

Scottish Approach to Change

National Symposium

Executive Summary of the Final Report

Healthcare Improvement Scotland

March 2026

Executive summary

Scotland's health and care system does not lack intent or expertise when it comes to change. The challenge is often more fundamental – those leading it are navigating a range of methodologies, frameworks and expectations that can feel disparate and disconnected from the realities of work. The result is often a gap between the ambition for transformation and the success of delivering it on the ground.

The Scottish Approach to Change ('the Approach'; see Figure 1), developed by Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS), is a response to this challenge. It brings together established disciplines – such as quality improvement and service design – into a single, coherent approach that is intended to be both rigorous enough to operate in complex systems and accessible enough to be used by a wide range of people, not just specialists. It is not designed as a prescriptive set of steps, but as a way of thinking and working – it's an approach that emphasises behaviours, relationships, learning and meaningful involvement as much as process.

Recognising the scale of this ambition, HIS commissioned an external review to help 'stress-test' the Approach. This culminated in a national symposium in February 2026, bringing together 50 participants from across the health and care system, including practitioners, system leaders, academics and third sector representatives. Participants were

invited not to endorse the Approach, but to challenge it – to explore what is helpful, what needs to be strengthened and what could get in the way of it being successfully adopted and making impact across the system. The process was designed to surface both consensus and tension, drawing on 'deep democracy' principles to ensure less-heard perspectives were included alongside dominant views.

The symposium saw active and constructive engagement from people who want this to succeed. Participants recognised the value of the Approach, particularly its emphasis on people-led change, its alignment with the non-linear and complex nature of change and its potential to create a shared language across sectors. Importantly, the Approach was widely understood not as a 'framework to be implemented', but as an approach which encourages a shift in mindset and behaviour as much as offering advice on key steps. It is seen as a 'different' way of approaching change.

At the same time, participants were clear about what will be required for the Approach to succeed in practice. This includes ensuring it is practical and usable in real-world conditions; supporting people to understand how to apply it through examples, learning and peer exchange; and enabling ownership to sit genuinely across the system.

Executive summary

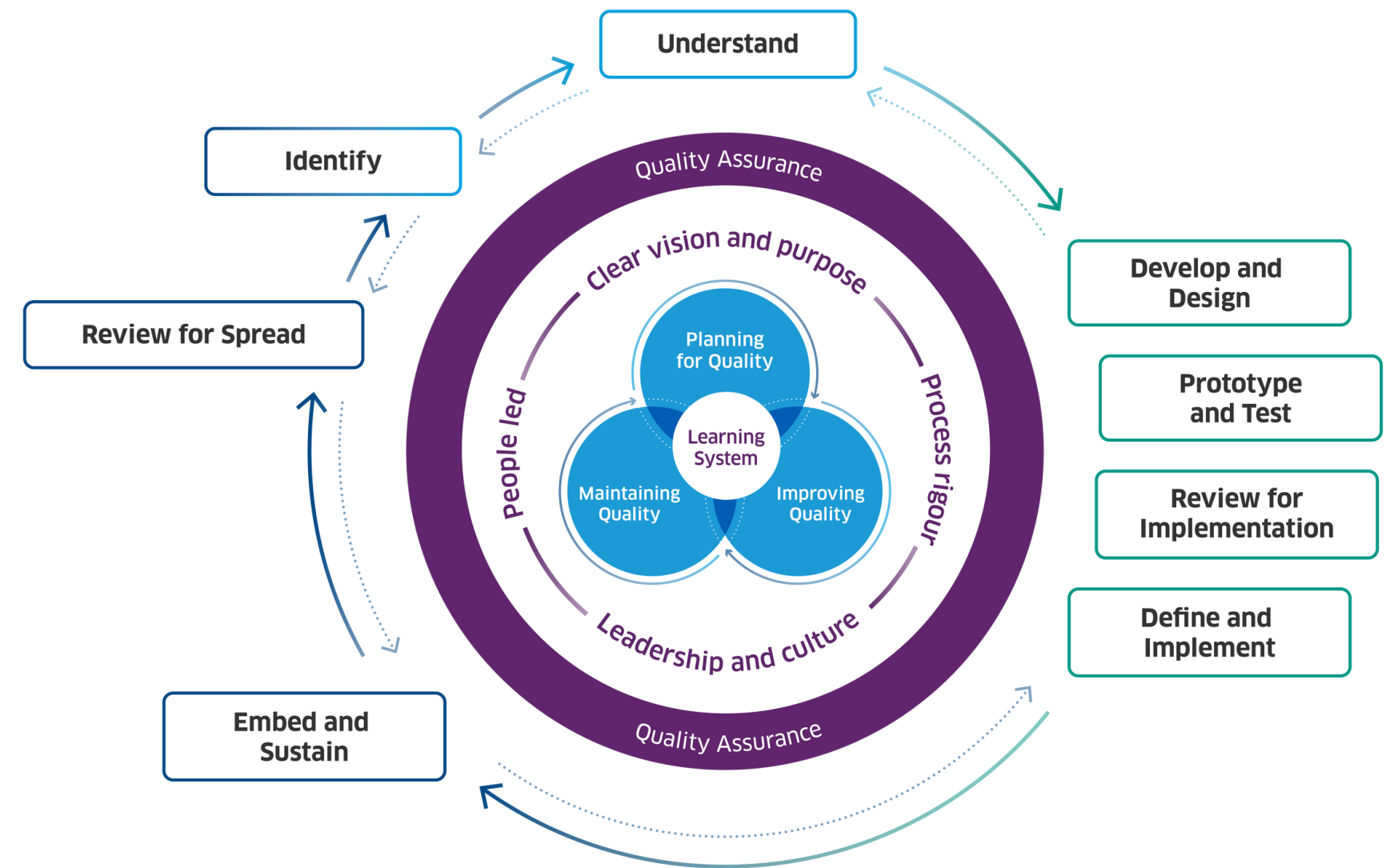
It was also stated that the Approach must avoid encouraging ‘tickbox’ compliance, and rather become a real, lived ‘way of working’.

Participants also highlighted a set of important tensions that will shape how the Approach is taken forward in practice. These include balancing flexibility with usability, ambition with system constraints, and shared ownership with coherence. Alongside this, there was a clear articulation of what ‘success’ would look like – this included the Approach being routinely used to shape change, learning being shared openly and a shift in ownership and agency across the system.

The evidence from this process shows that the system is not waiting to be convinced of the need for a different approach to change – but it is looking for clarity, consistency and leadership in how that approach is taken forward and embedded. The ‘key asks’ in this report reflect what participants said would be needed for the Scottish Approach to Change to be adopted and impactful. Alongside these, a set of provocations is included to support further reflection on more complex challenges.

The opportunity now is significant. The policy context is aligned, the appetite across the system is clear and the foundations of the Approach are strong. The task ahead is to take visible, sustained action which supports the Scottish Approach to Change to become actively used and owned across the system.

Figure 1: The Scottish Approach to Change Framework



Executive summary – headline findings from the symposium

There is strong system appetite for a different approach to change

Participants did not need convincing of the problem. There is clear recognition that current approaches to change are often fragmented, technical and sometimes disconnected from realities of practice. The Scottish Approach to Change is seen as a credible, timely response.

The Approach is understood as a shift in mindset and behaviour

The Approach is valued as a way of thinking and working, rather than a set of steps to follow. Its emphasis on behaviours, relationships, learning and meaningful involvement was highlighted as a strength and point of differentiation.

The emphasis on people-led change and leadership and culture is both welcome and challenging

Participants strongly supported this focus. However, it represents a significant shift from how change is often experienced, and will require practical guidance, system support and changes in how power and decision-making operate.

The Approach reflects the reality of change in complex systems

Its emphasis on non-linearity, learning and iteration resonated strongly. Participants valued that it reflects how change actually happens, including more complex forms of change such as redesign and decommissioning.

Success will depend on translation into practice

There is strong alignment in principle, but participants agreed and were clear that success depends on whether the Approach is:

- easy to understand and use for all people working in the system;
- demonstrably valuable in practice;
- supported by the right conditions (e.g. time, capacity, leadership, incentives);
- genuinely owned across the system.

The system is ready but looking for clarity, consistency and leadership

The system is looking for clear signals about how the Approach should be used, how it connects to existing work and how it will be supported and sustained.

Executive summary – key asks for stakeholders to consider

For Healthcare Improvement Scotland

1. Communicate the ‘value proposition’ of the Approach more strongly

Clearly articulate the value of using the Scottish Approach to Change for different users and contexts. This can be supported by case studies and narratives that answer: “What difference did using the Approach make compared to not using it?”

2. Continue testing and refining the Approach

Ensure the Approach remains clear, accessible and easy to understand for a wide range of audiences. Continue simplifying language, explaining key terms and providing resources through multiple channels. Consider a plain language review with likely users who are ‘under pressure’.

3. Provide further guidance on how to use the Approach

Develop clear ‘entry points’ and specific guidance for different contexts. This should support those working under pressure to understand where to start, how to apply the Approach and what ‘good’ looks like in their situation – without making it overly prescriptive.

4. Develop and share case studies, including where things didn’t work

Prioritise case studies that show how the Approach has been applied across different contexts and the value it added in practice. Include complex and high-pressure change, and complement formal case studies with shorter ‘learning logs’ which capture what was tried and what was learned.

5. Continue to build and convene the learning community

Continue evolving the Approach through learning from practice and strengthen the learning community by capturing and sharing insights, and supporting peer learning, networks and communities of practice. HIS should act as a ‘convenor’ rather than an owner of learning.

6. Model the principles of the Approach

Ensure the ongoing development and rollout of the Approach reflects the same principles it promotes – openness to feedback, collaboration, iterative development and being meaningfully people-led. Make learning visible and involve a wide range of voices.

7. Publish a theory of change, measurement framework and formal evaluation

Develop and share a theory of change and measurement framework which sets out what ‘success’ looks like over time, how impact will be assessed and how learning will be used. A transparent evaluation process will be welcomed.

8. Design a dedicated ‘middle management’ engagement process

Create a specific engagement process for middle managers, recognising their critical role in translating strategy into practice. Provide space to explore pressures and what support is needed to apply the Approach effectively.

Executive summary – key asks for stakeholders to consider

For system leaders and national partners

9. Support a consistent narrative about how change should happen

Reinforce the value of the Scottish Approach to Change and align messaging across the system. Review existing frameworks and expectations to reduce confusion and ensure the Approach is not undermined by conflicting asks and expectations.

10. Help create the conditions for teams to lead change

Recognise that success depends not only on the design of the Approach, but on whether people have the conditions to apply it in practice. This includes time, capacity, capability, supportive leadership and alignment of priorities.

11. Promote cross-sector collaboration

Position the Approach as a shared framework for collaboration across health, social care, the third sector and wider public services. Use existing networks and routes to support adoption.

12. Consider how performance is managed

Be deliberate about how the Scottish Approach to Change is referenced in performance and governance systems. Avoid reinforcing compliance or 'tick-box' behaviours, and ensure alignment with its principles.

13. Make ownership visible and safe

Actively signal that organisations and individuals are trusted to adapt and apply the Approach in their own context. Support this through leadership approaches, messaging and actively creating space for learning and challenge.

For organisations and practitioners

14. Use the Approach, name it and share the learning

Apply the Scottish Approach to Change in practice, reflect on what is learned and share insights, including what was difficult or did not work. Teams are invited not only to use the Approach, but contribute to the wider evidence-base.