

Scottish Approach to Change

Information for Senior Leaders

(This resource pack is targeted at Chief Executives, Chief Officers, Directors, Associate Directors, Heads of Department, Heads of Service, and General Managers but it will also be relevant to anyone in a leadership role)

September 2026

Leading quality health and care for Scotland

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Foreword

Scotland's health and social care system is operating in a period of significant challenge. Rising demand, changing population needs, workforce pressures, and financial constraints require senior leaders to achieve what can sometimes feel like competing priorities: delivering safe, effective services today while transforming systems to meet the needs of tomorrow. Running the current system well has long been the core focus of leadership. Today, success depends on our ability to do both.

For many years, improvement and transformation have often relied on the commitment and expertise of a small number of individuals, working to deliver change alongside the demands of their day job. However, the scale and complexity of the challenges we now face require a more fundamental shift. Change can no longer be viewed as a separate activity. It must become part of how we lead, learn, and deliver quality every day.

The Scottish Approach to Change provides a framework for navigating this new reality. It recognises that sustainable change happens when organisations have a clear vision and purpose, are genuinely people-led, foster collaborative and empowering leadership and culture, and are supported by process rigour through effective governance and decision-making. At the heart of these interconnected enablers sits a learning system, enabling organisations to understand what is working, respond to emerging challenges, and continuously adapt and improve.

It recognises that while some challenges can be addressed through planning, control, and predictable processes, others require us to work within complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence. Today's leaders must be able to navigate both.

This resource pack has been developed to support you in applying the Scottish Approach to Change in a practical way within your role. It is intended to help you create the conditions in which quality, safety, improvement, and transformation are not separate ambitions, but part of a connected system.

The challenges facing health and social care are significant, but so too is the opportunity. By embracing the interconnected enablers of quality and change, senior leaders can help create a more sustainable, responsive, and person-centred future for the people of Scotland.

What is change?

Change is the transition of an organisation, pathway, service, or process from a current state (how things are done today), through a transition state (the change), into a future state (a new way of operating).

Change can be a positive thing which leads to improvements in the way things are done and the outcomes that are achieved for the people who need, use, deliver, and support services. Change can reveal new opportunities and lead to innovative solutions.

Change can be small in scale, or it might be large scale organisation-wide change. In health and social care change might look like:

- **Process improvements** – such as changing the way waiting lists are managed
- **New service models** – such as moving to a community-led model of care
- **Pathway redesign** – such as redesigning urgent care pathways
- **Whole system transformation** – such as implementing value-based health and care across an organisation
- **Culture change** – such as shifting towards an enabling culture focused on Getting It Right For Everyone

It is important to remember that sometimes we know where we're trying to get to, but with more complex change, the way forward, and sometimes even the end point, emerges as we learn and adapt.

Delivering effective change

To deliver effective change it is essential that the process of change is underpinned by **a robust approach**.

A robust approach to change increases the chance that change will be successful by:

- Ensuring there is a **clear “why”** that is aligned to the organisation's vision and purpose and is effectively communicated to the people affected by the change
- **Involving people** in the planning, design, and delivery of the change to increase support and buy-in
- Ensuring there is a **clear plan** in place to implement, embed and sustain the change
- Ensuring that processes are in place to **learn and adapt** throughout the change

It is critical that change is sufficiently resourced (time, people, and funding) – **effective change requires investment**, however there are high returns when change is done well.

The role of a senior leader in change

As a senior leader, you play a key role in driving and governing change in your organisation, this includes:

- **Setting a clear direction** – helping people to understand what needs to change, why it matters, and what success looks like
- **Showing visible support** – being seen backing the change, talking about it regularly, and demonstrating that it is a priority
- **Removing barriers** – helping teams overcome obstacles, make decisions quickly, and ensure they have the time and resources they need
- **Listening to and involving people** – creating opportunities for people who deliver services (staff), people and communities who use services, and other stakeholders to contribute ideas and shape the change
- **Building a positive culture for change** – encouraging learning and continuous improvement, helping people to feel confident to try new approaches
- **Understanding that many of the challenges facing health and social care can't be led or solved by one leader or organisation alone** – recognising in these more complex areas, leadership itself needs to be collective

These themes are explored further in the following pages on quality management and the enablers of quality and change.

What does it mean to be an organisation that does change well?

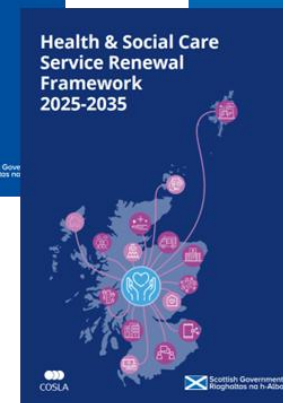
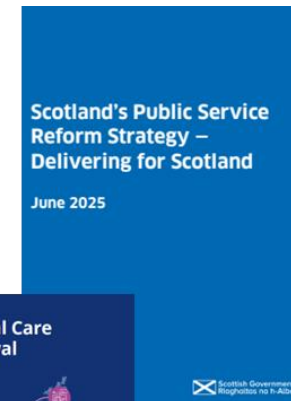
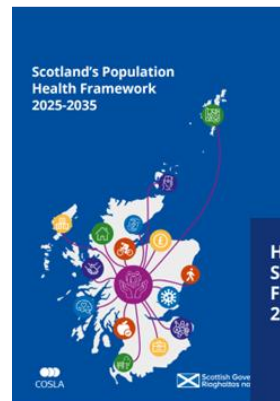
- **Embracing continuous change** – recognising the need to continually change and adapt in response to a rapidly changing environment and the needs of people, populations, and communities.
- **Being a learning organisation** – data and intelligence from a range of sources is used to learn and improve, in addition to managing performance.
- **Being curious** – asking questions to help identify the need for change or to challenge changes that are already underway. Honest and open conversations are encouraged.
- **Involving people** – people who need, use, deliver, and support services and communities are meaningfully involved in change. Changes focus on how services can be improved to better meet the needs of the people we serve.
- **Change and improvement is everyone's responsibility** – change is not seen as the responsibility of specialist teams but instead is owned across the organisation (including by the executive team and the Board).
- **Empowering teams** – people working at all levels of the organisation are empowered to find solutions to problems and to make decisions based on their knowledge.

What is driving the need for change?

Health and social care organisations are facing an unprecedented volume and pace of change arising from NHS renewal, service challenges, and wider reform. There is a need to respond to three key drivers of change:

- **Policy direction** – the Scottish Government has a clear vision for the future of health and social care in Scotland. This vision prioritises prevention, care designed around people, community delivery, population planning, and digital and technological innovation. This vision is set out in the following documents:
 - Health and Social Care Renewal Framework
 - Scotland's Population Health Framework
 - Scotland's Public Service Reform Strategy
- **Resource pressures** – health and social care in Scotland is facing ongoing financial constraints and workforce shortages.
- **Rising demand and need** – increasing complexity of care and multi-morbidity means there is an additional pressure to move away from single condition care.

The Scottish Approach to Change is recognised as an integral part of delivering the renewal agenda by providing a clear and coherent method for change.



Introducing the Scottish Approach to Change

There is often an implementation gap between policy ambitions and reality. Evidence shows that a significant contributing factor to this is that change is not always done well in health and social care. The Scottish Government commissioned HIS to develop a Scottish Approach to change to underpin delivery of health and social care renewal and reform.

The Scottish Approach to Change aims to:

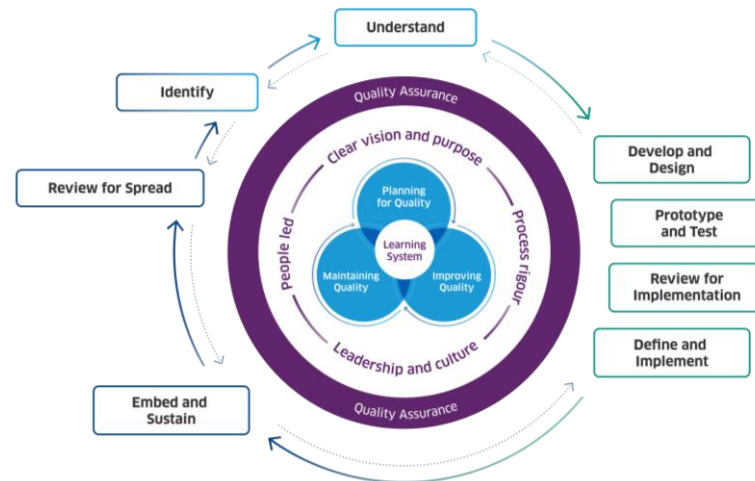
- Create a clear pathway to support everyone to do change well

It does this by:

- Bringing together siloed change methods into a single approach, showing how they can be used together
- Translating theory into a practical, coherent tool
- Creating a universal language for change

The Scottish Approach to Change can be used to:

- Manage discreet change projects
- Provide an organisational framework for managing quality and change



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The Scottish Approach to Change is built around a quality management system comprising planning, improving, maintaining and assuring quality. The approach has five enablers and eight steps. Together, this creates a framework for successful and lasting change.

The enablers of quality and change

The [enablers of quality and change](#) create the conditions that support successful and sustainable improvement. They do this by aligning people, processes, and leadership around a shared purpose.

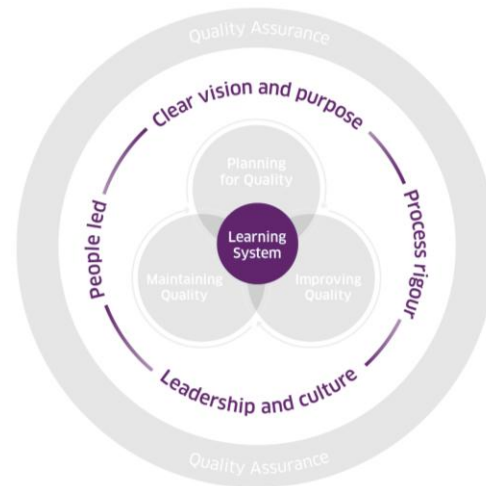
The enablers of quality and change are:

- **Clear vision and purpose** – providing direction, motivation, and alignment
- **Leadership and culture** – setting a vision, and inspiring and empowering others
- **People led** – meaningfully engaging and involving people to help meet their needs
- **Process rigour** – going through a structured process to ensure high-quality outcomes
- **Learning system** – sharing learning and knowledge to support improvement and better outcomes

Evidence shows that without these enablers, change can:

- Face more systemic challenges and organisational barriers
- Struggle to gain support and make progress
- Be more challenging to sustain over time

Successful change relies on having all five enablers in place.



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The most critical role you play as a senior leaders is to create, value and embed the enablers of quality and change

- By setting a clear direction, putting people at the centre of change, fostering the right culture, and supporting a rigorous approach to learning and improvement, you create the conditions that are essential for successful and sustainable change

Clear vision and purpose



Define a **clear vision and purpose** that drives your change, it:

- Unites, and builds momentum behind a single direction
- Is tangible and actionable, it doesn't shy away from hard choices

As a senior leader, you play a key role in:

- Defining a clear vision and purpose for the organisation, aligned to strategic priorities at a national level
- Prioritising and deciding where resources will be allocated, taking shared ownership for tough choices
- Developing strategies and plans for change that clearly drive towards the organisation's vision and purpose
- Supporting an organisational commitment to the agreed values that underpin your vision and purpose
- Clearly communicating and continually reinforcing the vision and purpose to the organisation, including the reasons for change
- Collaborating across the system (such as social care, housing, or the third sector) to develop your vision and purpose

Key questions to consider:

- How might you bring together a range of information and insights to inform your vision and purpose?
- How might you consider what changes you need to make and how to shift away from things that are not working?
- How have you involved people and stakeholders in setting your vision and purpose?
- How have you built consensus?

Leadership and culture



Create the conditions for change to thrive through setting the right **culture and leadership**, it:

- Sets the vision, empowers others, and unblocks barriers to change
- Sees leaders stepping into change, playing an active role

As a senior leader, you play a key role in:

- Leading with courage and compassion
- Modelling behaviours and promoting a culture that focuses on learning and embedding all five enablers
- Empowering people to make changes and encouraging innovation
- Supporting and enabling change by removing barriers, solving problems, and prioritising resources
- Collaborating and building trust across sectors and with colleagues, partners, communities, and people
- Taking active and shared responsibility for success

What does effective leadership in change look like?

- Having confidence in uncertainty and complexity
- Valuing collaboration and collective leadership
- Harnessing the energy and knowledge of others
- Building strong, trusting relationships, asking questions, and listening
- Making decisions based on evidence and the wider picture
- Being calm, adaptive, and holding your nerve to see change have impact over time
- Building trust with others to try new things
- Being visible and present

Key questions to consider:

- How are you actively modelling leadership behaviours (including the enablers of quality and change) in daily operations?
- How are you actively empowering and supporting people to deliver change?
- How are you bringing people together across organisational, professional, and sector boundaries to make sense of challenges and act together – especially in complex areas where the challenge cannot be solved by a single organisation?
- How are you collaborating and making connections across the system to make proposed changes a reality?

People led



Take a **people-led** approach by inviting people to design and deliver change together, it values:

- Meaningful engagement as vital, not an additional 'thing to do'
- People articulating their own needs, and supports them to do so meaningfully
- The needs of people over the needs of the system – services belong to people

As a senior leader, you play a key role in:

- Creating organisational strategies that focus on people, community, prevention, and population planning
- Ensuring a continual focus on reducing inequalities in the delivery of strategies and plans
- Ensuring processes are in place for meaningful engagement with people and communities
- Ensuring people's rights are at the centre of policies and practices
- Ensuring that people and communities who use services are involved in the planning and design of changes
- Ensuring that your staff, their representatives (like trade unions), your partner organisations and commissioned services are involved in the planning and design of changes
- Empowering people, being responsive to what matters most to people in communities

Key questions to consider:

- How are you creating a shared understanding of what it means to be people led across the organisation?
- How much weight is given to the voices, needs, and wishes of people in communities?
- Is there meaningful, ongoing engagement with people (communities and colleagues) – instead of infrequent consultation?
- Is there meaningful, ongoing engagement with your staff, partners, and commissioned services?
- To what extent and how are people involved in change?

Process rigour



Outline a **rigorous** approach to how you understand change, it:

- Adds clarity to what you are doing, when and why – it brings calm to the noise of change
- Helps increase confidence in decision making, supporting momentum in uncertainty and complexity

As a senior leader, you play a key role in:

- Using system intelligence (from a wide range of sources) to inform decision-making when making changes
- Being curious about what data and intelligence is telling you, asking curious questions about what is behind the data
- Ensuring governance processes create momentum for change through effective, efficient, and transparent decision-making
- Ensuring the right resources and processes are in place to add rigour to change projects/programmes (e.g. project management)
- Ensuring robust commissioning arrangements are in place to support implementation of your changes
- Ensuring all statutory and regulatory requirements have been met

Key questions to consider:

- Are your processes clear and flexible to ensure you consider all relevant factors on a consistent basis?
- Are your processes flexible enough to enable you to adapt depending on new information and emerging needs?
- Are you curious about what data and information is telling you to help you to identify what changes are needed?
- Are there systems in place which connect functions across the organisation? (i.e. strategic planning, governance, risk)?

Learning system



Embed a **learning** culture to support your change programme sustainably, it:

- Is a superpower – it unlocks knowledge, solutions, energy, momentum, and brilliance
- Requires commitment, it challenges engrained values and behaviours, and needs continued practice

As a senior leader, you play a key role in:

- Cultivating whole-system understanding and learning across sector boundaries
- Promoting a learning culture where people are safe to experiment
- Creating spaces for people to deliberately come together to learn
- Building supportive learning environments that capture and learn from lessons from both success and failure
- Being curious about data and evidence, and using this primarily to support learning and improvement in addition to monitoring or managing performance
- Using governance and management spaces to collectively sense-make outcome data

Key questions to consider:

- Are teams and staff at all levels empowered/permissioned to put learning into action?
- Do you have a culture of psychological safety where people feel free to speak up about what is and is not working?
- What systems and processes are in place to hear learning from the front line and act on it?
- Are there systems and processes in place to celebrate success when things go well?

Quality management

Quality management supports delivery of high-quality care in health and social care organisations.

It is essential to both day-to-day operations and the delivery of effective change.

Quality management is a coordinated and interconnected approach to:

- **Planning for quality** – proactive planning and prioritisation of services and processes
- **Improving quality** – a systematic and coordinated approach to making services or processes better
- **Maintaining quality** – routine monitoring to assess and maintain performance
- **Quality assurance** – internal and external processes to ensure services are operating effectively and providing quality care



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As a senior leader, you play a key role in:

Planning for quality in change

- Identifying where there is a need for change and translating this into a clear vision
- Allocating sufficient resources (time, people, funding) to support change to be done well

Improving quality

- Developing change and improvement capacity and capability, and empowering teams to make change happen
- Removing barriers to change and improvement and enabling experimentation and learning

Maintaining quality

- Using data for to learn and make decisions to drive change, not retrospective performance reporting

Quality Assurance

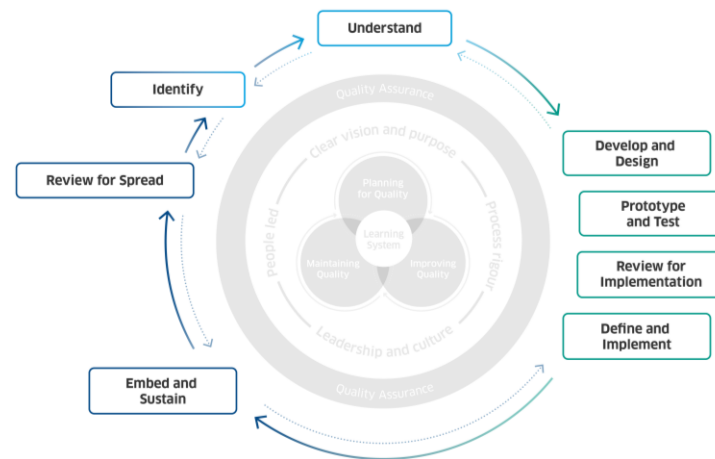
- Ensuring governance systems are functioning effectively to provide confidence in how change is being delivered

The steps of change

The eight [steps of change](#) provide a practical structured approach and create momentum for successful change. As a senior leader, you can play a key role in supporting the following steps of change:

- **Understand** – often, due to pressure to make change happen quickly, there can be a tendency to skip the understand step and jump to a solution. You can support this step by ensuring that change delivery teams are permitted to take time to fully understand the problem, and their readiness for change before proceeding.
- **Develop and design** – at times change delivery teams can end up in “analysis paralysis” (spending too much time understanding and not moving to action). You can support change delivery teams to move past the understand step and into the develop and design step by providing reassurance about what is “good enough”.
- **Embed and sustain** – it can be challenging to embed and sustain change so that it becomes business as usual. You can support this step by ensuring that change has a “landing pad” (the operational and cultural support required for new processes to survive implementation) to help it to be embedded and sustained.
- **Review for spread** – sometime when a change is successful in one area there can be a tendency to “lift and shift” the solution to other settings or contexts. You have a key role in encouraging change delivery teams to stop and reflect on the suitability for spread and what about it could be spread. Without this step, you risk trying to implement a change or approach in a context that won’t work.

Further detail on your role in the steps of change can be found on the next page.



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As a senior leader, you have a key role in:

- Providing time, resources (people and funding), and permission for change delivery teams to follow the steps of change
- Ensuring organisational capacity and capability is in place for change delivery teams to follow the steps of change

How can you support the steps of change?

Identify		- Reviewing performance/outcome data, population needs, and feedback from people who use services to identify the need for change - Aligning local service delivery issues with national goals and renewal/reform requirements set by the Scottish Government
Understand		- Providing teams delivering change take with the time and space to do the understand step before jumping to a solution - Encouraging teams to consider their readiness for change – as a team, service, or organisation – considering each of the enablers - Supporting teams to gain buy in from the range of stakeholders that will be critical to the successful delivery of the change
Develop and design		- Ensuring that potential solutions that are developed and design remain aligned with the organisation’s vision and purpose - Ensuring that people who use and deliver services are involved in the development and design of potential changes - Supporting teams to gain buy in from the range of stakeholders that will be critical to the successful delivery of the change
Prototype and test		- Allocating sufficient time, capacity, capability, and funding to enable changes to be tested effectively and efficiently - Helping to clear operational, financial, or bureaucratic barriers that impact fast-paced testing - Creating a culture where it is safe to experiment and learn
Review for implementation		- Review quantitative and qualitative data to verify if the test of change met its original aims - Ensuring the impact of any unintended consequences of the test of change are identified and considered - Ensuring governance processes enable timely decision-making about whether a change should be fully implemented
Define and implement		- Allocating sufficient time, capacity, capability, and funding to enable the change to be fully implemented - Helping to clear operational, financial, or bureaucratic barriers that impact implementation - Ensuring the change has been effectively communicated to the people who will deliver and use the new service
Embed and sustain		- Ensuring that change has a “landing pad” (the operational and cultural support required for new processes to survive implementation) to help it to be embedded and sustained within the organisation - Helping to protect the time, relationships, and other things that keep the change working
Review for spread		- Ensuring that changes that work are not simply “lifted and shifted” into new contexts - Encouraging teams to stop and reflect on the suitability for spread and what about it could be spread - Ensuring that a new change cycle is initiated (understand, develop and design, etc.) to spread changes to new contexts

Case study: reviewing governance processes

A review of “how it feels to take change through local governance processes” in an NHS Board in Scotland found that governance process frequently create inertia and did not enable the action required to support transformational change in the health and social care system. The review found:

- Approval via governance processes did not translate to action as there was not sufficient buy-in across teams to enable successful delivery of the agreed change.
- Governance processes are centred on signing off changes rather than active leadership and governance during the implementation of changes. Active leadership and governance can support challenges to be identified and overcome. Without it, progress can be slower and less impactful.
- Staff morale is affected by the experience of participating in governance processes – meaning greater hesitancy in wanting to undertake change and less trust that proposals will result in change.
- A lack of clarity and efficiency in governance processes that could be improved through more clear and consistent expectations across the various governance processes and forums that feed each other rather than creating duplicate parallel lines.

The scale of investment in governance:

- The NHS Board will receive around 100 papers in a year, representing an estimated 765 hours of time spent writing papers
- The NHS Board Management Team will receive around 250 papers in a year, an estimated 1,900 hours of time spent writing papers
- Local governance meetings, including preparation for and attendance at, accounts for an estimated 14,657 hours of staff time per annum

The role of senior leaders

These findings reflect the culture of governance within the organisation; senior leaders play a huge role in shaping a culture that enables change and does not create unnecessary inertia, including:

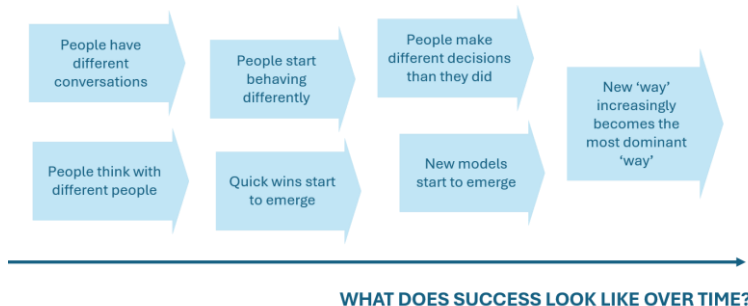
- Supporting collective ownership of changes and buy-in across the organisation rather than delegating responsibility to a single director or part of the organisation
- Providing active leadership and governance during implementation of change to help overcome challenges
- Empowering teams to implement changes in areas within their control
- Supporting streamlined governance processes which reduce duplication of effort

Case study: achieving organisation wide change

An NHS board is seeking to have all decision making across their organisation driven by value-based health and care. They are investing in the following to enable this to happen:

- Supporting teams to work through the steps of change themselves to build what works in their setting and enable them to feel true ownership. Organisation-wide change struggles if you roll out a one size fits all solution.
- Tailoring the material, tools, and support they offer to meet the needs of the individual teams they want to use these. It means moving away from how the value-based health and care team see the world and designing these from the perspective of the end user.
- Building an inclusive, diverse, and engaged community of people across the organisation who drive the changes in their areas. Identifying who was passionate and willing to try something new, getting them onboard and pointed in the same direction, equipping them with what they needed, and creating an environment that builds and maintains their resilience and passion when things get hard.
- Rethinking how they measure success. Organisational-wide transformational change takes time, and the outputs, measures, and definition of success need to reflect this. Figure 1 shows the ways success could be measured in this context.

Fig. 1



The role of senior leaders

- Supporting collective ownership of changes and buy-in across the organisation rather than delegating responsibility to a single director or part of the organisation
- Holding a genuine shared vision and purpose between leaders who are on the same page about where they are trying to go, what this means for their teams and the organisation, and what hard decisions need to be made to get there
- Walking the walk by sticking alongside implementation, trouble shooting, and removing barriers throughout

Case study: understanding readiness for change

As part of their transformation programme, the senior management team for a health and social care partnership (HSCP) in Scotland has been taking steps to identify their readiness for change. Through this, four areas of focus have been identified as critical underpinnings to support their transformation ambitions:

- Ensuring the transformation is **driven by a clear vision and purpose** which points everyone in the same direction in their work and supports shared and collective responsibility.
- **Tackling transformation over time**, understanding that true transformation is not a quick process and sufficient time and resources need to be committed over years to ensure change is sustainable.
- Ensuring that **governance processes support change not inertia**, by ensuring there is buy in for decisions, not just sign off, and by addressing risk aversion within the culture of governance.
- Ensuring **active leadership during implementation of change**, supporting delivery of change beyond sign-off by remove barriers to change across the system and providing change teams with confidence to continue despite setbacks.

Ensuring your change efforts created a sustained impact

Many transformation and change programmes fail as insufficient attention is given to the five enablers in the Scottish Approach to Change, without these change is likely to be smaller, slower and be sustained less often. This creates continuous cycles of small scale, time limited change efforts that don't stick, and burn staff's energy and will for change.

The role of senior leaders

When planning for transformational change senior leaders play a critical role in ensuring the enablers for change are in place and in driving the organisation's readiness for change, this include:

- Ensuring a sufficient focus on **planning for quality**
- Supporting **collaborative accountability** for the change at a whole organisation level and not just delegating responsibility to a single director or part of the organisation
- Recognising that **investment in transformation and the change process** is required but the return on investment is high
- **Empowering staff** to be change agents – leaders can't 'instruct' every part of transformational change – so everyone needs to be equipped to drive change

Resources and support available

You can access support to use the Scottish Approach to Change as a senior leader through:



Our **digital resource** which provides detailed guidance, tools, resources, and case studies to help you use the Scottish Approach to Change.



Join our Scottish Approach to Change **learning community** to access our learning events (including webinars, reflective practice, and project surgery sessions) and to receive information, advice, and peer support on using the Scottish Approach to Change.



We are **providing direct tailored support** for NHS boards and HSCPs who are looking to embed the Scottish Approach to Change – you can express an interest in receiving support by contacting his.satc@nhs.scot.



We are currently looking at what **education and training** we can develop to support the Scottish Approach to Change - until then you can find support on the various methods included in the Scottish Approach to Change on our **education and training** page.