



# Further Strategic Inspection of the Education Functions of Local Authorities

## **Argyll and Bute Council**

7 December 2017

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## 1. Introduction

The *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000* places a duty on education authorities to provide children and young people with school education and (in terms of raising standards) requires authorities to endeavour to secure improvement in the quality of that school education. The Act also places a duty on HM Inspectors to provide external evaluation of the effectiveness and performance of education authorities in relation to their education functions.

In March 2016, the published Local Scrutiny Plan for Argyll and Bute Council indicated that a scrutiny response was required in education. In September 2016, a strategic level inspection of the education functions of the council was carried out and a report was published in March 2017. The report set out a number of areas for improvement which we had agreed with the council.

HM Inspectors returned to the council in June 2017 to carry out a further visit to monitor progress. A report of this visit was published in August 2017. In this report, we identified some early areas of progress which had been made since the original inspection. We also indicated that a further inspection of the education functions of the council would be carried out in September 2017.

## 2. Aims, nature and scope of the inspection

The original inspection evaluated key aspects of the education authority's provision using updated quality indicators based on the *Quality Management in Education 2 (QMIE2)* quality framework. An evaluation of provision was made using a six-point scale. This further inspection focuses on the progress that has been made in addressing the main points for action identified in the original inspection. The report also considers the education authority's capacity for further improvement.

### 3. Main points for action

#### (a) Significantly improve young people's attainment across the authority

Across the authority, attendance rates remain above the national average and the number of children and young people excluded from school are below national averages.

Children's progress in early learning and childcare centres has been sustained, with most children achieving their expected developmental milestones. In 2017, data provided by the council demonstrates improvements in children's progress across important stages of the broad general education. Most children at P1, P4 and P7 are making good progress in literacy and numeracy and achieve in line with national expectations. By the end of S3, the authority data indicates that almost all young people achieve in line with national expectations. The authority recognises the ongoing need to ensure robust moderation of teachers' judgements. In Gaelic Medium Education, there is a strong start to learning, with most children at P1 achieving appropriate levels. However, at P7 only half of children engaged in Gaelic Medium Education currently reach national expectations in reading and writing.

At the secondary stages, young people's attainment across the senior phase in National Qualifications improved considerably in a number of key measures. For example, in 2017, the numbers achieving success at National 3, National 4 and National 5 improved from the previous year. Attainment at these levels is broadly similar to that of young people across the country who have similar needs and backgrounds and the national average. The improving trend in the number of young people gaining one Higher has been sustained and is now above that of young people across the country who have similar needs and backgrounds and the national average. A few schools are now demonstrating that they are beginning to close the poverty related attainment gap by improving the attainment of young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

On leaving school, almost all young people continue to move on to a positive destination. Where they have identified the need, central officers have worked well with individual schools to ensure that they monitor more carefully the destinations of young people after they leave school. This is helping to improve the number of young people achieving a positive, sustained destination.

Whilst attainment in the senior phase across Argyll and Bute is improving, the authority recognises that there remains scope for further sustained improvement. The attainment of young people in literacy and numeracy at SCQF level 4 or better is lower than that of young people across the country who have similar needs and backgrounds. The authority recognises that it should continue to monitor more closely young people's attainment by the time they leave school in terms of tariff<sup>1</sup> scores. There is a continuing need to improve outcomes for specific groups of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Tariff scores' have been designed by *Insight*, a national benchmarking tool for attainment.

children and young people who are at greater risk of underachievement, for example, those who are Looked After and Accommodated by the local authority.

Overall, in the past 12 months, the authority has made some important improvements in achieving positive outcomes for its children and young people. Across the authority, staff recognise that they need to continue to work together effectively to ensure that these improvements are sustained.

### **(b) Improve the use of data, ensuring greater rigour**

The authority has significantly improved the collection, storage and analysis of performance data. Over the last 12 months, central officers have reviewed data sources, developed clearer methods to measure performance and present data in more appropriate formats and provided appropriate training for staff. For example, they have implemented a programme of support for elected members to improve their understanding of data to help them to carry out their scrutiny function more effectively. Commendably, a performance report prepared for elected members was enhanced with an early analysis of National Qualifications data.

New approaches to the use of data collection and analysis are helping central officers to challenge schools more confidently about their performance. Valuable training provided for officers and headteachers is now leading to more effective analyses of data and to better targeted support. There is an increasing confidence in the use of assessment and moderation to ensure that data, particularly across the broad general education, is valid and reliable. This is well supported by, for example, Assessment and Moderation Facilitators. Regular discussions between central officers and headteachers, focusing on improvement data, are helping schools to identify and plan appropriate priorities and to set clearer, more measurable targets for raising attainment.

The authority has made a very positive start in measuring how well schools are achieving positive outcomes for their pupils against comparable averages and national averages. This is providing a more complete picture about performance across the authority. The developing primary school profiles have the potential to support headteachers further in understanding the progress of their pupils and to identify next steps for improvement. Overall, the gathering and use of data is beginning to underpin almost all improvement conversations across the authority.

There are now strong peer support networks for staff to develop further their understanding of data analysis. The secondary headteacher trios are an increasingly effective means to hold supportive and challenging conversations about progress. Across the authority, new leaders at various levels demonstrate a thorough understanding of the importance of data handling to school improvement. The authority is increasingly expecting all staff to use data to understand individual pupil progress and to identify cohorts of children and young people who require additional support to make further progress.

Whilst the authority is increasing its use and understanding of data, it is aware that it now needs to build evidence over time to support analysis of important trends. Further development is required to track and monitor Curriculum for Excellence levels effectively and use this data to monitor and understand trends and key priorities for schools. Information gathered during establishment reviews is helping to build an authority-wide overview of strengths and areas for improvement. It will be important to continue to analyse performance data and to develop approaches for monitoring the quality of learners' experiences across the authority and identify priorities for improvement.

**(c) Continue to improve the quality of educational provision with consistently higher levels of support and challenge from central officers and elected members**

Across the authority, central officers provide a wide range of support and professional development activities for school staff. There is now an increased range of curriculum development programmes and activities. The authority now provides a clearer strategic direction for developing its approaches to delivering important aspects of the curriculum, including, literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. The appointment of principal teachers on an authority-wide basis with responsibility for these areas, along with assessment and moderation, has resulted in a wider range of supportive visits to schools and the development of appropriate resources. This development has contributed to the authority's approaches to tackling aspects of isolation, especially in smaller and remote schools.

Central officers themselves now benefit from a wider range of opportunities to develop and enhance their own professional skills, for example, in developing their approaches to understanding and using data more consistently. The extent of this professional learning has enabled officers to provide stronger support for schools and to develop more consistent and rigorous approaches to evaluative activities.

Central officers now engage much more effectively, and with greater consistency, with schools. The recently implemented authority-wide school visit programme ensures that all schools benefit from regular and well-planned visits from officers. Visits now have an agreed purpose, ensuring that key local and national priorities are considered. Officers now have better opportunities to engage with children and young people in their learning activities. As a result, officers are developing a more robust knowledge of schools and the quality of education which they provide.

Over the last 12 months, officers have carried out a number of School Review visits, involving central officers and managers and peer staff from other schools. These School Reviews provide helpful opportunities for sharing good practice and for ensuring that central officers are made aware of the strengths of educational provision as well as areas needing improved. As a result of the programmes of school visits and reviews, most headteachers now feel more confident that officers maintain effective contact with their schools and that they now have a better knowledge of their schools.

Officers now have a more clearly defined and enhanced role in how schools plan for improvement and report on their successes. Arrangements for preparing School Improvement Plans and Standards and Quality Reports have improved. These plans and reports are now discussed routinely during visits by central officers to schools. Officers provide helpful advice and challenge to the contents of reports. This positive approach to planning for improvement and reporting on successes now needs to be implemented consistently across all schools to ensure that all plans and reports are of a consistently high quality.

Senior officers have identified appropriate key areas requiring further improvement. These include continuing to ensure that all central officers receive appropriate training and skills' development to enable them to support and challenge schools effectively. This is particularly important given the high proportion of officers who are on secondment or have been recently appointed. Senior officers also recognise that several of the significant recent improvements made, for example, the introduction of a range of approaches for improving officers' engagements with schools, have not yet been in place long enough to have made full impact. Senior officers recognise, too, the need to evaluate the success of recent changes to procedures and practices.

Elected members now benefit from improved opportunities to access appropriate education-related training and development opportunities. A programme of training sessions for elected members is now in place and this helps to support members, including those recently elected, to engage more confidently and insightfully in their scrutiny role. Senior officers with support from other central officers provide elected members with regular and helpful performance reports, including about the attainment of children and young people at various stages. It will be important to ensure that time spent by officers in preparing these reports does not detract from other important aspects of their work, including supporting school staff.

Overall, most elected members are now very appreciative of the efforts made by officers to keep them well informed and involved. Several have expressed higher levels of confidence that there is now a more positive culture and commitment to work together more effectively for Argyll and Bute's children and young people. It is important for all elected members now to ensure that any political differences do not detract from that commitment to improving young people's educational experiences and outcomes.

**(d) Improve relationships and communication, promoting a more positive ethos amongst all stakeholders**

The publication of the council's vision and strategy paper, *Our Children, Their Future* (OCTF) is providing staff across the council with a helpful shared language and common purpose to help them to prioritise their work. A strengthened central team, established to support the implementation of OCTF, is helping officers to develop a stronger sense of identity and shared purpose. The central team continues to

increase its direct engagement with schools to provide support and challenge. The team's work is now more clearly focused on outcomes for children and young people.

Almost all staff who met with HM Inspectors feel that OCTF is now an important driver for their work. They are positive about the efforts led by senior officers to make improvements following the original inspection report. They recognise that significant resources have been concentrated on establishing and embedding Argyll and Bute Council's new vision for education.

The recently-established Headteachers' Advisory Group is beginning to promote more effective communication links between school staff, clusters, the central team and senior leaders. The Group's workplan includes, targets focused on improving communication, promoting an increasingly positive ethos and strengthening strategic leadership. Appropriate arrangements are in place to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the group.

Senior officers have now put in place appropriate arrangements to improve the range of communication channels and the quality of communication with stakeholders. Routine use of newsletters, bulletins, blogs and electronic messaging is helping to improve stakeholders' awareness of the authority's work, its vision and direction of travel. These approaches are promoting a stronger shared ownership of the improvement agenda and a better understanding of roles and responsibilities.

Almost all young people who met with HM Inspectors spoke positively about their participation in Youth Forums. They value the opportunities which the forums provide to influence council policy, for example, in writing OCTF in a youth-friendly format. The authority recognises the need to strengthen further its arrangements for ensuring that young people have more formal opportunities to contribute to self-evaluation and performance improvement processes. The Youth Voice Action Plan (2016-2018) led by Youth Services outlines clearly a number of steps that the council is now taking to strengthen young people's participation in the work of Education Services.

Increased professional learning opportunities are promoting professional confidence and successful collaborative projects across schools and clusters. An increased number of professional networks are now in place leading to a stronger sense of an Argyll and Bute identity and increased opportunities for educational leadership.

The authority has correctly identified the need to update and implement its Parental Involvement Strategy further to reflect national guidance and to develop its partnership with the Chairpersons of Parent Councils.

Whilst the authority has made some positive early progress in improving relationships and communication and promoting a more positive ethos amongst all stakeholders, continued effort is needed to ensure that current improvements are fully embedded and sustained.



**(e) Improve the quality of strategic leadership and direction at all levels within the education authority**

Overall, there has been sound progress across a number of key aspects of leadership, including, establishing a coherent vision and setting a clearer direction for the education functions of the council. Senior officers recognise that further sustained leadership activity is required to embed the new initiatives in practice at all levels of the education community to maximise the impact of OCTF.

Senior officers have disseminated effectively their vision for Argyll and Bute in the education strategy document, OCTF. The vision was launched in January 2017 and takes good account of local and national priorities. The vision and its six related objectives are now understood better by education staff. Across staff groups, there is now greater ownership and commitment to the vision. Senior officers have used a wide range of strategies, including social media, to reinforce the key messages outlined in the vision. It has created a clarity of focus for education and provides a consistency of expectation for education staff across the council. There are early signs that the implementation of OCTF is beginning to gain the momentum necessary to impact more positively on the lives of young people and their families. While headteachers demonstrate their commitment to the vision, senior leaders acknowledge that it is not yet fully embedded across all establishment staff groups. The authority is aware of the need, for example, to engage further with teachers, learners and parents in order to make greatest impact. Senior officers are aware of the need to capitalise on good practice within clusters and share this more widely across the council.

There are now a number of strengths in the leadership and direction of the education functions of the council. Senior leaders are now more visible and accessible and this has been welcomed by central officers and school-based staff. The acting Executive Director has a key role in corporate planning, and has identified appropriate, specific priorities within education as drivers for change. Individually and collectively, the Chief Education Officer and other central officers are committed to taking forward the priorities of OCTF, and are providing more robust levels of support and challenge for schools.

The recent strengthening and clarity of strategic and operational leadership has been received positively by stakeholders. Most headteachers feel that senior officers show a high level of commitment to improving education and the majority believe that the authority is now well led. The majority of centrally deployed staff agree that they have good opportunities to be involved in the decision-making process and that the authority is well led.

The central education team, under the leadership of the Chief Education Officer, has been successful in strengthening the consistency and quality of central officers' links with schools and other establishments. This has the potential to make a positive impact on school improvement. Most headteachers now believe that the authority is making a positive difference to improving the quality of learning and teaching across Argyll and Bute.

Central officers have built on their early work on leadership development and are now taking positive steps to strengthen leadership capacity across schools and other establishments. Staff now have a wide range of good opportunities to develop leadership skills formally and informally, for example, through mentoring and cluster arrangements. Senior officers recognise that further work is required in strengthening the leadership capacity of children and young people across the council, building on existing positive approaches.

## 4. What is the education authority's capacity for improvement?

In the 12 months since the initial inspection, the authority has made positive progress in each of the main points for action.

Across the authority, attendance rates remain above the national average and the numbers of children and young people excluded from school are below national averages. At the primary stages, most children attain in line with national expectations. Staff have worked well to improve teachers' confidence in making assessments of children's progress and have appropriate measures in place for this to continue. At the secondary stages, young people's attainment in National Qualifications has improved considerably in a number of key measures. Staff are aware of areas in which further improvements should now be made.

The authority has significantly improved how it collects and analyses performance data. Central officers and school-based staff have good opportunities to develop their skills in making more confident use of data. The authority recognises that it now needs to continue to gather important information about learners' progress and the quality of their learning experiences and to develop further their approaches to tracking and monitoring this progress.

The engagement of central officers with schools has improved considerably over the last 12 months. Central officers now work to provide support and challenge to schools with increased levels of quality and consistency. Schools benefit from a wider range of well-planned visits and communication with central officers, including senior officers. Most headteachers now have higher levels of confidence that central officers know their schools well and value their contributions. Elected members, including new members, now benefit from education-related training opportunities and from regular briefings. All elected members need to continue to work together in a climate of trust and transparency in the interests of Argyll and Bute's children.

The authority has made some positive progress in improving relationships and communication since the original inspection. Senior officers have established an appropriate range of communication channels and this is helping stakeholders to develop a better awareness of the authority's vision and work. The recently established Headteachers' Advisory Group has the potential to promote more effective communication links between schools and central officers. There is now a

more positive ethos across the authority. Senior officers recognise the need to strengthen arrangements for ensuring that young people have an appropriate say about their education.

Overall, the authority has made sound progress in improving the quality of leadership. There is now a clear vision for education, as outlined in the council's strategy document, OCTF. This vision takes good account of local priorities, including those in the council's Corporate Plan, and also key national priorities. Senior officers are more visible and central staff now have much stronger links with schools across the authority.

## Next steps

The authority now has a considerably greater capacity for further improvement. Central officers and school-based staff have worked with commitment to bring about a wide range of improvements. These staff have identified accurately areas in which further improvements are needed, acknowledging areas which are improving but which have not yet had time to impact fully on outcomes for children and young people. All staff now need to continue to work together to ensure that these improvements are embedded across the authority and that they make a positive and sustained impact.

Education Scotland will carry out further inspection activity by the end of 2018 to monitor and report on the continued progress made by the council in addressing the main points for action contained in this report.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland**

## Appendix 1

### Interviews and meetings

HM Inspectors met with a wide range of officers and stakeholders including:

- Chief Executive
- Acting Executive Director
- Council Leader and Policy Lead for Education
- Acting Head of Education
- Elected Member Focus Group
- Education Officers Focus Groups
- Primary Headteacher Group
- Headteacher Advisory Group
- Secondary Headteacher Group
- Joint Services Committee
- Middle Leadership Focus Group
- Young People Focus Group
- Parent Focus Group