

1 February 2022

Dear Parent/Carer

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education are currently carrying out visits to some schools and early learning and childcare settings across Scotland. When we wrote to you after the last inspection of Whalsay School, we said that we would engage with the school to report on progress. We recently engaged in discussion with staff and the local authority and carried out a visit to Whalsay School. Our engagement helped us learn more about how children and young people and their families, have been supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard about approaches that have been working well to support children and young people's health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the headteacher and local authority officer the school's progress in taking forward the recommendations from our original inspection.

This letter sets out what we found during our visit.

Supporting children, young people and families through COVID-19

Whalsay School is an all-through school providing education for children and young people up to S4, with nursery, primary and secondary departments. It serves the island of Whalsay, to the east of the Shetland mainland. In June 2020 in our inspection findings, we identified areas where improvements were required in the nursery department.

The leadership team led the school effectively throughout the pandemic and responded with speed and efficiency to the many challenges that arose. These included moving the nursery department to temporary accommodation and then equipping the new nursery department. Practitioners, children and parents alike are delighted with the modern purpose-built accommodation.

Throughout the period of the pandemic senior leaders and staff have prioritised keeping the school community safe. Children and young people described how well supported they felt throughout both periods of remote learning and the positive impact this has had on their mental wellbeing. During the periods of remote learning, senior leaders and support staff undertook regular wellbeing check-ins for all families. A number of children and young people received more frequent calls and were also supported by the teacher of additional support needs. Surveys which were distributed after each period report high levels of resilience amongst children and young people. There have been few challenges relating to children and young people's attendance. Staff have expressed their appreciation of the care for their wellbeing, both by their colleagues across the school and by senior leaders.

Teachers provided useful programmes of learning activities on Glow and other digital platforms. They also created paper resource packs for children and young people who were unable to access digital devices. There are connectivity issues for both staff and children and young people, which are still ongoing for a few families and staff members. During periods of remote learning in the primary school, wellbeing weeks took place. Children were set challenges which related very much to their local context. They could choose activities which supported them to work with their families, enjoy learning, experience success and move

away from online learning. Parents reported high levels of enjoyment and appreciation of these family activities.

The focus on wellbeing continues during recovery. All staff have undertaken valuable training in nurture and trauma and use this knowledge to identify individual need and better support learners. Children who have additional support needs are ably supported by skilled support assistants and teachers. Children and young people have described the importance of the time management, independent learning and research skills they have acquired during the periods of remote learning. In the primary department during the periods of remote learning, the focus was on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. Staff are currently planning how best to address gaps in children's learning effectively. Early learning and childcare (ELC) staff are helpfully continuing to use social media and share children's learning and achievements, as well as information on play through regular postings on their blog.

Teachers in the secondary department have identified gaps in young people's learning, in both skills and knowledge. Teachers continue to review courses and programmes of work and provide additional resources to support young people in research and independent learning activities. Recruitment and covering staff absences have been and continue to be challenging.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

Overall, there has been good progress in taking forward the areas for improvement outlined in the inspection letter published in June 2020.

Parents and carers have a shared understanding of the statements outlining Whalsay School's vision, values and aims. Practitioners link the values to children's interests within floor books and build on what children already know. Children's leadership, confidence and sense of inclusion in the wider school community is beginning to develop through their involvement in groups such as the Eco Group and a recent environmental clean-up.

Senior leaders and practitioners have regular meetings with a focus on the children and the early level curriculum. The ELC team have developed systems and processes significantly. These help them see the progress children are making in their learning. Practitioners are developing their use of digital technology to enhance children's play and learning across the curriculum.

The depute headteacher provides strong leadership, supporting practitioners and building a trusting ethos. The ELC team meet together regularly to discuss how children are progressing in their learning. This includes improving both the quality of the learning environment, children's levels of engagement in their play and adult interactions. This has brought about significant and positive change to the setting. Overall, there has been steady progress in developing approaches to planning, observing and assessing children's learning. Parents comment positively on improvements in these areas within the ELC setting. Practitioners and senior leaders have undertaken professional learning on many aspects of children's learning and development. The children talk about their interests and their experiences from home with confidence, and are more involved in the evaluation of the ELC environment.

What happens next?

Understandably, the school has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These have had a significant impact on the work of the school. Staff are implementing plans to support recovery. Staff have addressed the recommendations from the original inspection successfully. As a result, we will make no more visits to the school in connection with the original inspection. Shetland Islands Council will continue to inform parents about the school's progress as part of its usual arrangements for reporting on the quality of its education service.

Jacqueline Gallagher
HM Inspector