



Discussion Paper

Exploring how a refocused Education Scotland can support the
Community Learning and Development (CLD) Sector

August 2025

Exploring how a refocused Education Scotland can support the CLD sector, August 2025

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1. Introduction

1.1 Welcome

This discussion paper shares exploratory work undertaken by Education Scotland (ES) in the first half of 2025 on how it should best support the Community Learning and Development (CLD) sector in the future. It also sets out what we plan to do next.

Education Scotland's role is changing. Scottish Ministers have asked Education Scotland to refocus its work as part of wider education reform¹, As a result:

- HM Inspectors of Education will no longer be part of Education Scotland and will form a separate inspection body.
- A refocused Education Scotland will concentrate on curriculum improvement and continue to support professional learning and leadership, equity, improvement and ASN. Education Scotland is now leading a systematic review of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence called the 'Curriculum Improvement Cycle' (CIC).

We are taking this opportunity to consider how a refocused Education Scotland should support improvement and professional learning across the Community Learning and Development (CLD) sector.

We are following a *Service Design*² approach to this work. Our aim so far has been to improve our understanding of what the CLD sector might need from Education Scotland in the future, before designing our response.

The exploratory phase of work began in early 2025 and included engagement sessions in March and April with senior CLD stakeholders from local authorities, the third sector, and higher education. Education Scotland officers have also been learning from developments in other parts of the UK and Ireland. We have been using the findings from this work to inform internal discussions within Education Scotland and with Scottish Government policy officials.

¹ [Education reform programme - gov.scot](https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-reform-programme/pages/introduction.aspx)

² [The Scottish Approach to Service Design \(SAtdSD\) - gov.scot](https://www.gov.scot/publications/the-scottish-approach-to-service-design/pages/introduction.aspx)

1.2 About Education Scotland

Education Scotland is an executive agency of the Scottish Government. Its core functions are to support:

- the quality and improvement of education in Scotland;
- the professional development of educators;
- improved learning experiences and outcomes for all learners.

Education Scotland's Corporate Plan 2021–2026 sets out its current vision and mission to: 'Champion improvement across the whole education system in order to reduce inequity and to maximise life chances.' Its current offer is aimed at 'all learners, regardless of their age and where the learning takes place.'

In June 2024 it was announced through a Government Initiated Question (GIQ) that Education Scotland would be refocused with the primary purpose focused on curriculum³. The key functions of the newly refocused ES would be to:

- Lead curriculum design, delivery and improvement, including the provision of resources to support high quality learning and teaching.
- Continue to have an important role in supporting a thriving professional learning sector through a national framework for professional learning and will build on the existing and well-regarded national leadership professional learning programmes. Further work will take place with COSLA/LAs to define what this looks like in more detail.
- Employ its unique national perspective to inform, share and promote wider approaches to improvement to close attainment gaps as set out in the National Improvement Framework.
- Work with local authorities to inform approaches to wellbeing, inclusion, behaviour and enabling better support for those with additional support needs.

³ [Written question and answer: S6W-28044 | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

1.3. How to use this paper

Decisions about the functions of Education Scotland are made by Scottish Government Ministers, so this paper does not offer fixed recommendations. We plan to use this paper to support our ongoing discussions about how Education Scotland can best support Community Learning and Development (CLD) learners, practitioners, and providers. We also hope it will be useful to others involved in CLD and education reform. The paper sets out:

- The background context used to inform discussions with stakeholders (noting that some developments have progressed since those sessions).
- The main themes emerging from the engagement sessions, including several quotes from CLD stakeholders, and early messages for Education Scotland.
- Links to relevant findings from the CLD Review, inspection evidence, and international examples.
- Questions to support further discussion on the topics raised.

If you would like to discuss any elements of this report with us, then [please get in touch](#).

2. Summary of Key messages for Education Scotland

2.1 CLD stakeholders indicated that a refocused Education Scotland should:

1. Recognise and support CLD contributions to the [Curriculum Improvement Cycle](#).
2. Clearly define its offer to CLD practitioners and partnerships.
3. Outline its commitment to lifelong learning.
4. Continue to develop an accessible professional learning offer for a wider range of CLD practitioners and leaders, which addresses 'real world' issues and offers clearer pathways for progression.
5. Offer to lead on a review of existing CLD practice frameworks - within a wider CLD 'ecosystem'.
6. With CLD partners, explore the potential for a shared, sector-wide CLD framework.
7. Work with Scottish Government to strengthen synergies between the CIC & national priorities for lifelong learning.

2.2 CLD stakeholders also highlighted the following key messages about the approach to refocusing Education Scotland:

- Involve CLD participants and practitioners in the design, development and review of the work in any future stages.
- Be clear on a refocused Education Scotland's contributions to implementing the CLD Review recommendations.
- Aim to deliver tangible actions and avoid overpromising or tokenism.
- Communicate next steps about our changing role clearly.
- Keep the conversations with CLD stakeholders going, to support networking as well as shared professional dialogue and discussions.

3. Background

3.1 Exploratory Work with CLD Stakeholders: Why, What, How?

Why this work was undertaken

While the Scottish Government's response to the Independent Review of CLD (2024) was being considered, Education Scotland has taken early steps to explore how it might respond to key themes from the Review and align with its own refocused remit.

How the work was carried out

Between March and April 2025, five engagement sessions were held with 96 senior CLD stakeholders across Scotland. These included participants from 27 local authorities, 9 national CLD organisations, and representatives from universities delivering Community Learning & Development professional learning. The sessions were held both in-person and online. You can find the slides used at these sessions [here](#)⁴.

The sessions formed part of a 'discovery phase' and were introduced with updates on Education Scotland's evolving remit and on developments related to the Curriculum Improvement Cycle. They followed a *service design* approach, so our aims were to understand the sector's current context and needs before suggesting solutions. It allowed space to reflect on Education Scotland's CLD role—both now and in the future—and how best to support emerging work on the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC).

Participants were invited to discuss four key questions:

1. How can Education Scotland better support CLD stakeholders to contribute to Scotland's Curriculum Improvement Cycle?
2. What are the key issues and priorities for CLD learners and providers that a changing Education Scotland should focus on?

⁴ [CLD Stakeholder Engagements 2025 - Wakelet](#)

3. How effective are the frameworks and learning resources currently available to CLD practitioners?
4. How should a refocused Education Scotland use its curriculum improvement and professional learning roles to support CLD and the aims of the Review?

To support this piece of work so far, officers have also been exploring relevant developments in the rest of the UK and Ireland and will continue to learn from developments in other countries.

3.2 Community Learning and Development (CLD) in Scotland

Community Learning and Development (CLD) is a field of professional practice that supports people of all ages to identify their personal and collective goals, engage in meaningful learning, and take action to create positive change in their lives and communities. Effective CLD is voluntary, learner-centred, flexible, and adaptable. It actively addresses barriers to participation, builds on learners' experiences and interests, and supports progression.

The purpose of CLD aligns with two key national policy outcomes⁵:

- Improved life chances for people of all ages through learning, personal development, and active citizenship;
- Stronger, more resilient, inclusive, and influential communities.

CLD practitioners work in diverse settings in the public and voluntary sectors—including youth work, adult learning, family learning, and community development. They share a common set of professional competencies⁶.

The Requirements for Community Learning and Development (Scotland) Regulations, 2013⁷ place a statutory duty on education authorities to secure

⁵ [Strategic guidance for community planning partnerships: community learning and development - gov.scot](#)

⁶ [The Competences | CLD Standards Council for Scotland](#)

⁷ [The Requirements for Community Learning and Development \(Scotland\) Regulations \(2013\) \(the 2013 Regulations\) - Community learning and development: guidance for 2024 to 2027 - gov.scot](#)

‘adequate and efficient’ CLD provision in their areas, and to work with their CLD partners to develop and implement CLD plans for their areas⁸.

*Learning: For All. For Life. The Independent Review of CLD (2024)*⁹

Extensive evidence shows that CLD provides a positive return on investment in the medium to longer term by developing “critical thinking, personal and social skills, widening access to lifelong educational attainment and employment prospects; improving people’s health and well-being; and encouraging active citizenship and participatory democracy.”

Independent Review of CLD (2024)

In July 2024, the Scottish Government published *Learning: For All. For Life*. This is the final report of the Independent Review of Community Learning and Development (CLD), commissioned as part of Scotland’s wider education reform agenda. The Review emphasises that CLD is a voluntary, learner-centred approach, where programmes are developed through dialogue and shaped by the goals of individuals and communities.

The Review is informed by a [literature review](#) which reinforces the essential role of CLD in tackling social and economic inequalities, supporting health and wellbeing, closing the attainment gap, addressing digital exclusion. It recognises the contribution CLD made to community resilience, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Review makes recommendations in the following areas:

1. Leadership and Structures
2. Overarching Policy Narrative
3. Focus on Delivery
4. Budgets and Funding

⁸ [Local authority community learning and development plans | Community Learning and Development \(CLD\) | Education sectors | Learning in Scotland | Education Scotland](#)

⁹ [Learning: For All. For Life. A report from the Independent Review of Community Learning and Development \(CLD\) - gov.scot](#)

5. Developing the Workforce and Standards
6. Demonstrating Impact

In 2025, the Scottish Government established a CLD Strategic Leadership Group to consider and act on the Review's recommendations. Education Scotland is a member of the Group.

Evidence from HM Inspectorate of Education CLD Reviews

"The person-centred, non-judgemental approach that is at the heart of CLD means that staff, volunteers and partners can reach those who face additional challenges in their lives."

Evaluation of Community Learning and Development in Scotland, HMI 2024.¹⁰

HMI published [*Evaluation of Community Learning and Development in Scotland*](#) in December 2024. The report highlights where CLD leaders, staff, volunteers and partners are supporting children, young people and adults to 'discover new ways to engage in and enjoy learning, helping them overcome challenges.'

The report highlights key challenges, including inconsistent governance and funding arrangements, increasing short-term contracts, and a narrowing of adult learning provision. Inspectors also noted that the sector's ability to measure impact remains under-developed, with no national dataset or shared outcomes framework.

HM Inspectors recommend stronger national and local leadership, more sustainable funding for CLD roles, improved data and impact reporting, and expanded access to adult learning.

3.3 Education Scotland's current CLD support role

"There is scope for greater clarity on respective areas of responsibility for CLD across government and associated bodies. I accept that might be challenging at the

¹⁰ [Evaluation of community learning and development in Scotland. Introduction.](#)

present time due to uncertainty over the future of Education Scotland, but it needs to be done as soon as possible.”

[Independent Review of CLD \(2024\)](#)

Education Scotland currently supports Community Learning and Development (CLD) practitioners and partnerships at local, regional, and national levels. This includes providing advice, guidance, and access to professional learning.

Education Scotland also houses the CLD Standards Council.

The exploratory work described in this paper focused specifically on Education Scotland’s improvement and professional learning roles, so the roles of the CLD Standards Council and HM Inspectors have not been in scope.

3.4 What do we know so far from research?

The following are examples of developments in the rest of the UK and Ireland that we used to set the context for the stakeholder discussions:

- The [National Youth Work Curriculum](#) developed by the National Youth Agency as a reference tool for young people, youth workers, funders and policy makers.
- The [Citizens’ Curriculum](#) in Wales which builds on the core competences of the Curriculum for Wales to help ensure greater coherence between pre-16 education and adult education. This links with the commitment for Wales to be a “Second Chance Nation” and equip people with the skills needed to lead healthy, rewarding and fulfilling lives.
- Ireland’s new national [Community Education Framework](#)¹¹ (2024). SOLAS (Ireland’s further education and training agency) developed the Framework with partners and learners. The Framework sets out the critical and unique role that community education plays, benefitting learners, communities and in supporting a democratic society.

¹¹ Community Education in Ireland refers mostly to non-formal learning with adults

- Regional skills and [ESOL planning in the West Midlands](#) Combined Authority in England.

The following are examples of international research that we used to set the context for the stakeholder discussions:

- The [OECD's 2023 Survey of Adult Skills](#), which indicates that literacy and numeracy skills among adults have largely declined or stagnated over the past decade in most OECD countries. It highlights these fundamental skills as crucial for personal development, economic participation, and societal engagement.
- The [Trends Shaping Education 2025 | OECD](#) report, which examines major economic, political, social, technological and environmental trends affecting all stages and sectors of education.
- [The World Economic Forum Global Risks Report 2025](#), which highlights the challenges posed by climate change, energy transition, geopolitics, economic stability, technological advancements (including cyber), and health risks. The evidence shows that these challenges cause disproportionate negative impacts for the more vulnerable people in societies.

4. Key messages from discussions with CLD Stakeholders

4.1 How can Education Scotland better support Community Learning Development (CLD) stakeholders to contribute to Scotland's Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC)?

4.1.1 Context

The Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC)

Education Scotland is leading a systematic review of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence called the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC), to ensure it remains up to date and relevant for children and young people. It is envisaged that the cycle will take around ten years to complete.

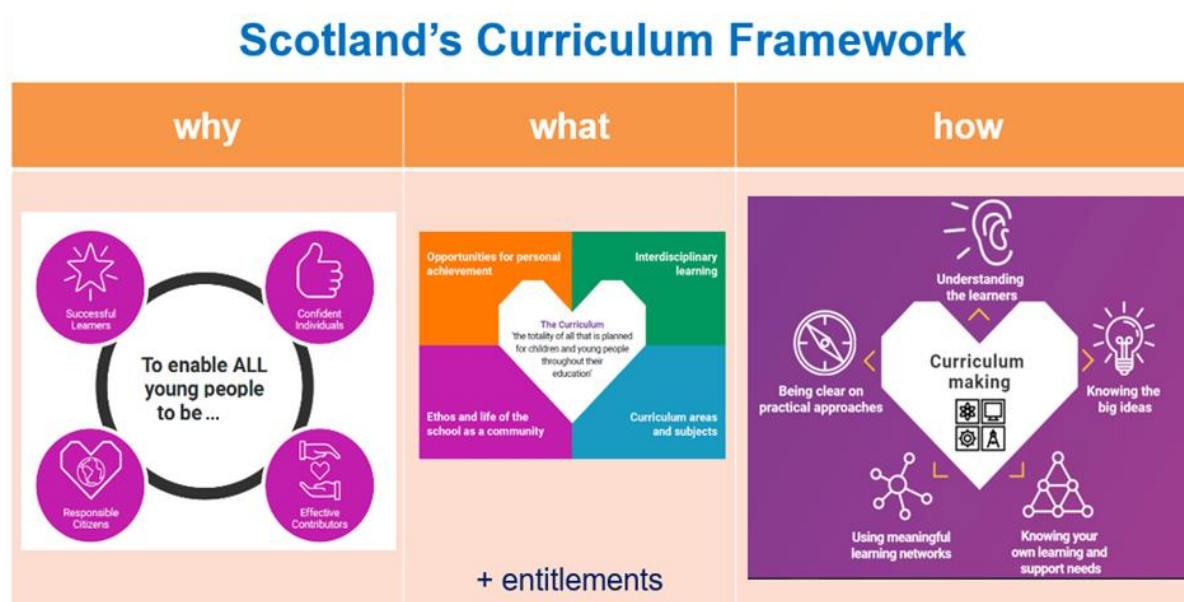
Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence is defined as *“the totality of all that is planned for children and young people throughout their education.”*¹² This broad definition includes all four contexts for learning: curriculum areas and subjects; interdisciplinary learning; the ethos and life of the school; and opportunities for personal achievement.

CLD plays a vital role within this landscape. CLD practitioners support children, young people, adults, and families through inclusive, community-based learning that often takes place beyond formal education settings.

Scotland's Curriculum Framework (fig. 1) is the basis for the CIC work. This includes the purpose, the 'why', as set out in the four capacities; the 'what' as presented by the four contexts for learning; and the key elements for curriculum making as identified in the 'how'.

¹² [Terminology – Curriculum Improvement Cycle](#)

The CIC website provides up-to-date information and shares the ongoing story of the CIC: [Curriculum Improvement Cycle – Education Scotland](#)



Scotland's Curriculum Framework (fig.1)

Since April 2024, Education Scotland has published three discussion papers, outlining the details of the CIC work:

- [Background and A Case For Change : Findings from the Pilot Curriculum Reviews 2023/24](#) November 2024.
- [‘Towards an Evolved Technical Framework.’](#) December 2024.
- [‘Working Together to Make Change Happen’.](#) April 2025

Education Scotland has also developed a shared glossary, called [Language Matters](#), and held webinars and workshops to involve stakeholders.

The CIC model is based on a participatory approach and includes a commitment to involve CLD practitioners alongside children and young people, teachers, lecturers, early years practitioners, parents and families, employers and other key stakeholders.

There has been some very valuable involvement by CLD stakeholders in the CIC work so far and we are keen to support wider involvement from CLD practitioners and learners in CIC projects as they are developed. Feedback will also be sought on a regular basis from 'Reference Groups' with specialist knowledge. The format of Reference Groups will be flexible and draw on existing networks. A CLD Reference Group will be established in 2025-26.

What the CLD Review and HMI feedback tell us

There is no 'CLD curriculum' as such, and every learner's journey starts from where the learner finds themselves, rather than having set expectations about the level of prior learning or experience required to engage in new learning. The course of the journey is largely determined by the learner, as is the pace.' [Learning for All for Life 2024](#)

The Review of CLD highlights that CLD practice is shaped by learners' needs and aspirations. It reinforces that CLD practitioners often work with those furthest from learning and participation, and that their work is collaborative, participatory, and driven by inclusion.

HM Inspectors have found variability in how well CLD is understood and supported across local systems. Support for learners and communities can differ significantly, particularly in areas with high levels of need.¹³

4.1.2 Feedback from stakeholders

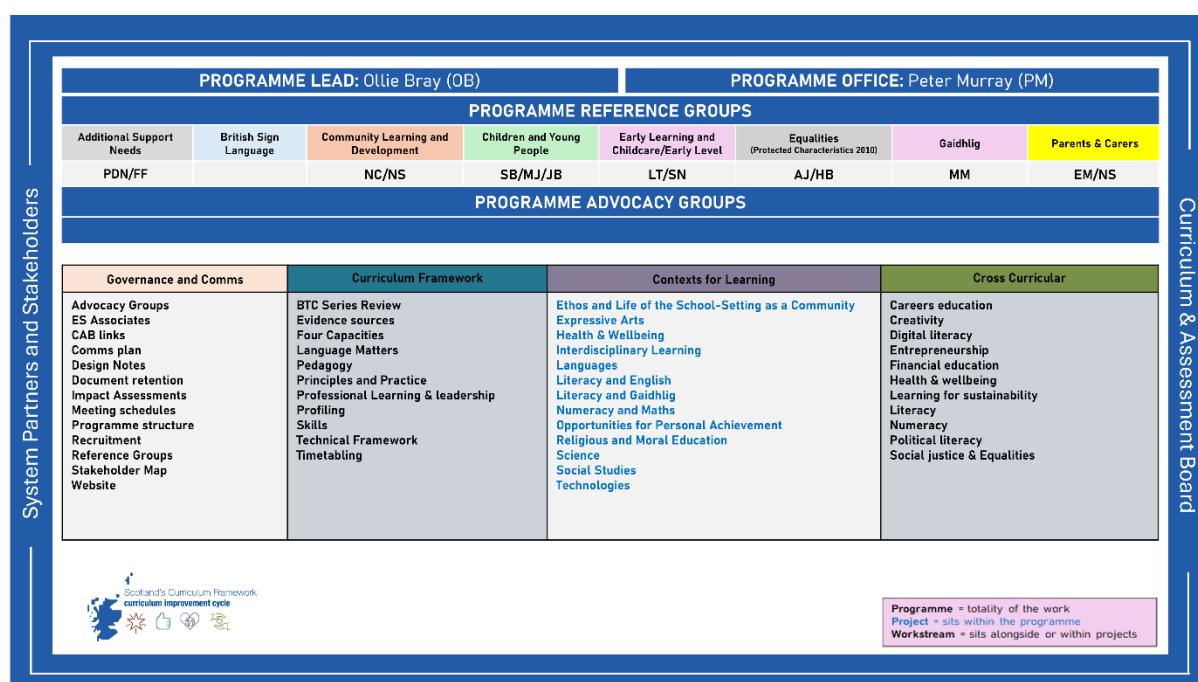
Stakeholder feedback: *"Be clearer that Scotland's learning is broader than schools."*

We asked CLD stakeholders to discuss the following questions:

1. What are the touch points where CLD providers have the most to contribute to and why?

¹³ [Summary findings | Evaluation of community learning and development in Scotland | National thematic inspections | HM Chief Inspector reports and guidance | Inspection and review | Education Scotland](#)

2. What support should Education Scotland give CLD stakeholders to contribute to *Scotland's Curriculum Improvement Cycle*?



Overview of Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC) areas (fig 2)

1. Key CLD Touchpoints with the CIC:

We asked CLD stakeholders to look at an overview of the different areas of the CIC and highlight the areas that CLD does or could have a role to play. This wasn't a scientific exercise but it did give a good indication that there is a wide range of potential CLD contributions to this work:

The Curriculum Framework

The elements within the Framework with the highest votes included the contexts for learning - ***Opportunities for Personal Achievement; Inter-Disciplinary Learning;*** and ***Ethos & Life of School Community. Professional Learning & Leadership;*** and ***Messages from Children and Young People*** were also highlighted by many people.

Core Competencies/ Cross Curricular Areas

The areas that received the most votes included ***Health and Wellbeing; Literacy; Numeracy***; and ***Social Justice & Inequalities; Digital Literacy***; and ***Political Literacy***.

Curriculum Areas:

Health & Wellbeing; Literacy and English; Numeracy and Maths; and ***Expressive Arts*** were highlighted the most.

Governance and Communications

Stakeholders seem to place moderate importance on governance and communication elements, with the highest votes going to ***Impact Assessments*** and the ***Stakeholder Map***.

2. What support should Education Scotland give CLD stakeholders to contribute to *Scotland's Curriculum Improvement Cycle*?

- CLD stakeholders told us that they see themselves as essential to making Scotland's Curriculum more inclusive and relevant but say that they face challenges in being fully integrated into the CIC process and recognised for their contribution.
- Stakeholder feedback consistently reflects the view that the current 3-18 age range of Scotland's Curriculum is too narrow and is at risk of overlooking the learning needs and contributions of families, adult learners and communities.

Recommendations for Education Scotland:

CLD stakeholders are asking Education Scotland for clearer roles, better recognition, stronger opportunities for collaboration, and more support for professional development to fully contribute to the Curriculum Improvement Cycle.

Education Scotland's focus should be on enhancing partnership working, raising the profile of its CLD role, and ensuring that resources and professional recognition are

aligned with their potential to contribute. Specifically, Education Scotland should do more to:

- **Explain the Role and Impact of Community Learning & Development (CLD):** Provide clear guidance and communicate to schools, policymakers, and other stakeholders about how CLD does and can contribute to curriculum development and improvement.
- **Promote Parity of Esteem:** Ensure that CLD professionals are recognised as equal partners in the educational system and given the same level of respect and recognition as teachers and other practitioners.
- **Support Professional Learning:** Offer targeted professional learning opportunities for CLD practitioners to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to curriculum design and implementation.
- **Encourage Collaborative Approaches:** Foster stronger relationships between schools, CLD providers, and other stakeholders.
- **Focus on Lifelong Learning:** Place a greater emphasis on lifelong learning, including adult education and community-based learning, and recognise the role of CLD in these areas.
- **Use transparent communication:** Improve the accessibility and clarity of language used in curriculum discussions to ensure that CLD stakeholders can fully engage with the process.

4.2 Discussion: Looking ahead (e.g. to 2030) what are the top challenges and opportunities likely to be for CLD learners and groups?

CLD Stakeholder feedback: <i>“It’s an exciting time to be part of CLD – but we need to be bold and clear about where we go next.”</i>

4.2.1 Context:

We asked this question to encourage stakeholders to explore how well Community Learning & Development is positioned to meet the evolving needs of learners and communities in a rapidly changing world and what these changes might mean for CLD practice.

We shared some factors that stood out to us including National Census data showing how Scotland's population is changing; the rising cost of living; the lasting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic; and how technological shifts—such as social media and AI—are reshaping lives and learning.

The Independent Review of CLD (2024)

The Review underlines the essential role that Community Learning and Development plays in responding to Scotland's evolving social, economic, and educational landscape. It provides strong evidence that CLD helps to tackle many current challenges:

- Personal, Social and Community Challenges: Migration and Integration; Poverty and the Cost-of-Living Crisis; Digital skills; Barriers to learning due to transport infrastructure and internet connectivity issues
- Health and Wellbeing Challenges: Obesity and 'lifestyle' illnesses; the mental health 'crisis'; Scotland's ageing population
- Education and Economic Challenges: Levels of literacy, numeracy or digital skills; the 'poverty-related attainment gap'; the increase of young people who are 'persistently absent' from school

HM Inspectors have echoed these findings in their evaluations, while also highlighting inconsistency in access and provision across Scotland. Some communities, particularly those facing the greatest disadvantage, continue to experience limited or fragmented support. This reinforces the importance of a national, strategic approach to CLD that looks ahead to the future needs of learners.

4.2.2 Feedback from stakeholders

Challenges	Opportunities
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Poverty & the cost-of-living crisis 2. Mental health & wellbeing 3. Societal changes & demographic shifts (changing demographics, migration patterns) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maximise collaboration & partnerships 2. Make effective use of digital tools & AI

4. Climate change 5. Digital & AI 6. Declining community cohesion 7. Leadership, Funding & Sustainability of CLD	3. Align CLD policy & practice with human rights & sustainability goals 4. Expand alternative learning pathways for young people 5. Shift towards more preventative & long-term approaches 6. Raise the profile of CLD & demonstrate its value more clearly
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Challenges identified:

The most critical challenges identified revolve around poverty, mental health, resource limitations, and geographic inequality. Poverty and the cost-of-living crisis were highlighted by every group in every engagement session. Stakeholders felt that CLD's capacity to respond to these issues are compounded by short-term funding cycles and uncertainty in leadership. They felt that there is a clear need for stable, long-term investment and a strategic approach to address these interconnected issues.

Opportunities for the sector:

Stakeholders also identified significant opportunities in maximising collaboration, making best use of digital tools and AI, expanding alternative learning pathways for young people, and aligning CLD with human rights and sustainability goals. There was also a strong call for a shift towards more preventative and long-term approaches, as well as a need to raise the profile of CLD and demonstrate its value more clearly and coherently, particularly in relation to the vital role the sector has in supporting learner agency.

4.3 Discussion on CLD Practitioner Frameworks

4.3.1 Context

We asked stakeholders to think about the impact of current practice frameworks being used by CLD practitioners. This is just one element of the wider CLD 'eco-

system’ – which also includes the policy and statutory basis for CLD, the CLD Professional Competency Framework, and evaluative frameworks.

We undertook an initial review of practitioner frameworks currently available to the CLD practitioners and found a number across the sector, but they vary significantly. Education Scotland has led on developing some but by no means all of these frameworks. The frameworks have been developed under different policy conditions and timescales, they differ in structure, language, intended use, and levels of support. Some are detailed and outcome-based, while others take a more general or strategic approach.

Current practitioner-focused frameworks include:

- [Adult Literacies Curriculum Framework](#) – hosted by Education Scotland
- [Adult ESOL Curriculum Framework](#) – previously hosted by Education Scotland
- [Family Learning Framework](#) – Hosted by Education Scotland (available for all sectors in education system)
- [Statement on the Nature and Purpose of Youth Work](#) – Hosted by Youth Link Scotland
- [Youth work outcomes and skills Framework](#) – Hosted by Youth Link Scotland
- [National Standards for Community Engagement | SCDC - We believe communities matter](#) – Hosted by the Scottish Community Development Centre

There are some specific examples of recent Education Scotland practitioner frameworks developed such as: Improving Digital Practice in CLD, Gender Balance & Equalities in CLD and the national Youth Voice Toolkit.

4.3.2 Feedback from stakeholders

We asked stakeholders to discuss the following questions:

- How effective are the frameworks we have?
- What's missing?
- How do these practice frameworks impact on learners and communities' experiences, practitioners, and the CLD sector?

Stakeholders told us that:

- Overall CLD practice frameworks were seen as useful but there is demand for practical resources to support delivery of learning and knowledge within the workforce.
- There also appears to be support for further research on the wider CLD ecosystem and a role for Education Scotland in exploring needs of the sector in more detail.
- The Youthwork Outcomes & Skills Framework is an example of an effective practice framework
- Many other CLD frameworks were highlighted as outdated – particularly for adult learning.
- Many had not been adapted to reflect impact of Covid-19
- The overall picture is fragmented, with little strategic alignment or guidance on how the different frameworks link together
- There is a lack of professional learning around the purpose & use of practice frameworks and few “How to” guides for practitioners
- There is no single centralised area for accessing CLD practice frameworks and a lack of accountability for updating / promoting them. Stakeholders would welcome a review of current practice frameworks within the Community Learning & Development ‘Eco-system’
- Most stakeholders also supported further exploration of a Community Learning & Development (CLD) wide, over-arching framework clearly articulating a national CLD approach, targeted learners, outcomes, workforce and funding streams

4.4 Discussion: How should a refocused Education Scotland use its curriculum improvement and professional learning roles to support Community Learning and Development and the aims of the CLD Review?

4.4.1 Context

Education Scotland needs to explore what its improvement priorities should be for the wider Community Learning & Development (CLD) sector in Scotland. We asked

stakeholders to consider what ‘curriculum’ and ‘curriculum improvement’ might mean in a CLD context where ‘the curriculum’ is negotiated between educators and learners or groups.

The *Language Matters* definition of ‘curriculum’ was available for the groups to refer to during the discussion, but they were not asked to comment on it specifically.

The development of skills for learning, life and work has been an ongoing feature of curriculum development in Scotland for many years, presenting both challenges and opportunities. Skills 4.0: Skills Model to Drive Scotland’s Future (Skills Development Scotland, 2018) supported practitioners to make links with the purpose of the curriculum and between learning, life and work.

Through the engagement discussions there was a range of interesting descriptions and uses of the term, but most feedback indicated that using the term ‘Curriculum’ to describe Education Scotland’s support to the Community Learning & Development sector would be problematic.

4.4.2 Feedback from stakeholders

Q1: What should ‘curriculum’ mean in CLD contexts? What should it not mean?

Most feedback indicated that the term ‘curriculum’ can have negative connotations for CLD participants. Comments on the term included: ‘rigid’, ‘schooly’, ‘daunting’, ‘may put off some community learners’, ‘doesn’t fit within the context of CLD’, ‘Doesn’t reflect what we do’ ‘tied to school-based systems’. There was a small minority who did want to ‘reclaim’ the term to promote greater recognition for CLD contributions, particularly in cross-sectoral contexts.

The *Language Matters* definition of ‘curriculum’ was available for the groups to refer to during the discussion and some feedback did point out that the definition is not inclusive of learning with adults and community groups.

Alternative suggestions for CLD contexts included:

- Use terms like “Learning offer,” “scaffolding,” or “broad framework” that supports voluntary involvement, negotiated content, and personalised learning pathways.
- Flexibility and responsiveness to local and individual learning needs were viewed as essential.
- Allow learners to define their goals and progress at their own pace, where the learning journey is co-created with the learners & communities
- Have a strong emphasis on equalities and social justice
- Reflect the lifelong learning process, addressing the needs of both young people & adults

CLD Stakeholder feedback: *“An ask would be that the Education Scotland of the future has a strapline that profiles and makes visible the lifelong learning / CLD role that it has.”*

Q2: What could a long-term cycle of improvement look like in CLD contexts?

CLD Stakeholder feedback: *“CLD services are flexible and reactive but also precarious... funding can disappear.”*

- There was a strong desire for Education Scotland to position itself clearly within the lifelong learning agenda, signalling that Community Learning & Development is not only a support to schools but a parallel contributor to Scotland’s lifelong learning and community empowerment priorities.
- A dominant theme was the need for a flexible and long-term improvement cycle, recognising that Community Learning & Development operates in rapidly changing environments with shifting funding and focussed on the changing needs of communities.
- There was consistent emphasis on involving a wide range of voices—particularly learners, practitioners, and third sector partners—in any improvement process. Many highlighted the value of co-production and ensuring that any improvement cycle is not seen as top-down.
- Short-term funding cycles and fragmented investment were repeatedly cited as major barriers to long-term improvement. There was a clear demand for a more

stable and strategic funding environment that enables long-term thinking and planning. A 10-year cycle was seen as unrealistic and potentially counterproductive; however suggestions were made for 3-year cycles with regular, proportionate reviews and a 'living document' approach to any CLD frameworks.

- Rather than a prescriptive 'curriculum', support should be shaped around key thematic issues such as health and wellbeing, poverty, digital inclusion, and employability. These themes could act as collaborative entry points for cross-disciplinary practice and improvement.
- Participants also stressed the importance of national support from Education Scotland in gathering and sharing evidence of effective practice.

Q3: How should Education Scotland's professional learning (PL) role support a CLD improvement cycle?

CLD Stakeholder feedback: *"What is the offer? How do we access it? What are the benefits?"*

- The current professional learning offer is valued. A key theme across responses however is the lack of clarity around Education Scotland's current role in supporting CLD, with stakeholders expressing a need for better visibility, coherence, and alignment with sector needs
- There was a call for Education Scotland to better align its professional learning offer with inspection findings and identified practitioner needs across Scotland.
- Many stakeholders saw Education Scotland as having an important role as a connector: to bring together practitioners across disciplines, to share effective practice, build collective understanding, and create joint solutions.
- There were also frequent calls to address barriers like geography, time, and digital access.

Q4: What needs to happen next?

CLD Stakeholder feedback: *“This shouldn't be the end of it. If a 'box is just ticked' this isn't enough. We need action as well as talking.”*

The key messages from stakeholders were that a refocused Education Scotland needs to:

- Maintain and improve its current support to CLD sector
- Show stronger commitment to lifelong learning
- Work with CLD partners to understand learner and sector needs
- Be clear about what support is CLD-wide and what is more relevant to component parts of CLD (i.e. youth work, adult learning, community development)
- Avoid tokenism and consultation without change. Focus on delivering on tangible actions
- Be realistic about funding challenges for the CLD sector and avoid overpromising
- Keep the conversation with CLD stakeholders going and communicate next steps clearly

5. Our next steps

Education Scotland officers have been using the CLD stakeholder feedback to inform internal planning and discussions with Scottish Government policy colleagues. As Education Scotland's role changes, we will continue to make use of the feedback to inform the following next steps:

1. We will focus on how Education Scotland supports the Community Learning & Development (CLD) sector's input across key areas of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC) programme, including:
 - Supporting and monitoring CLD engagement in relevant parts of the CIC, recognising the priorities and the capacity issues identified by CLD stakeholders.
 - Identifying opportunities for learners in CLD settings to meaningfully participate in the CIC.
 - Where appropriate, supporting synergies between the CIC priorities and key thematic issues for the CLD sector identified by stakeholders, such as health and wellbeing, poverty, digital inclusion, and employability.
2. We will develop our national professional learning (PL) offer to CLD leaders and practitioners. We will do this by maximizing professional learning opportunities and increasing accessibility to the offer through our [CLD Professional Learning webpage](#) and other communications.
3. We will explore the synergies between Education Scotland's refocused role and the improvement needs of Community Learning & Development practitioners
4. We will work with Scottish Government and the Community Learning & Development Strategic Leadership Group (SLG) to identify and develop how a refocused Education Scotland can support the implementation of the recommendations from the Independent Review of CLD. The SLG has agreed its immediate priorities for 2025/26: [Community Learning and Development Strategic Leadership Group minutes: June 2025 - gov.scot](#)

5. We will continue conversations about Education Scotland's role with a wider range of CLD stakeholders and learners by publishing this discussion paper and exploring the issues discussed further. This will involve continued research internationally to gather evidence and learn from other countries.

6. Questions for further discussion

Stakeholder feedback: *‘Keep the conversation with CLD stakeholders going and communicate next steps clearly.’*

Our aim in publishing this paper is to share the feedback from our CLD stakeholders so far and to encourage ongoing discussions. If you would like to discuss the findings with us, please get in touch with your [Education Scotland CLD contact](#). Here are some questions that may help with those ongoing discussions:

General

- What are your reflections on the emerging messages in this paper?
- What do you think the top priorities should be for Education Scotland as it considers this feedback?
- Are there messages for you or your organisation?

CLD and the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (Section 4.1)

- Do you agree with the feedback from CLD stakeholders that the CLD sector is “essential to making Scotland’s Curriculum more inclusive and relevant”?
- What areas of Scotland’s Curriculum do you see CLD having the biggest contributions to make?
- How should Education Scotland focus support for increased CLD involvement in the Curriculum Improvement Cycle?
- CLD stakeholders told us that we should build stronger links between the aims of Scotland’s Curriculum and lifelong learning. What do you think about this?

Focusing on the issues that matter to learners and groups (Section 4.2)

- What will be the most important issues for learners and groups in your communities over the next few years?
- How should Education Scotland ensure that the issues that matter to communities are at the core of our CLD support?
- What would a national CLD practice framework look like - to support coherence, accountability, and impact across all parts of the sector?

Supporting CLD practitioners (Section 4.3)

- Do we need to regularly review/update existing practice frameworks for CLD practitioners? If so, what areas of practice would you start with?
- CLD stakeholders told ES that we should work our CLD partners to explore the potential for a shared, sector-wide CLD framework. What views do you have on this?
- How can we ensure that practitioner frameworks remain relevant, inclusive, and responsive to current and future challenges facing learners and communities?
- What strategic actions are needed to embed the use of practice frameworks in professional learning, planning, and evaluation across the CLD ecosystem?

Next steps for a refocused Education Scotland (Section 4.4)

- What could a long-term national improvement programme for CLD look like?
- How should ES involve learners, communities, and practitioners in the development and delivery of their support to CLD practitioners?
- How could Education Scotland develop its professional learning offer to reflect the feedback from our CLD stakeholders?
- Who else should ES be discussing this feedback with?

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