



Education
Scotland
Foghlam Alba



National overview of practice in remote learning

Local authority
approaches to assuring
the quality of remote learning

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1. Introduction

HM Inspectors of Education (HMIE) have been engaging with local authorities, schools, parents, carers and learners since January 2021 to provide a national overview of how remote learning is being delivered in schools across Scotland. The purpose of the national overview is to outline what is working well, identify the challenges and what further support is needed to continue to improve the delivery of remote learning.

In the first and second phase of the national overview, six [reports](#) were published. These focused on planning, guidance and delivery of remote learning and how schools and local authorities are taking forward the expectations and entitlements outlined in the [remote learning guidance](#) published on 8 January 2021. The final report of this phase summarised what we have learned so far about what is working well in remote learning across Scotland and where there remains scope for reflection and improvement.

Phase three of the national overview focuses on taking a closer look at particular themes emerging from evidence published in previous reports. This report focuses on local authority approaches to assuring the quality of remote learning and highlights examples of practice which illustrate what is working well in six local authorities. The report includes comments made by local authorities during professional dialogue with HMIE and detailed case studies to help illustrate examples of strong practice.

2. Approach to engagement with local authorities

HMIE engaged in professional dialogue with six local authorities about their approaches to assuring the quality of remote learning.

Professional dialogue with key local authority staff focused on their approaches to assuring the quality of remote learning. In particular, these conversations aimed to:

- identify approaches local authorities are taking to assure the quality of remote learning, and how new approaches have been adapted for this purpose;
- explore how well these approaches are enabling local authorities to assure the quality of remote learning;
- explore how local authorities are using the information gathered to support individual school and local authority wide improvement and what has improved/changed in the delivery of remote learning as a result of these quality assurance processes; and
- identify the main challenges and how have these been overcome.

This report contains case studies from the local authorities involved. Supporting documentation will be published on national overview [‘Sharing what’s working well’](#) section of the Education Scotland website.

3. Findings

Guidance and frameworks to support improvement

“Quality assurance is part of the culture of the local authority. The process of consulting and agreeing approaches with schools is collegiate and collaborative.”

Local authorities have shared clear guidance to assure the quality of remote learning across their schools. This guidance consistently reflects national advice, for example in respect of learner expectations and entitlements, and in particular the aim that all learners experience regular live engagement with staff. This supports school leaders’ discussions with their staff, helping to achieve higher levels of consistency in children’s and young people’s experience of remote learning.

All local authorities involved had well-established quality improvement frameworks, positive relationships with their schools, and a culture of improvement through quality assurance prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. These approaches were a sound basis for ensuring the quality of remote learning in schools. Local authorities report that they were able to move at pace, adapting their established quality assurance approaches to assure the quality of remote learning. In doing so, they have taken close account of the experience of earlier restrictions arising from the pandemic and built on practice which they had found to be effective. For example, local authority officers have implemented new programmes of virtual visits, and local authority teams have refined their use of data, to ensure that support for vulnerable children and young people is prioritised.

Local authority staff report that regular discussion about the effectiveness of remote learning is helping school leaders to identify and use quantitative and qualitative information about children’s and young people’s engagement. As a result, teachers can target support for individual learners, use a range of strategies to promote and sustain learners’ motivation and engagement, and support progression in young people’s learning.

Local authorities have continued to ensure that stakeholder views make a strong contribution to quality assurance approaches. They report that the views of learners, parents and carers, staff and partners have made significant contributions to improvements. Feedback from learners and families has been used, for example, to identify learner preferences regarding live learning, and the need to consider ways of promoting opportunities for learners to engage in more social activities. Schools have been able to implement improvements as a result, including providing parents and carers detailed information on learning programmes in advance to help them to plan their own engagement in supporting their children’s learning.

Case Study – North Ayrshire Council

North Ayrshire Council has adapted its approaches to quality assurance to meet the ever changing demands of learning and teaching during Covid-19. The local authority 'Quality Improvement Framework' has been updated to reflect the current context of remote learning. This guidance affords flexibility to schools in developing their own approaches to quality assurance in the current context to meet the needs of each setting. Across the local authority, every headteacher engages in a weekly professional dialogue with a senior officer. They explore what is working well for the school, learners and families, where challenges exist, and identify what more needs to be undertaken. This enables local authority senior officers to provide ongoing support and challenge to schools on their approaches. When headteachers are brought together they are invited to discuss what is going well, where there are issues, and to offer solutions. As a result of these approaches, headteachers report that quality assurance is part of the culture of the local authority and that the process of consulting and agreeing approaches with schools is collegiate and collaborative.

Several groups have been established to consider progress schools have made with remote learning. Groups include Directorate Leadership Group, Headteachers' Meetings, Senior Managers Meetings and the Education Recovery Group. These groups focus on quality improvement, learning, teaching and assessment, wellbeing of all, progress in learning, and quality of delivery and challenges. The information gathered is examined further within the sector contexts of early years, primary, secondary and additional support needs.

Senior managers use intelligence gathered from their professional dialogue to establish common themes. These common themes influence what the local authority and schools prioritise as further areas for improvement. Heads of Service produce two briefings per week, one for all education staff and one for leaders, to ensure regular communication straight to staff. Briefings offer clarity of purpose, clarity of vision and they consistently highlight the importance of staff, pupil and family wellbeing. The weekly briefings are valued by staff as they ensure clear, consistent and regular authority-wide communication is delivered directly to all staff simultaneously.

Case Study – Midlothian Council

To assure the quality of remote learning across Midlothian Council, a programme of virtual school visits is in place. Schools Group Managers have undertaken virtual quality assurance visits with every school headteacher and where appropriate senior leadership teams to discuss the remote learning offer, the school's own approaches to quality assurance and self-evaluation, and to provide appropriate support and challenge. The frequency of these visits will vary according to need. The latest round of visits has also had a focus on wellbeing and supporting vulnerable learners. All headteachers have provided information on planning learning, assessment, tracking and monitoring, digital exclusion, and partnership working. Schools have also provided more detailed self-evaluation data in relation to safeguarding and their use of digital technology. Each school has been asked to submit a digital return with screenshot examples of the remote learning on offer at each stage. This provides an insight into the nature, quality and range of the online experience for children and young people. This exercise has generated further discussion within schools and provided opportunities for dialogue and moderation of remote learning. The submissions have allowed the local authority digital team to identify issues which they can address by providing further support, as well as examples of effective practice worth sharing across all schools.

Local authority officers use this information to gain an authority-wide overview of challenges, support needs and examples of good practice. Information from quality assurance processes supports planning for targeted and proportionate support. The data and evidence gathered is used to identify areas which may need authority wide guidance or support. Officers are also collating information from each school's tracking of engagement to inform authority-wide intelligence and reporting. Where officers identify effective practice, this will be shared at headteacher meetings either sectoral or authority-wide as appropriate. As a result of these approaches, staff are involved in collective problem solving to improve practice and local authority officers have a more detailed and accurate picture of provision across all schools and establishments.

Use of data to support improvement

Local authorities use a range of data to gather evidence of the impact of remote learning and identify areas for improvement. All local authorities draw on stakeholder views, for example through surveys and focus groups, for evidence of how well strategies for quality assurance are working. The use of learner focus groups, to ascertain whether learners are receiving all their entitlements, is providing headteachers and officers with the intelligence needed to put in place targeted adaptations to support learning improvement. For example, it enables headteachers to ensure staff are fully aware of children's and young people's different and individual

responses to remote learning approaches. All local authorities are gathering data on learner participation, the progress of vulnerable learners, feedback from stakeholders and the extent and impact of collaboration across establishments. Collectively, this information supports headteachers to introduce improvements in remote learning, for example to increase the frequency of recorded lessons in response to feedback about their popularity with learners, parents and carers.

As a result of these processes, local authorities are able to demonstrate how the engagement of learners has increased across primary and secondary schools since the start of lockdown, how the provision of digital resources is increasing, and how staff's understanding of effective remote learning approaches has improved. Senior local authority officers value and use the data they gather from regular reviews, helping them promote high-quality remote learning across their schools. They are able to analyse and present evidence, for example of clear improvements in the attendance of specific groups of learners, particularly the most vulnerable. Officers can quantify the range of learning activities including daily live engagement sessions, and the extent to which learners access recorded lessons and complete independent learning. Officers are using this information in their quality assurance discussions with schools, identifying issues and proposing solutions which are leading to improvements in children's and young people's engagement and progress.

“Our improvement and inclusion lead staff are working with academics from Glasgow University's Robert Owen Centre to drill down to assess the 'learning loss' as a result of Covid-19, for individuals and targeted groups of children and young people.”

Case Study – Inverclyde Council

Inverclyde Council's vision in the short term is to improve consistency in remote learning and teaching and continue to raise the expectations of all stakeholders. Local authority officers recognised engagement with learners was the first area they needed to focus on with an emphasis on health and wellbeing. To ensure that all staff fully recognise how the local authority will assure the quality of remote learning, regular daily briefings were put in place for headteachers.

Case Study – Inverclyde Council (continued)

Senior education local authority leaders quickly recognised that all staff needed to understand what the remote learning offer was first, in order for this to be quality assured well. The quality assurance now in place is a three part process in the form of a deep audit. Questions are completed by all primary and secondary headteachers. The completed audit is then analysed and thereafter head teachers meet formally with education officers to complete support and challenge conversations, linked to the completed audit results and analysis. In addition, principal teachers quality assure aspects of learning and teaching through observations of lessons on-line as well as assessing attainment results as data is gathered. In order to support self-evaluation, five questions have been developed by the local authority to support and challenge senior leaders. These focus on revisiting: what the remote learning offer looks like in their school; how consistent their offer is; how this is linking to improving attainment; how they are tracking engagement in remote learning; and how they will ensure that effective interventions continue to be in place for learners. Senior education local authority leaders and headteachers are very positive about the approach taken and comment how much they value the use of the two remote learning audits to help them assure the ongoing quality of remote learning across their schools. The role of the senior leadership team and education officers has been critical to assure what is happening in schools. For example, as a result of all the local authority support and challenge, commitment to live lessons is growing alongside the wealth of lessons that are pre-recorded. In addition, senior school leaders are now providing increasingly robust quality assurance of the quality of remote learning in their own schools.

High-quality digital services to support learning

“In terms of the digital contribution to high-quality remote learning, it (the pandemic) has taken things forward in ways that would have been unimaginable.”

In almost all local authorities involved, effective digital learning and teaching has been identified as a key feature of high-quality remote learning. All local authorities have benefited from pro-active digital services. For example, one authority offers a ‘virtual school and pathway’ designed to meet the specific needs of vulnerable learners. Local authority digital officers provide direct support through engagement at authority-wide headteacher meetings and through regular contact with individual establishments. They provide bespoke support which takes account of schools’ different contexts and stages of improvement. All local authorities have provided additional professional development opportunities. These important opportunities support practitioners to enhance their digital skills, and underpin improvements in remote learning.

Local authorities have supported the use of digital platforms for educators, parents and carers, helping them plan and deliver high-quality remote learning programmes. As a result, local authority officers report that parental and learner engagement and feedback has improved and teachers' knowledge and confidence in using a wider range of digital platforms has increased.

As part of approaches to assure the quality of remote learning, a few local authorities have introduced strategies to undertake direct observation of the quality of learning and teaching using digital solutions. For example, senior staff and peers join online lessons to share the learners' experience. In other cases, senior leaders gather samples of materials used in lessons, and examples of children's and young people's responses. These digital quality assurance approaches are resulting in more focused remote learning lessons, for example ensuring that tasks and volume of work are better matched to learners' needs.

Equitable access to digital technology remains a key priority for all local authorities. They recognise the critical part it plays in enabling high-quality remote learning. Local authorities' quality assurance processes indicate that some aspects of what has been gained in digital and remote learning are likely to have a lasting impact. For example a 'virtual campus' e-learning approach, evolving in one authority, has the potential to become the norm for senior phase subjects with small numbers of learners in individual schools. In one local authority secondary school, principal teachers regularly join online live classes, modelling best practice for teachers.

Case Study – North Lanarkshire Council

High-quality learning and teaching is a key priority and agreed focus for the local authority. The local authority is committed to ensuring this is supported by relevant quality assurance approaches which have been developed and adapted to provide support in current circumstances. Open lines of communication and clear strategic planning that make explicit the key measures for improvement are shared and understood by all staff. This is provided by the local authority's planning framework for lockdown which is based on the needs of individual and targeted cohorts of children and their families. The local authority has been clear in identifying vulnerable cohorts for priority support that will fall into their universal, additional or intensive categories.

Case Study – North Lanarkshire Council (continued)

The local authority has adapted approaches to quality assurance to improve the remote learning offer by undertaking essential virtual school improvement visits, keeping a strong focus on online learning and increasing communication within and between schools. Staff have established a sustainable improvement model through the Digital School. This includes the work of the recently appointed Digital School Lead, Digital Inclusion Lead, the Pedagogy Team, Pathfinder Staff and digital champions that help build capacity within schools and across clusters. The Virtual Classroom which is a key part of the Digital School offer, supports the Broad General Education including ASN learners and Gaelic learners. There have been over 450,000 visits since the Virtual Classroom was initially established in December. A 5G Immersive Classroom has also just recently been placed into a community facility for use by the community and local primary and ASN schools.

The local authority has identified eight key measures as a set of outcomes, from which to measure progress of key priorities. Priorities are organised around connectivity, increased teacher confidence and consistently high-quality digital learning experiences. Key measures and priorities of focus are ever-evolving in order to provide more rich data to identify ongoing areas for improvement and areas of particular success.

High uptake and positive responses from the career-long professional learning programme is indicative of the value and commitment of staff to build their confidence and improve the online learning offer. Senior pupils across secondary schools are now successfully re-engaging in Advanced Higher courses that had previously been delivered through an authority-wide consortia arrangement. Advanced Higher courses which had been delivered via these consortium arrangements have now moved to being entirely digital, with the exception of practical elements of courses which will continue to be conducted in schools. Across the schools estate, digital classrooms are being set up to overcome sustainability challenges.

“After lockdown, we will need to move our focus from providing up to date school buildings to now providing the latest fast high-quality broadband to support the ongoing remote learning of the future.”

Strategic and collaborative leadership to assure quality

“There is a high level of trust from the local authority.”

Clear structures for strategic leadership, management and communication have ensured a continuing two-way flow of important information between the local authorities and schools, to inform decision-making and to support quality assurance approaches. Local authorities have demonstrated responsiveness and flexibility, adapting swiftly to changes in their local contexts and in national expectations and advice. Local authorities are aware that headteachers particularly value collaborative approaches to supporting the delivery of remote learning. This approach is enabling the sharing of issues and helping to improve consistency in approaches to learning and teaching, including for the most vulnerable children and young people.

Most local authorities emphasised the importance of collegiality, coordination and coherence in quality assurance. Joint planning has involved collaboration with stakeholders. Staff within and across establishments have engaged in collective moderation of learning materials and lessons, leading to improvements in the quality of children’s and young people’s remote learning experiences. In one local authority, headteachers regularly review pre-recorded lessons or join live lessons. This enables them to provide constructive feedback to teachers on what went well and what could improve, and share their findings with local authority officers to confirm improvements arising from their quality assurance approaches. All local authorities noted staff’s increased confidence in the delivery of remote learning since the previous lockdown. Teaching staff are now making more use of the functions within digital platforms to communicate and gather regular feedback from parents, carers and learners. This feedback contributes to ongoing improvements in remote learning, for example by enabling prompt assessment of learners’ work, and helpful advice on next steps in learning.

The pace of change has presented inevitable challenges for local authorities, requiring decisive leadership. Local authority and school staff have found the transition between phases of the pandemic challenging. The local authorities’ experience of managing the consequences of the pandemic has confirmed the need for them to ensure consistent and coherent messaging across their communities and partnerships, and minimise bureaucracy where possible. They continue to strive to sustain their commitment to ensuring high-quality provision, through remote learning, for their communities.

A few local authority findings indicate that senior staff have focused on providing support rather than challenge for school leaders. Local authority staff are clear that challenge must be delivered in a supportive way, acknowledging the importance of timing and the need to minimise additional pressure on headteachers.

“The local authority are transparent, supportive and helpful, ensuring questionnaires or surveys are purposeful.”

Case Study – Angus Council

Angus Council has taken a collaborative approach to quality assuring the effectiveness of remote learning, building on existing quality improvement approaches and system leadership through the Angus Virtual School (AVS). The local authority established the AVS in 2018, as a means to provide a systems leadership approach and pedagogical support to schools. The purpose of the AVS is to work with schools and partners to secure sustainable improvement. Primary headteachers meet regularly in ‘triads’, and more recently secondary leaders in ‘quads’, in order to discuss, share and peer-review educational provision. Meetings are facilitated by AVS officers to ensure a level of consistency within quality assurance and appropriate levels of support and challenge. Since August 2020, these groupings have continued to meet in these well-established forums, to discuss and peer review the quality of remote learning.

AVS officers have developed a bespoke planning and monitoring framework to accompany the local authority refreshed remote learning guidance. This framework is helping school leaders and staff to measure quantitative and qualitative information in relation to remote learning, focusing on high-quality remote teaching, targeted support for individual learners, and wider strategies to promote and sustain learners’ motivation and engagement.

School leaders discuss, evaluate and share practice on their school’s approaches to remote learning using the framework. AVS officers ask that school leaders provide examples of remote learning and associated data/assessment information to allow for an evidence-based discussion about improvement. For example, headteachers regularly review pre-recorded lessons or join live lessons and provide constructive feedback to teachers on what went well and what could improve. AVS officers’ comment that this process has helped particularly to ensure consistency of approach across the local authority, as these regular sessions allow for moderation of standards and expectations for remote learning. Headteachers report that this approach is enabling the sharing of issues and approaches which is helping to improve consistency.

Supporting continuous improvement in remote learning

“Just because we are not involved in ‘in person’ working does not mean we can’t assure quality. It’s just a different context and we have adapted.”

A key feature of the local authorities’ approaches to assuring the quality of remote learning has been to establish consistent methods and frequency of communication. This helps them ensure that information is shared promptly and to reflect the rapid rate

of change associated with the pandemic. Service leaders meet frequently with headteachers to discuss and learn about what is going well, what the challenges are, and to share learning. This approach is informing the professional learning offer across local authorities, including in respect of teachers' use of digital technology. In one local authority, consultation with school leaders identified the need for staff to improve how they provide feedback to learners and to explore effective approaches to assessment within remote learning. As a result, the local authority is developing and updating its remote learning guidance and providing online professional learning sessions for teachers.

Based on the information they gather, all local authorities have implemented programmes of virtual quality assurance visits by their officers. The format of these visits provides clear evidence of the local authorities' commitment and capacity to respond quickly to the context of the pandemic, gathering information by which the local authority can gauge the effectiveness of its guidance. Officer visits also provide opportunities for communication of key developments, good practice sharing and continuing challenge. This cascading of information and advice strengthens headteachers' ability to ensure high-quality remote learning. Local authorities consider it likely that some virtual approaches may become standard features of practice in the years following the pandemic. Local authorities recognise the need to challenge schools where necessary, alongside providing support. For example, a few local authorities noted occasions when schools had not been sufficiently responsive to parent and carers' concerns, relating to young people's wellbeing or their engagement with remote learning. Officer virtual visits were also used to raise issues of progress and attainment in, for example, literacy and numeracy, helping plan for improvements in learners' achievement. In a few local authorities, headteachers are beginning to review school improvement plans to reflect blended and remote learning. These practical measures provide a stronger, quality assured foundation for teachers to plan and provide more effective remote learning experiences, in balance with meeting the needs of those learners attending school.

All local authorities recognise the need for headteachers and other stakeholders to be clear about their roles in quality assurance. Local authorities appreciate the need for relationships between headteachers and officers to remain positive, to convey a clear message of empathy and understanding but also to provide the necessary challenge which leads to further improvement. One local authority expressed their aim to build headteachers' resilience and encourage them to remain ambitious, optimistic and forward-looking, sustaining their leadership role in quality assuring remote learning.

Most local authorities share good practice in pedagogical approaches for remote learning between schools and establishments. Programmes of professional learning for staff, and training for parents and carers, have been received positively and had a positive impact in improving confidence and provision over the period of lockdown. Local authorities present clear evidence of responding quickly to any professional learning needs identified. These have included digital skills, and a focus on children and young people requiring additional support for learning. Local authority toolkits exemplify and help staff to understand and deliver best practice in remote learning,

and set standards to support quality assurance. These toolkits are leading to improvements in understanding of the necessary balance of support and challenge across schools and the local authority. Headteachers noted an increased range of learning and teaching styles used during remote learning, enabled by analysis of feedback from local authority officers.

“It is exciting to think how we can maintain and carry forward for years to come the range of skills teachers have developed recently.”

Case Study – East Renfrewshire Council

East Renfrewshire Council’s (ERC) current approaches to assuring the quality of remote learning are an extension of previous clear and robust quality assurance processes and include lessons learned from the previous lockdown in March 2020. Approaches and guidance created throughout the period of Covid-19 identify clear processes for consultation with stakeholders; a variety of effective and helpful guidance for staff; and established platforms for sharing digital expertise, practice and resources across and between schools. A range of data has been used by local authority staff to identify areas of strength and next steps. Data has been used to identify where support is needed and targeted support provided. Quality Improvement Officers (QIOs) provide support and challenge to their link schools through reviews of recovery plans, continuation of QIO visits to schools and through establishment of key working groups to take forward areas of practice, for example in moderation and validation of assessment.

Effective self-evaluation remains at the heart of ERC approaches to assuring quality. The development of a new self-evaluation toolkit ‘How effective is your remote learning offer?’ provides a shared understanding of quality across ERC and provides a means of supporting their quality assurance of remote learning. The audit tool is being utilised by senior leaders in school to self-evaluate practice against four themes, along with assessing the digital capacity of learners and staff. QIOs are engaging with school leaders during the self-evaluation process, providing support as required and gathering information, which is contributing to the education authority’s wider self-evaluation. Individual schools and clusters receive feedback through ongoing dialogue and links with their QIO, along with consultation with Heads of Service and Director. Good practice is shared across the local authority through formal and informal networks, for examples, pairings of schools, cluster wide sharing, networks, sectoral sharing and staff forums. Through use of ‘How effective is your remote learning?’ areas of strength and next steps / areas for support and challenge are identified by ERC officers, resulting in a report to be presented to forthcoming education committee. This report includes recommendations for the local authority education department, schools and clusters.

Emerging strengths in quality assuring remote learning

- **Local authority and school staffs' skills in digital learning and teaching, as an essential basis for ensuring high-quality remote learning; and professional learning approaches well matched to staff needs.**
- **The clear progress in the local authorities' strategic approach to quality assurance which builds on the experiences of earlier periods of remote learning. This is enabling them to adapt their established quality assurance approaches to meet the demands of remote learning at rapid pace.**
- **The positive impact of quality assurance approaches in recognising families' needs with respect to remote learning, including resource issues alongside the sharing of key information to help parents and carers support young people's engagement.**

Areas for continuing improvement in quality assuring remote learning

- **The clarity with which local authorities consistently share their expectations of remote learning with stakeholders, for example ensuring key features of the entitlements expressed in national advice including a clear commitment to 'live' interactions between staff and learners.**
- **Quality assurance processes for remote learning materials and approaches, including collegiate moderation of teaching materials and innovative systems for monitoring the quality of learners' remote learning experiences.**
- **Further progress in securing resourcing to enable every learner to have access to digital learning, including appropriate supply of devices and access to online learning.**

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

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