Summarised inspection findings

Portlethen Academy

Aberdeenshire Council

14 May 2024

Key contextual information

School Name: Portlethen Academy
Council: Aberdeenshire Council
SEED number: 5258030
Roll (February 2024): 917 young people

Attendance is generally in line with the national average.

The school's exclusion rate was generally in line with the national average. However, data from the school indicates that exclusion incidents have risen since 2020/21.

In September 2022, eight per cent of pupils were registered for free school meals, significantly below the national average.

In September 2022, no pupils live in 20% most deprived data zones in Scotland.

In February 2024, the school reported that 64 per cent of pupils had additional support needs.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment	weak
This indicator focuses on ensuring high-quality learning experiences for all children and young people. It highlights the importance of highly-skilled staff who work with children, young people and others to ensure learning is motivating and meaningful. Effective use of assessment by staff and learners ensures children and young people maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are: ■ learning and engagement ■ quality of teaching ■ effective use of assessment ■ planning, tracking and monitoring	

■ In most classrooms, young people and staff enjoy a positive learning environment. There are mutually respectful relationships between staff and young people. Most young people are motivated to learn. Most young people participate well in basic level tasks, set by the teacher. They contribute confidently when given the opportunity to participate in discussions and interact well when working in groups. In a minority of lessons, a few pupils are not on task and their behaviour has a negative impact on the learning experience of others. Senior leaders and staff need to work with young people to ensure classroom routines and behaviours are commonly agreed and well understood. These should be underpinned by a shared understanding of the school vision, values and aims. Senior and middle leaders should support staff to have higher, more consistent and more widely shared expectations. This will support all young people to take responsibility for both their behaviour and their learning. A few young people display disruptive behaviour which has a detrimental impact on their learning and that of other young people in class. There are strategies in place to support young people who present with disruptive behaviour. All staff should ensure these are applied consistently.

■ In most lessons, teachers share the purpose of learning and offer clear explanations and instructions. Teachers frame learning with success criteria and learning intentions in almost all lessons. The quality of the learning intentions and success criteria is variable across the school. As a result, young people are not always able to evaluate their own progress. In a few lessons,

plenaries effectively encourage young people to reflect on their learning. In these classes, teachers check well for understanding and plan useful next steps.

- Teachers should have a greater focus on developing the use of effective questioning across all stages. Where this is being done well in lessons across a range of faculties, it is promoting greater participation and higher order thinking skills. The majority of young people's learning experiences in S1 to S3 are too passive. Teachers need to ensure an appropriate balance between teacher-led activities and more open-ended, independent, enquiry-based learning. In these instances, young people exemplify a deeper engagement with the class activities and take the lead in their learning.

- In a minority of lessons, examples of strong practice in the broad general education (BGE) are evident. In these instances, young people exemplify a deeper engagement with the class activities and take the lead in their learning. Teachers should be encouraged and empowered to share this good practice more effectively. The recent introduction of the '6 Aspects' policy has established a learning and teaching framework for all staff. If embedded effectively, young people should experience greater consistency in their learning across all subject areas.

- The pace of learning should be improved across the school. Class tasks and activities are not sufficiently challenging. Young people are often doing the same task at the same pace. As a result, learning does not always meet the individual needs of young people.

- Digital technology is used in a number of contexts across the curriculum. In a minority of instances, young people use portable devices or mobile phones effectively for research tasks or to access resources. Teachers should develop further the use of digital technology to enhance learning. They should provide more opportunities for young people to lead learning and apply skills in different contexts.

- In the senior phase, teachers make good use of National Qualifications criteria to assess learning. This provides reliable information about progress and allows staff to share next steps. In the BGE, assessment approaches vary across faculties. The validity and reliability of assessment is also variable. Effective approaches to moderating learning, teaching and assessment and ensuring there is a shared understanding of standards have not yet been established across the school. A minority of young people talk confidently about where they are in their learning. Where faculties have clearly defined criteria for assessment, young people are more able to talk about how well they are doing and what their next steps are. A common language to describe progress and targets in S1 to S3 would allow young people to understand better where they are in their learning.

- Most staff engage young people in regular conversations about their learning in both S1 to S3 and the senior phase. This happens with class teachers and in 'Clan' time periodically throughout the year. There is scope to improve the impact of these conversations to ensure they are target-focused, followed up and lead to improvements in attainment. Senior leaders should evaluate the impact of 'Clan' time and how well it is meeting its intended outcomes. At present, there is too much inconsistency in the delivery and content of the programme.

- Each faculty has a different approach to tracking and monitoring learners' progress. Although this does provide helpful information about how well young people are doing in that faculty, there is no coherent understanding about how to track and monitor young people's progress and attainment in different aspects of each course. In a few faculties, teachers use tracking information well to plan and adapt learning to meet young people's needs. A consistent approach across the school is required to support staff to use assessment information

effectively. This will help them to plan future learning, monitor young people's progress more effectively and intervene appropriately.

2.1 Safeguarding and child protection

■ The school submitted self-evaluation information related to child protection and safeguarding. Inspectors discussed this information with relevant staff and, where appropriate, children. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. Areas for development have been agreed with the school and the education authority that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

3.2 Raising attainment and achievement	**weak**
This indicator focuses on the school's success in achieving the best possible outcomes for all learners. Success is measured in attainment across all areas of the curriculum and through the school's ability to demonstrate learners' achievements in relation to skills and attributes. Continuous improvement or sustained high standards over time is a key feature of this indicator. The themes are: ■ attainment in literacy and numeracy ■ attainment over time ■ overall quality of learners' achievement ■ equity for all learners	

Attainment in literacy and numeracy

BGE
■ In 2022/23, by the end of S3, most young people achieved Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) third level in literacy. Almost all achieved CfE third level in numeracy. By the end of S3, a majority achieved CfE fourth level in reading and listening and talking. A minority achieved CfE fourth level in writing. A majority achieved CfE fourth level in numeracy. Staff should continue to develop approaches to assessing literacy and numeracy in the BGE that fully align to national expectations and standards. Senior and middle leaders agree that professional judgements for achievement of a level are not yet reliable.

■ In the BGE, achievement of CfE levels for literacy are based on a range of evidence from learning in English. Staff have engaged in moderation activities for literacy at school and local authority level. In numeracy, staff should focus on ensuring S1 to S3 provides young people with opportunities to achieve CfE third and fourth level outcomes more fully before moving on to National Qualifications. There is limited use made of prior learning from primary CfE levels or National Standards for Scotland data in literacy and numeracy. As a result, there is no baseline tracking against which to monitor progress.

Senior Phase

Literacy (leavers)
■ Most young people leaving school achieved Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 5 or better in literacy between 2017/18 and 2021/22. The school has maintained these standards over the last five years. A majority of young people leaving school achieved SCQF level 6 over the same period. This is in line with the Virtual Comparator (VC).

■ Most young people who have additional support needs who left school between 2017/18 and 2021/22 achieved SCQF level 5 or better in literacy, with the exception of 2020/21, when a majority of young people who have additional support needs attained at this level. At SCQF level 6, the number of young people who have additional support needs leaving school declined from a majority in 2017/18 to a minority from 2018/19 to 2021/22.

Literacy (cohorts)
■ At S4, most young people achieve SCQF level 5 or better in literacy. This is generally in line with the VC. In English, attainment at S4 in N5 is in line with the national establishment. By S5 and S6, based on the S4 roll, a majority of young people achieve SCQF level 6 or better. This is in line with the VC in 2022/23.

- Staff have begun to identify young people at risk of not achieving an award in literacy. Staff have created a bespoke programme at SCQF level 3 and level 4 in class. The school does not yet have a strategy to raise attainment and ensure more young people achieve at SCQF level 5 or better and above.

Numeracy (leavers)
- In numeracy, there is no pattern of improvement for young people who leave school. In 2020/21 the percentage of young people who achieved SCQF 5 or better in numeracy was significantly lower than the VC, improving in 2021/22 to being in line with the VC. The percentage of young people leaving school who achieved SCQF level 6 is significantly lower or much lower than the VC from 2017/18 to 2020/21, improving to being in line with the VC in 2021/22.

- The number of young people who have additional support needs who left school from 2018/19 to 2021/22 who achieved SCQF level 5 or better in numeracy fluctuates between a minority and a majority. There is no discernible pattern of improvement. A few young people who have additional support needs leaving school achieved SCQF level 6.

Numeracy (cohorts)
- In S4, the majority of young people achieved SCQF level 5 or better in numeracy from 2018/19 to 2022/23, generally in line with the VC. By S5 and S6, based on the S4 roll, a minority of young people achieved SCQF level 6 in numeracy, in line with the VC in 2022/23, having been significantly lower, or significantly much lower than the VC in previous years.

- In applications of mathematics at S4, the percentage of entries is significantly higher than the national establishment. Attainment at A-C is in line with national. In mathematics, attainment at A and A-C is significantly lower than national in 2022/23.

Attainment over time
- Senior leaders are at the early stages of developing a strategic overview young people's attainment from S1 to S3. Once more fully embedded, this will enable them to track and monitor young people's attainment and progress through the BGE and help to meet the needs of all young people more fully. At present, senior leaders and staff do not have a sufficient understanding of young people's attainment to ensure appropriate progress is being made across all curricular areas.

Senior Phase
- There is a whole school tracking system in the senior phase. It is not yet sufficiently rigorous to support staff to plan the most effective interventions to improve outcomes for young people.

Leavers
- Using complementary tariff scores, attainment for the lowest attaining 20% of young people leaving school is generally in line with the VC between 2017/18 and 2021/22, with the exception of 2020/21, when attainment was significantly lower the VC. For the middle attaining 60% and highest attaining 20% young people, attainment is frequently significantly lower, or much lower than the VC from 2017/18 to 2021/22.

- At S4, by S5 and by S6, based on the S4 roll, using complementary tariff scores, the attainment of the lowest attaining 20% of young people is broadly in line with the VC. At S4, the attainment of the middle attaining 60% of young people is significantly lower than the VC in 2022/23. The attainment of the highest attaining 20% of young people at S4 is in line with the VC from 2018/19 to 2022/23. By S5 and S6, based on the S4 roll, the attainment of the middle attaining 60% and the highest attaining 20% of young people is largely significantly lower or much lower

than the VC. This improves for the middle attaining 60% and highest attaining 20% by S5 to in line with the VC in 2022/23. By S6, this remains significantly lower than the VC in 2022/23.

Breadth and depth

- In S4, the majority of young people achieve five or more awards at SCQF level 5C or better. This is significantly below the VC in 2022/23. A minority achieve five or more awards at SCQF level 5A or better. This is significantly lower than the VC in 2022/23.

- By S5, the majority of young people achieve five or more awards at SCQF level 5C or better, in line with the VC in 2022/23. The majority of young people achieved five or more awards at SCQF level 5A or better in 2022/23. This has improved to being in line with the VC, having been significantly much lower. By S5, a minority of young people achieve three or more to five or more awards at SCQF level 6C or better, significantly lower or much lower than the VC. A few young people achieve five or more awards at SCQF level 6A or better. This is in line with the VC in 2022/23, having previously been significantly much lower than the VC.

- By S6, a majority of young people achieved five or more awards at SCQF level 5C or better, in line with the VC in 2022/23, having been significantly much lower in 2021/22. A majority achieved five or more awards at SCQF level 5A or better, significantly much lower than the VC, having been significantly lower or much lower since 2018/19. A minority of young people achieved three or more awards at SCQF level 6C or better, significantly much lower than the VC, having been significantly lower or much lower in most of the previous years. A minority of young people achieved five or more awards at SCQF level 6A or better. This is significantly lower, or much lower than the VC from 2018/19 to 2022/23, with the exception of 2020/21, when it was in line. A minority of young people achieve one or more awards at SCQF level 7C or better, significantly much lower than the VC in 2022/23. A few young people attain one or more award at SCQF level 7A, in line with the VC.

All SCQF courses

- In S4, the majority of young people achieve five or more awards at SCQF level 5 or better when all SCQF courses are considered. This is below the VC in 2022/23. By S5, the majority of young people achieve five awards at SCQF level 5 or better. This is in line with the VC. By S5, at SCQF level 6 or better a minority of young people achieve five or more awards. This is below the VC from 2019/20 to 2022/23. By S6, there is an increase in breadth across SCQF level 5 and 6 as a result of the very wide range of Foundation Apprenticeships, National Progression Awards, skills for work courses and opportunities to study at North-East of Scotland College in the senior phase. These courses provide young people with more opportunities to achieve at SCQF level 6 and support them to develop a wider range of skills. The school should continue to ensure that these courses and pathways have a clear rationale within the curricular offer, so that they form a cohesive approach to adding value to the learning of young people learning as they progress through the school. A majority of young people talk very well about the skills they develop in these courses and how these are of benefit to them as they move through the school. As a next step, the school could replicate the approach to skills development in other areas of the senior phase to support pupils who are not accessing the Foundation Apprenticeships courses in articulating their skills and attributes.

Overall quality of learners' achievement

- Young people's achievements are recognised and celebrated through assemblies, awards ceremonies, in subject departments and via social media. Young people enjoy the formal recognition for their achievements, and a few young people talk positively about their S3 passage presentations.

- Young people can take part in a wide range of out of class activities offered by staff across the school. It is not yet clear how many young people benefit from these achievements. As planned,

the school should implement an approach to tracking participation to be able to recognise those who take part and identify any barriers for those who do not.

Equity for all learners

■ The number of exclusion incidents has increased in recent years. However, this number is now decreasing. Staff are fully aware of the need to consider all factors impacting on a young person's life before excluding them from school. There is a need however, to ensure effective planning is in place to reduce the likelihood of similar situations arising in future. This includes analysing more effectively the reasons for exclusion incidents and contributing factors.

■ When compared using average complementary tariff points, young people leaving the school from 2017/18 to 2021/22 who reside in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) deciles 8-10 broadly attain significantly less well than young people living in the same deciles across Scotland. The small number of learners residing in SIMD deciles 1 and 2 precludes any robust analysis to evidence the closing of poverty-related attainment gaps.

■ Most young people elect to stay on at school beyond S4, with the majority continuing to the end of S6. Between 2017/18 and 2021/22, almost all young people entered a positive destination on leaving school. The majority continued into further and higher education on leaving school, with a minority leaving to enter employment.

■ Care-experienced young people and other individuals with protected characteristics benefit for mentoring support through the Motivation, Commitment and Resilience (MCR) Pathways initiative. Pupil Equity Funding supports a range of initiatives designed to raise attainment, improve school attendance and promote engagement. This is leading to targeted support for a few individuals and identified groups.

■ Staff should continue to address existing costs related to the school day to ensure that all learners can access all school resources and participate fully in learning opportunities.

■ Case study evidence presented by staff indicates positive outcomes for targeted learners. Senior leaders and staff should continue to sharpen the focus on gathering data to evidence the needs and progress of learners. As senior leaders and staff gather more robust evidence, this will help them evaluate the impact of current strategies and inform equity planning to improve outcomes for all young people.

Explanation of terms of quantity

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

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.