

27 August 2019

Dear Parent/Carer

In May 2017, HM Inspectors published a letter on Hermitage Academy. The letter set out a number of areas for improvement which we agreed with the school and Argyll and Bute Council. Recently, as you may know, we visited the school again. During our visit, we talked to young people, parents and partners who work with the school. We worked closely with the headteacher and staff. We heard from the headteacher and other staff about the steps the school has taken to improve. We looked at particular areas that had been identified in the original inspection. As a result, we were able to find out about the progress the school has made and how well this is supporting young people's learning and achievements. This letter sets out what we found.

Improve strategic leadership and leadership at all levels to drive change which is underpinned by robust self-evaluation. There is a need for increased collaboration across the school community to ensure all stakeholders have a good understanding of the school's strengths and improvement priorities.

Since his appointment in October 2017, the new headteacher has led important improvements in the work of the school. He has won the confidence and respect of staff and parents. Strategic leadership has improved with senior leaders and middle leaders working together well to have a better overview of the school. Staff are feeling more included and involved. Working together, they are playing a stronger role in taking forward school improvements. Weekly meetings of middle leaders are providing them with a useful forum for ensuring better coherence in the work being taken forward across departments. Responses to the questionnaire issued prior to this visit show clear improvements in the views of parents and staff since the 2017 inspection.

Processes are in place to take forward most of the improvements identified in the 2017 inspection. These processes are appropriate, well-considered and leading to important improvements. There are a few areas identified in the inspection in 2017 which need taken forward at greater pace in order to ensure young people benefit. A more dynamic and responsive approach is needed so that findings from self-evaluation feed carefully into the strategic planning and prioritising of the work required to secure improvements. It would be helpful to produce a 'parent friendly' version of the school improvement plan which could be made available in an easily accessible format.

Young people need a stronger voice in school improvements. The pupil councils in junior and senior school have not had a strong influence on securing changes on behalf of young people in the past year. The Leadership Academy provides a renewed approach which is welcomed by senior pupils. The focus on developing skills and attributes supports individuals whilst also providing a way for young people in S6 to make positive contributions to the life and work of the school. As planned, these opportunities now need to be built in from S1 to provide all young people with school leadership opportunities.

Continuing to strengthen communications, both within the school and with parents, remains a priority. Staff need to continue to improve the quality and consistency of approaches such as

the use of digital platforms to inform parents of the progress of their children. Reviewing how and when reports are sent home should include the views of staff, parents and young people. Accurate, timely and reliable information needs to be a key feature of all communications.

Continue to extend and strengthen partnerships with local colleges and other providers to increase the range of learning available, particularly in the senior phase. This should aim to ensure further improvements in attainment and greater equity through appropriate learning pathways for all young people. The curriculum should include an increased focus on skills for learning, life and work for all.

The school has made significant progress in improving the range of learning available, especially at the senior phase. Consultations with staff, parents and young people explored different curriculum models. The new curriculum model aims to increase depth through providing more time for learning for all year groups. Young people in S4 now have seven choices for courses leading to qualifications. The school provides a range of helpful information on the curriculum on the school website. Providing an overview of the curriculum would be helpful in supporting parents to have a good understanding of the outcomes of the range of recent work.

The school has extended and strengthened partnerships with local colleges and a range of partners and employers. As a result, learning pathways available in the senior phase include a wider range of college provision delivered in the school at an increasing range of SCQF levels.

Partners have supported the school in providing an increased focus on skills development. The S4 Skills Programme and the Flexible Learning Plans have both been successful in keeping young people engaged in their learning. Employers and other partners, including Skills Development Scotland (SDS), have supported the school in increasing the focus on Career Education Standards and skills, including through a whole school in-service day. This year, the school has increased the range of skills-based courses on offer to support young people's choices for specialisation in S3. The school now needs to build on the improvements to the senior phase learning pathways to ensure that the broad general education is further reviewed to support better progression. Continuing work is required so that young people are able to talk knowledgeably about the skills they are developing and using across their learning.

Greater priority needs to be given to improving the whole school approaches to health and wellbeing. The school has been developing approaches to rights-based education, promoting positive relationships and anti-bullying to support improving young people's wellbeing. Further work is required to improve the school's approaches to promoting positive relationships. The school needs to review its strategy for delivering the entitlement to universal support for all young people. Young people would benefit from having more regular opportunities for one-to-one discussions with an adult who knows them well.

There is a need to ensure learning across the curriculum takes better account of young people's prior learning through an integrated approach to learning, teaching, assessment and moderation. Staff, supported by the school leadership team, should take steps to ensure appropriate levels of support and challenge for all young people.

Senior leaders and staff are working together well to improve the quality of learners' experiences across the curriculum. The learning and teaching policy has been reviewed and

sets out clearly and concisely whole-school expectations about what constitutes high quality learning and teaching. More systematic approaches to evaluating the quality of learning and teaching are now in place. These include the sharing of practice across the school, professional learning and a planned programme of classroom observations by senior and middle leaders. These approaches are supporting teachers to implement the new policy more consistently.

The structure of lessons across the school has improved. They start with activities that enable young people to revisit or build on prior learning and end with review and recall of current learning. Teachers share the purpose of lessons with learners more consistently and make it clear what they need to do to succeed. They use an increasing range of active approaches to promote learner engagement and deepen thinking. At times learning remains overly teacher led and too often directed at the whole class. This limits opportunities for young people to learn independently and to take more responsibility for their learning.

A new assessment and moderation policy, which fully reflects national advice, has been agreed and implemented. It provides staff with guidance about planning assessment as part of learning and teaching. It also supports the understanding of expected standards, along with advice on providing reliable and varied evidence of young people's progress through Curriculum for Excellence levels.

Young people value the few opportunities they have to contribute to improving learning and teaching in the school and to make a difference. In some subject areas this includes giving feedback on courses and programmes and the learning environment. Senior leaders and staff should continue to consult fully with learners at all stages to evaluate the impact improvements to learning, teaching and assessment are having on their progress and achievement.

Continue to monitor the progress of young people currently in S5 and S6 to ensure continued high-quality support for them to maximise their successes and achievements by the time they leave school.

The school monitored effectively the progress of young people who were in S5 and S6 at the time of the inspection (early 2017) to ensure they were on track to attain as highly as possible.

The percentage of young people in S5 in 2016/17 attaining five or more National 5 qualifications and five or more Higher qualifications was in line with young people with similar key demographic characteristics across Scotland. By the time they completed S6, the percentage attaining one to five or more Higher qualifications improved to the highest percentage in the past five years.

By S6 in 2016/17, the percentage of young people in S6 in 2016/17 attaining one to six qualifications at Higher was overall in line with young people with similar key demographic characteristics across Scotland. This attainment was an improvement when compared to the S6 in the previous year.

Almost all of the young people in S5 and S6 in 2017 moved to an initial positive destination on leaving school. The percentage of young people going to higher education increased to the highest in five years in 2018.

What happens next?

The school has made some progress since the original inspection and taken forward important improvements. The school now needs time to evaluate these changes to ensure outcomes for young people are continuing to improve. As part of their ongoing support, officers from Argyll and Bute Council will carry out a review of the school within one year. Inspectors from Education Scotland will join their team. A joint report will be published informing you of the progress being made by the school.

Carol A. McDonald
HM Inspector