

Summarised inspection findings

Whithorn School

Dumfries and Galloway Council

24 January 2023

Key contextual information

Whithorn Primary School is located in rural Dumfries and Galloway in the small town of Whithorn. The headteacher, who has been in post since 2014, is also the headteacher of the partnership school in nearby Garlieston. The primary school has 90 children over four classes. The nursery has 25 children attending. The school is a member of the active and supportive Machars cluster. The catchment area for the school is very mixed. Children living on farms and more remote areas travel to school by bus or car. A number of families experience rural deprivation. The cost and availability of transport has a significant impact on families, and on the school's capacity to offer children experiences beyond The Machars.

1.3 Leadership of change

good

This indicator focuses on collaborative leadership at all levels to develop a shared vision for change and improvement which is meaningful and relevant to the context of the school within its community. Planning for continuous improvement should be evidence-based and linked to effective self-evaluation. Senior leaders should ensure the need for change is well understood and that the pace of change is appropriate to ensure the desired positive impact for learners. The themes are:

- developing a shared vision, values and aims relevant to the school and its community
- strategic planning for continuous improvement
- implementing improvement and change

- Leadership of change is a shared activity across the school, with the partnership school and the Machars cluster group of schools. The headteacher, principal teacher, teachers and support staff all know the children and their families very well. Many staff live in the community and understand rural life, its privileges and challenges. The headteacher has been in post since 2014. She is well supported by the principal teacher. They have developed strong partnerships within the cluster. Work across the school and the cluster has supported the improvement of experiences and outcomes for learners.
- The school's vision, values and aims are presented in child friendly language around the school and are modelled in the daily life of school. These were reviewed earlier this year, the final versions agreed following surveys across the community. Most children can describe the culture and aims of the school in their own words.
- The school team is committed to school improvement. They work well as a team, sharing roles and responsibilities to meet current priorities and plans. Collegiate time is planned and used well to enable all staff to actively participate. The headteacher participates in monthly cluster meetings, and staff also have opportunities to work together across schools towards shared goals for improvement. In this rural location, transport and travel time present additional challenge for staff. The use of digital platforms has enhanced the opportunity for staff to work across the cluster and the local authority. This has increased professional learning opportunities for all staff.
- The staff team uses well established approaches to evaluating and monitoring the work of the school. School leaders use a quality assurance calendar, which supports a breadth of activity across the school year. A next step for senior leaders is to enhance, update and refresh these approaches and offer all staff opportunities to work together in their improvement journey. The staff engage in open and reflective discussion and work together to identify areas for school improvement. Following the pandemic, they identified that a number of children required support across their learning in literacy and numeracy. Pupil Equity Funds have been utilised to

ensure staff are trained in the local authority's 'closing the gap' programmes. Staff have also invested funds towards improving approaches to teaching numeracy and writing across the school. A focus on improving the quality of learning and teaching has led to agreed approaches across the school. These approaches are not yet consistently applied. There is a lot of improvement activity underway across the school. Staff are committed to change. School leaders should ensure the range of new approaches and interventions being introduced is manageable. A feature of change across the school is that staff and children now refer to a wide range of pedagogical vocabulary and labels. The team should keep this under review to ensure it does not detract from their ambition to offer the children clarity and improved experiences. In another whole school project, staff are developing confidence with the implementation of a new writing approach. School leaders and the team should monitor this approach to ensure children's opportunities are not restricted by overly formulaic or rigid approaches. Staff recognise the need to ensure these approaches allow children to make progress across Curriculum for Excellence levels in a meaningful way using relevant and real-life contexts.

- The staff make effective use of the range of guidance and support materials provided by the local authority and as developed by the cluster. This has supported staff in reducing workload, and in ensuring consistency for learners.
- The headteacher and the staff team are confident in their improvement agenda. As the team continues its journey of improvement and change, they are well placed to work more effectively in partnership with the nursery team. There is a need to ensure children, parents and partners in the community are engaged more fully in development and change.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment

good

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

- Children and staff enjoy caring relationships across the school. There is a calm and purposeful ethos across the school, where all staff promote positive attitudes to learning and work. Children are treated with respect. Their views and contributions are valued. Across the school children engage warmly with their peers and all adults. Positive relationships and behaviour are evident in learning spaces, in the dining hall and in the playground. This provides a supportive ethos for learning and teaching.
- Children at Whithorn Primary School come to school keen to learn. Almost all children listen carefully during lessons and are eager to complete tasks and activities. In all classes, they enjoy opportunities to work together in pairs and small groups. They work well together organising their resources, and most share and take turns respectfully.
- Children are developing positive mindsets as they tackle activities and challenges. They are keen to try, knowing that they can also learn from mistakes. There is a 'can do' attitude in all classes. In most lessons, children experience appropriate challenge in their learning, and tasks are well matched to their needs. Children who need extra help in literacy and numeracy are very well supported through a range of local authority led interventions. Staff have engaged in professional learning to deliver targeted support for individuals. Parents and staff note the impact of these interventions, and children enjoy seeing success and improvement. Children across the school carry out activities diligently and politely. In a few lessons, tasks offer insufficient challenge. Most often, this is when tasks are directed to the whole, multi-stage class. Children are asked to complete worksheets regularly. Staff should review the quality of these to ensure tasks match planned learning outcomes, and that activities are sufficiently challenging. Children would benefit from more opportunities to be active and independent in their learning. Staff at the primary stages are not yet familiar with play pedagogy.
- Children have access to digital tools in all classes. They are confident using chromebooks to support and enhance their learning. For example, children in P6/7 used an National Health Service website to investigate their sugar intake each week. Children in P4/5 used a drawing programme in their initial designs to improve a local park.
- In all classes, teachers create a purposeful working environment. Their explanations and instructions are clear. Staff share the purpose of each learning activity and help children to understand what success looks like. Teachers and support staff use questioning well to check understanding and extend children's thinking. Whole school approaches to learning and teaching are beginning to offer children more consistent and coherent experiences. Teachers have high expectations of the children and use praise well to motivate learners to succeed. Children across the school respond well to the routines, expectations and structures that teachers use. This approach supports children who need extra help with their learning. In the

most effective lessons, teachers observe children carefully in their learning; they intervene and interact appropriately to support learning and promote pace.

- Staff plan learning across the curriculum. This is very well supported by cluster and local authority learning pathways, programmes and guidance. Staff plan over different timescales. The three-year overviews support progression in learning across multi-stage classes. Assessment is integral to teachers' planning, and staff make effective use of a range of assessment approaches, including standardised tests. The coherent school and cluster approaches support management of teacher workload and offer children across the cluster similar experiences. This supports transition, and partnership working across schools. Appropriate assessments are in place to support the identification of needs of care experienced children, children facing barriers to learning and those with additional support needs (ASN).
- The school has well established approaches to monitoring and tracking children's progress, their attainment and achievement. Regular tracking discussions between senior leaders and staff focus on individuals and cohorts of children. Information recorded at these discussions is used by teachers to plan next steps, including interventions for children needing extra help with their learning. The ASN teacher, principal teacher and headteacher liaise carefully with teachers and learning assistants, to ensure interventions meet children's needs and improve outcomes for learners. Roles and responsibilities for carrying out assessment and interventions should be kept under review by senior leaders.

2.2 Curriculum: Learning pathways

- Children at Whithorn School experience learning across all areas of the curriculum. Children talk with confidence about what they enjoy, with physical education and numeracy proving particularly popular. As part of The Machars cluster, children benefit from well considered and developed learning pathways. These support progression, continuity and coherence in learning across the whole community. Pathways have been updated to include a focus on sustainable development. Children are learning French across all stages. They are beginning to also learn Spanish. Children experience two hours quality physical education each week.
- The partnership three-year curriculum overview supports teachers to plan learning in contexts and topics with guidance on coverage of experiences and outcomes. This overview is also designed to enable children to build on prior learning as they move through the school. Children talk with confidence about their experiences across the curriculum and have good recall of learning within similar contexts when they were younger. Older children understand and value revisiting topics to learn in more depth.
- The range of suggested contexts offers good coverage of 'bundled' experiences and outcomes. The school should now build on this to review and refresh their curriculum design and the learning contexts. They should work in partnership with local partners, parents and children to consider learning contexts that are relevant and up to date. The local area offers a rich variety of learning opportunities across all areas of the curriculum and should be central to children's learning. The farming environment alongside the history of the area offers quality learning about links to the past, present and future. Children also need opportunities to develop skills and knowledge about wider society and 21st century Scotland. As they design the curriculum further, staff should embed regular opportunities for outdoor learning and the development of skills for learning, life and work.

2.7 Partnerships: Impact on learners – parental engagement

- The school has strong relationships with parents and the wider school community. Parents appreciate regular newsletters and teachers use a closed social media platform to share learning. Annual reports offer parents information about children's progress across the curriculum. Face to face discussions to review progress were paused during the pandemic and parents are looking forward to these resuming.
- Parents are very supportive of the school. They enjoy attending school events and fund-raising activities. They would welcome more opportunities to see children perform and share learning across the school year. A smaller number of parents are active members of the supportive Parent Council. They appreciate staff membership on the group. Parents would appreciate a better understanding of the role of parent councils. There is a need for the headteacher and her team to work with the Parent Council to encourage more parents to feel welcome at meetings. A few parents welcome the opportunity to be more involved in school development and improvement, for example in refreshing the curriculum. Parents are eager for their children to spend more time learning outdoors in the local area. They would also welcome support in offering children learning beyond Whithorn School. Parents are concerned that transport presents considerable challenge in offering children experiences outwith the school.
- A few parents do not feel confident or comfortable to approach the school with questions or suggestions. They feel that ideas for change are not welcome and that their views are not always taken into account. The shared goal across the school community to refresh the curriculum may provide a helpful opportunity for all to work together.

2.1 Safeguarding

- 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. At the time of the inspection, there were no identified areas for development.

3.1 Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion

good

This indicator focuses on the impact of the school's approach to wellbeing which underpins children and young people's ability to achieve success. It highlights the need for policies and practices to be well grounded in current legislation and a shared understanding of the value of every individual. A clear focus on ensuring wellbeing entitlements and protected characteristics supports all learners to maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- wellbeing
- fulfilment of statutory duties
- inclusion and equality

- Children are happy, feel safe and benefit from supportive and respectful relationships that prioritise wellbeing. They profit from calm, purposeful learning environments. During the COVID-19 pandemic and periods of remote learning, staff maintained the focus on the Whithorn School community staying connected. As a result, children and families continued to feel a sense of belonging. Staff's interactions with children are positive and the school regularly celebrates children's achievements. Children are encouraged to persevere, show resilience and approach challenging situations using a range of strategies. They know where and when to ask for help. Visual displays reflect a rights-based approach taking account of the United Nations Rights of the Child. In addition, there is a positive approach to solving problems, resulting in children describing ways that they can help themselves learn and achieve.
- Staff understand the importance of developing children's health and wellbeing as a responsibility for all. Wellbeing is developed through the curriculum and through opportunities for wider achievement. Following the pandemic, gradual reintroduction of the varied activities for children to learn and achieve is making a positive difference to their wellbeing. Children talk about their own wellbeing and what they need to do to be safe and physically healthy. They describe the benefits of regular exercise and fitness, as well as the importance of healthy eating. In addition, they engage well in after school clubs and community events. Children have many leadership opportunities in a wide range of pupil participation groups. Their membership of the eco group, pupil council, digital leaders, Learning for Sustainability, Rights Respecting Schools and health committees contribute strongly to children's wellbeing.
- Staff have a good understanding of their statutory duties and responsibilities to improve outcomes for children and young people. Children with ASN are identified and supported through planned interventions. The planned interventions, monitored by senior leaders, include targets that children understand and work towards. Target setting across the school to support all children's understanding of their individual strengths and next steps in learning is less well developed. Therefore, children would benefit from more focused opportunities to talk about their learning and what they need to do to improve.
- Strong partnership working between school staff and other agencies and specialists is resulting in positive outcomes for children. Teachers are reflective and use professional learning opportunities to advance their knowledge about how children learn and achieve. Staff work collaboratively with other agencies and plan interventions to support children with additional needs. The ASN teacher makes regular visits to classrooms, supporting individual children effectively in their learning. This consistent support makes a positive difference to individual children's progress. Children enjoy learning and are proud of the progress that they make. There is a need to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of how individual children's needs are met. Staff should continue to monitor the impact of when children receive individual, targeted

support across the week. In doing so, there is a need to ensure all children learn across the curriculum alongside their peers, and do not miss out on other aspects of their learning.

- The school promotes a culture of inclusion, fairness and positive relationships. Children at P6 and P7 learn about aspects of equality and diversity through the planned classroom activities. Wall displays also celebrate diversity and promote a culture of inclusion and respect. A few children can describe discrimination in relation to gender, religion and background. They talk about how they both respect and celebrate diversity in others. When talking about diversity, children are less confident about relating their knowledge to real life and relevant contexts. In addition, a majority of children have a limited vocabulary to discuss issues of diversity in depth.
- Staff are aware of the socio-economic and rural context of the school. They make adjustments to reduce any barriers for children's learning, participation and engagement. Children benefit from a variety of 'visiting events' to the school, for example Generation Science and the Glasgow Science Centre outreach programmes. These visiting events ensures children do not miss out on learning experiences due to high transport costs and rurality.

3.2 Raising attainment and achievement

good

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

- Overall, most children are making good progress in numeracy and mathematics. Most children are making good progress in listening and talking and reading. The majority are making good progress in writing. At early and first level, most children attain expected Curriculum for Excellence levels. However, attainment levels decrease at second level, and the early gains that children make are not sustained as they move through the school.

Attainment in literacy and English

- Most children at P1 are making good progress across all aspects of literacy and English. Most children working towards first and second level are making good progress in reading and listening and talking. The majority of children working towards first and second level are making good progress in writing.
- Children who need extra help with their learning are making good progress. Interventions to support closing the literacy gap are having a positive impact on outcomes for learners. Children benefit from regular high quality individualised support. This is having a positive impact, particularly in reading.

Listening and talking

- Children are friendly, polite and respectful. They listen well in class to the teacher and respond quickly to instructions and tasks. When working in pairs, they listen to each other and take turns to discuss their tasks. Most children are confident to respond to questions in class discussions. At early level, children are gaining confidence hearing and saying rhyming words. They enjoy blending initial sounds with letters to say simple words. Most can talk about their activities and ask for help when needed. Children working towards first level are developing skills in turn taking during class and group discussions, contributing appropriately. Most contribute clearly and audibly. At second level, most children show respect for the views of others and offer their own viewpoint. At all stages, a few children lack confidence and are not yet active participants in discussions. Staff should ensure learning activities support this group to develop confidence and that a few children do not dominate the discussions. Across the school, a few children need extra help with improving speech and language.

Reading

- Across the school, most children are making good progress in reading. Children have access to a range of quality texts, including from the school library, to promote reading for enjoyment and to develop reading skills. Children working towards early level are developing their confidence in reading initial and blended sounds. They are beginning to use this knowledge to read simple words. At first level, most children can read their reading books aloud, showing understanding. They can answer literal and inferential questions about their texts. Most children working towards second level read with fluency and expression. They enjoy checking

their knowledge and skills in the regular online assessments for their reading book. Children talk with confidence about a range of texts they have engaged with. They enjoy using digital tools in researching and making notes to prepare reports and presentations. Children talk about their favourite authors, and their preferred genre for reading for enjoyment.

Writing

- The school team has identified writing as an area for improvement across the school. They are at an early stage of implementing new approaches to writing. At the early level, children use pens and pencils with increasing control and confidence. Most form lowercase letters accurately and legibly on their whiteboards and in simple writing tasks. At first level, the majority of children spell most commonly used words correctly. They use simple punctuation well. They use vocabulary well to set the scene in their imaginative writing, for example in describing events on bonfire night. The majority of children working towards second level are developing skills in writing for a range of purposes. They can organise and present information in a logical way to share facts with the reader. This includes a report about the water cycle. They can use appropriate vocabulary to describe images of their local area. Staff should ensure all children have frequent opportunities to write at length and for a range of purposes. They should ensure the pace of writing lessons provides children with sufficient time to write independently. Older children would prefer more opportunities to choose what they write. They feel too much time is spent planning and that this restricts their time for writing. Staff should also ensure children can demonstrate and apply their writing skills in a range of real-life contexts.

Numeracy and mathematics

- Overall, most children across the school are making good progress in numeracy and mathematics. At P1 most children are making good progress. The majority of children working towards first and second level are making good progress.

Number, money and measure

- At the early level, all children can match one to one correspondence and can order numbers orally from zero to 10. Most count on and backwards within the range of 20. Children working towards first level are developing confidence in rounding numbers to the nearest 10 and 100. Most children working towards second level can explain the link between a digit, its place and its value for whole numbers to one million. They are confident to use multiplication and division facts up to and including the 10 times table. They can calculate the perimeter of simple two-dimensional shapes and the area of squares and rectangles.

Shape, position and movement

- At the early level, all children recognise two-dimensional shapes and almost all know their properties. They are less confident in investigating and describing features of three-dimensional objects. Children would benefit from play opportunities that allow them to explore shape in the classroom and outdoors. Most children at second level can identify three-dimensional objects and two-dimensional shapes within the environment. They are developing skills in describing their properties. They can follow instructions to draw the nets of three-dimensional objects and make paper models. A minority of children at second level are less confident at recalling mathematical language to describe the properties and range of common shapes.

Information handling

- Children working towards first level can answer questions to extract information from bar graphs. Children at second level can interpret information and data from a range of displays, graphs and tables. They are developing skills to collect and organise data to create their own graphs.

Attainment over time

- The school's data suggests that the pandemic has had a negative impact on children's attainment in writing and numeracy and mathematics. Attainment data for June 2022 showed some recovery, but writing remains an important focus for children working at first and second levels.

Overall quality of learner's achievements

- Children's achievements are celebrated in displays in school, and in newsletters and the school's social media platform. All children have the opportunity to participate in school committees. These groups offer children from stages across the school to work together. They have regular opportunities to express their views and ideas and contribute to the life of the school, the community and improving our world. The school is at the early stages of re-introducing opportunities that were offered prior to the pandemic. This includes Active Schools sessions, a range of sports including netball and football and after school clubs. The 'wider achievement sessions' also offer children opportunities to achieve new skills and knowledge, including in baking and craft activities. Children's achievements are tracked by teachers. As opportunities to achieve develop further, staff recognise the continuing need to monitor levels of participation and achievement to ensure all children enjoy success.

Equity for all learners

- School staff know all of the children and their families very well. They demonstrate empathy and understanding of the challenges children and families face in the community and surrounding areas. Children's progress, attainment, and attendance is carefully tracked. Factors affecting children's capacity to thrive and learn are recorded and monitored. The school ensures all children access all areas of the curriculum. The work of the school is well supported by local authority initiatives and interventions. The staff use PEF to ensure staff are trained and have access to a range of approaches to close the poverty-related attainment gap. Support for children is both targeted and universal. This includes support for children in literacy, numeracy and nurture. Children who face barriers to learning are carefully monitored by staff, their progress assessed, and support adapted accordingly.
- Data shows that the local authority closing the gap' interventions are beginning to have a positive impact on targeted children's progress.

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.