Staff were considering ways to use estate facilities to support courses at higher and advanced higher levels in subjects such as science and business education. The school was making use of the estate facilities to provide more opportunities for recreation and outdoor education.

School staff felt that the partnerships had improved the learning of the young people. Those who intended to leave school at the end of S4 were more enthusiastic and positive about school. They attended more regularly and behaved better. The number of young people excluded from school fell by around 50% over a two-year period. The school believed that School of Ambition funding had made a real difference to the lives of a significant number of young people. It was actively looking for ways to maintain and extend its partnerships when School of Ambition funding ended.

Key factors included use of funding to provide staff leadership and management of particular projects, partnership with local businesses, and a more flexible approach to timetabling which involved all learners and which allowed a greater focus on particular areas including vocational courses.

Partnerships for a more inclusive curriculum

The school is high attaining, with a large proportion of young people progressing to higher and further education. Through effective self-evaluation, staff identified that the courses on offer did not match the needs of an increasing number of young people remaining in school post-16. In addition, those who went on to further education courses did not appear to be developing the appropriate skills that met local employment needs. To address this gap the school widened its curriculum in S3 to S6 by introducing a range of learning experiences and courses with an emphasis on skills for life and work. Staff recognised that these courses required to target the areas of skill shortage and labour needs in the local area. They spoke to local employers to determine their needs. They also explored how effective partnership working with local businesses, colleges and other providers could help them to develop appropriate and effective learning experiences for all learners.

Work experience opportunities were extended and a number of vocational courses introduced. Each course includes a unit on employability developed in liaison with local employers and targeting key aspects identified by the Confederation of British Industry. Courses are supported by partners in various ways. For example, the rural skills course involves links with local estates and an agreement with a local garden centre to purchase surplus plants. A hairdressing course has been made possible by using a local salon which, through support from the school, is now an accredited training centre. The salon also provides valuable work experience and has led to young people from the school moving on to full-time training. A course in customer care was created following consultation with local employers and is linked to the tourism, hospitality, care and retail sectors. A travel and tourism course has been developed with a local perspective linking to local travel agents and amenities. Construction courses are delivered jointly by school and college staff. Young people are also able to take courses at the local IT Centre.

The school now has a more inclusive curriculum. The quality of its links with local businesses has resulted in learning experiences which match the needs of young people with those of the local area. The emphasis on employability developed in partnership with local employers is preparing young people more effectively for life beyond school. Young people are now using individual learning and training needs plans to track their development of core skills and competencies. The school has concluded formal working agreements with fourteen business and training provider partners. It recognises that there is potential for developing these links further to enhance the learning of a wider group of young people. Extended work placements have been skilfully used to re-engage young people in danger of opting out.

Key factors included better identification and meeting of needs, particularly the learning needs of certain groups of young people and the needs of local businesses. There was also a focus on improving the employability of young people.

3. Are staff and young people actively involved in improving their school communities?

The wide range of specific cases of staff and young people being involved in school improvement in schools of ambition included:

- Increased numbers of young people being given opportunities to show leadership, for example, by being involved in learner engagement projects in which young people generate and help implement ideas for improvement. This approach resulted in young people feeling more positive about and proud of their school and their achievements and a sizeable number taking up a coaching role with their younger peers in sporting activities.
- Staff and young people making improvements to school resources to allow greater participation in drama.
- Significant numbers of staff and young people organising and coaching a wide range of sports.

- Staff developing a system of gathering data, including establishing baseline measures, to monitor young people's achievement and progress.
- Staff recording and acknowledging the achievements of young people and helping to create a sense of success through building a more positive ethos.
- Young people being very positive about recent school improvements and having better opportunities to contribute their views via active Pupil Councils.
- Enterprise activities, including the development of a school farm giving young people a greater awareness of environmental and sustainability issues.

Learning in the Community

The school serves several areas of identified deprivation. The headteacher had seen the School of Ambition programme as an opportunity to broaden young people's experience. Funding was used to provide young people with motivating and valuable learning opportunities outside the school, with the aim of getting many more young people actively involved in improving their local community.

All staff were committed to providing young people with worthwhile learning experiences outside the school building. For example, the art department successfully used the city's art galleries and museum service to interest and stimulate young people. Groups of seniors visited galleries and museums in other parts of the country. The technical education department involved young people in an ambitious and impressive project to design and build a sensory garden at a nearby school for young people with special education needs. All departments worked together on joint projects, for example connected with events taking place in the area or in the city. Many young people had opportunities to visit other places in Scotland and abroad. The school formed strong links with a School of Ambition in another part of Scotland. Young people from those schools visited and stayed in each other's communities.

Carefully planned work with the local Fire and Rescue Service increased young people's personal and community responsibility. There was evidence that this work had contributed to a reduction in minor fire raising incidents in the area. Award-winning work with a local housing association improved relationships between the school and local people. Young people gained helpful knowledge through valuable links with national and international companies.

The school's successful contribution to improving its local community was recognised by the city and at the Scottish Education Awards. Almost all young people were positive about their learning outside the school. They felt more motivated and confident. Many thought that they were now more involved and more responsible for their own learning. The school had worked very effectively to involve parents more closely in their children's learning. It had made important and successful changes to the way it arranged parents' evenings. Parents appreciated the chance to discuss their children's learning in more depth. Attendance at parents' evenings increased dramatically.

The school had made very effective use of its funding to help young people become more successful and confident learners. They were more responsible citizens through their learning in their local community. The school's reputation had increased and its roll was increasing. Young people's achievements were improving. The school was looking for ways to maintain out of school learning when School of Ambition funding ended. Staff were working to provide courses that would allow young people to continue to learn in the community and beyond.

Key factors included use of funding to help learners benefit from learning in the local and wider communities, and work to improve the local community.

4. Do the schools have high expectations of all young people?

Almost all schools visited by inspectors were effective in acknowledging the achievements of young people. This acknowledgement had helped to improve the ethos of the school and its community. The raised expectations of young people led to improved attendance and motivation.

Many schools identified that young people frequently lacked confidence and had low expectations. This sometimes resulted in raised levels of absence from school, poor behaviour and self-esteem, and low expectations of achievement. As a result, the morale of staff and young people was adversely affected. Schools tackled this issue and achieved positive results through, for example:

- Agreeing with parents and young people approaches that would enhance everyone's identification with the school.
- Engaging all staff in setting high expectations for achievement and behaviour.
- Acknowledging the successful achievements of young people at school assemblies and through bulletins and press reports.
- Actively encouraging young people to take on responsibilities in the school and its community. In some cases, young people successfully learned about being a leader and applied these skills well, passing on their experiences to their younger peers.

Leadership to raise expectations

The school's overall vision is to create a 'can-do' culture based on enterprise and creativity, and seeking to raise expectations, aspirations and achievement. To support this vision, the school's transformational plan covers three main themes: developing leadership, transforming learning and teaching, and developing young people's motivation, confidence and self-esteem. Staff and young people have taken part in various leadership programmes. Good use has been made of external providers but the school has also recognised the benefits of 'in-house' events. In particular, it has set up its own leadership academy for young people. Those at S6 'pass on' their skills to their younger peers through a series of challenging outdoor

activities at a residential centre. As a result, the younger learners become better equipped to take on leadership roles within the school.

There is now a well established culture of distributed leadership which involves teachers at various levels leading developments and working groups. This culture has been central in ensuring a continuing momentum for innovation and improvement. Teachers are supporting each other through a greater sharing of practice. They are visiting each other's classrooms more often. Some unpromoted staff have taken on important specific roles. For example, one is responsible for mentoring and supporting probationer teachers while two others lead the Fuerstein instrumental enrichment programme to improve the quality of learning. There has also been a growth in out-of-school-hours activities supported by staff willingness to take on lead roles.

Opportunities for young people to lead have expanded, and the school has developed a wide range activities and projects for young people to participate in and take on leadership tasks. For example, young people lead assemblies. The pupil council plays a very active role in the school. A *Girls of Ambition* scheme has provided leadership opportunities through various activities, projects, presentations and conferences. The *Global Ambition Project* allowed sixteen young people at S6 to network with other schools in different countries. They researched and produced a video on their own community and made a presentation at an international conference in Edinburgh. A group of girls at S5/S6 have been trained to lead dance tuition. They work with extra-curricular clubs, primary children and community groups. Some young people at S1 were asked to present the findings of a survey on learning and teaching to staff. Young people taking the *Creative Fashion* course are leading a transition initiative with primary schools. Young people are also representing the school in community projects. The school is aware of the need to keep looking for opportunities as current projects lose their freshness or come to an end.

The school is now more successful in engaging its young people. They feel they have gained confidence through the greater number of leadership opportunities now on offer. Developing leadership has been a key to improving the school and the experiences of its young people.

Key factors included leadership programmes for young people, distributed leadership among staff, with a related increase in out-of-school-hours activities, and a commitment to change projects to keep activities fresh and exciting.

5. Do the schools have a clear sense of direction?

Those schools which achieved the greatest improvements through the Schools of Ambition project, benefited from strong leadership by the headteacher and other senior managers. In those schools, senior managers successfully encouraged the awareness and involvement of almost all staff in school improvements and initiatives.

In most schools, responsibility for managing the Schools of Ambition project was shared and this provided effective professional development opportunities for staff, including senior managers. In some, staff led initiatives as part of a temporary period in a promoted position.

In many schools, significant numbers of staff and young people have received training in leadership. Many schools provided staff and young people with opportunities to participate in the Columba 1400 programme. Some of these schools established their own programmes to encourage the sustainable development of leadership in both staff and young people. The benefits in greater self-confidence were evident to all. Increased numbers of staff took on leadership roles. In one school, staff shadowed senior managers as a means of developing greater professional knowledge and skills.

Factors which schools were able to capitalise on and which contributed positively to schools' capacity to improve included:

- The development of leadership at all levels across the school.
- Staff enthusiasm for change, for example working in partnership with other agencies and services, employers, colleges and other schools.
- Staff's propensity to collaborate, for example in working groups, to share good practice, and to engage in professional dialogue.
- The focus on learning including active learning, cooperative learning, thinking abilities, assessment for learning, the use of ICT and learner engagement.
- Staff's enthusiasm and creativity around curriculum development including vocational opportunities, exploring a broad view of achievement and developing higher order thinking and learning.
- A determination to develop and maintain high expectations for every learner, for example using approaches to personalisation and target setting.

In schools where staff and young people wholeheartedly grasped the opportunities made available to them, they demonstrated that improvements can be driven from within the school, making use of existing resources and expertise. The willingness to take risks and to look at things in a different way are skills which many staff have developed through their Schools of Ambition involvement and which are likely to be valuable in the successful implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence*.

6. How schools tackled potential barriers

Barriers to improvement that were identified by schools included:

- Uncertainty about the extent of freedom to innovate, particularly in relation to *Curriculum for Excellence* and related assessment issues.
- Natural uncertainty and conservatism within the school community and the need to 'keep the show on the road' while innovating.
- Existing management structures and culture to enable transformational change at both senior and middle management levels.

- Perceived inhibitors such as resourcing, lack of information and cultural reservations.

However, once schools realised that they had permission to be creative and innovative and needed to be so, they responded in an enthusiastic and professional manner, embracing the opportunities available.

Schools found that a range of factors that contributed to their success had evolved during the course of the Schools of Ambition programme, including:

- Using funding to provide specialised equipment for example for vocational courses, improve ICT provision to enhance learning, provide a broader range of experiences for learners for example through visits in the wider community, enable staff to take a lead role in managing a project, or improve the quality of professional development for staff, including leadership development. Some schools were motivated by the provision of funding to seek further funding from the local business community.
- Working with partners including local colleges and businesses to broaden the range of vocational courses and enterprise activities available and involve greater numbers of learners in them. New courses were often timetabled effectively to ensure that they had equal status with other more established courses and were available to all learners.
- Arts and sporting activities were also often managed well to involve wide numbers of learners, sometimes at different stages, working together and benefiting from opportunities to show leadership. The activities often involved public performances and other interactions which helped to develop confidence, self-esteem and high aspirations in learners.
- Successful schools often focused on improving learners' achievements by making learning more active, improving assessment, encouraging better use of ICT, trying to develop deep learning, and focusing on developing learners' skills for learning, life and work, sometimes with a particular focus on employability.
- Successful schools developed and benefited from a wide range of partnerships with associated primary schools, other educational providers including local colleges, and local businesses. Learners benefited from these and from well-planned opportunities to use the local community as a learning resource, to work to improve the local community, and from links within the wider community, all of which broadened their experience and led to improved outcomes.
- Effective leaders developed a sense of trust and ambition among staff and learners. They did this by involving all in decision-making and providing opportunities for all staff and learners to take responsibility and show leadership themselves. For example, some used small-scale funding across the school and gave individuals and teams the discretion on how this was spent. By communicating well and involving all in decisions, they reassured

doubters and created a culture of innovation and flexibility for implementing *Curriculum for Excellence*.

- In schools in which there was a commitment among staff to keep new developments under review, improvements tended to be clearer and more sustainable. Projects were often refreshed to maintain the impetus of improvement and transformation. In those schools, learners' needs were identified and met more effectively, and the needs of the local community, including businesses, were taken into account. Good quality CPD, including sharing of strong teaching practice, was provided. There was a clear focus on developing leadership skills among staff and young people. Learners' achievements were monitored effectively, and success for staff and young people was acknowledged and celebrated.

Overall, the projects embraced change and brought about improvements in the following areas:

- Raising levels of achievement, involvement and participation.
- Enhancing the curriculum.
- Increased focus on learning.
- Strengthening leadership.
- Establishing productive partnerships.
- Developing confidence and high expectations.

7. Sustainability

Schools of Ambition received additional funding over the three year period of their involvement in the project. All schools were aware of the need to ensure sustainability in any developments, including changes to the staffing complement, to allow transformations to continue into the longer term. The sustainability of projects, for example those involving regular visits to events and locations such as museums in the community, or the appointment of specific posts, was dependent on the availability of longer-term funding. Many schools used funding to enhance equipment in ICT. Most gave thorough consideration to ensuring that funding would be sufficient in years to come for the maintenance and replacement of their ICT equipment over a rolling period. Many Schools of Ambition developed leadership skills of staff and young people through participation in residential programmes, for example Columba 1400. Almost all ensured that the skills learned were then developed across the school community and put in place measures to develop these skills more widely in future years, for example through in-house training events. Where schools made significant changes to their staffing to allow new initiatives to take place, they gave careful thought to how these changes could be sustained within future core budgets.

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