Evaluation of curriculum design in Scotland

A thematic report from His Majesty’s Inspectors of Education.

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# Foreword

Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) has been, since it was launched in 2010, the subject of praise and scrutiny in equal measure. Sitting under the principles of CfE, there are many admirable aspects to what is expected from schools in their curriculum design. These include making sure they take account of children and young people’s views, and involving the local community to ensure that the school’s curriculum sits within the right context and delivers education that is relevant to its community as well as the country’s needs.

The publication of the OECD report [‘Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: into the future’](https://www.oecd.org/education/scotland-s-curriculum-for-excellence-bf624417-en.htm)in June 2020 ushered in a period of change in Scottish education. The subsequent programme for education reform in Scotland has brought with it widespread debate on what the Scottish education system could look like in the future.

The importance of curriculum design and curriculum leadership cannot be understated. The decisions on what children and young people will learn and the knowledge and skills that they will develop hold enormous significance when we consider how we are preparing them for the social, economic, political and cultural challenges that face society in the 21st century.

We wanted to understand more closely how some aspects of CfE are being delivered in Scottish schools. This report presents HM Inspectors’ professional view of curriculum design in Scotland. These findings are drawn from a selection of 50 schools and settings nominated by all 32 of Scotland’s local authorities, alongside broader inspection evidence. The report considers how well schools and settings take account of national guidance and local needs when designing their curriculum to meet the current and future needs of their learners. It also explores the extent to which schools and settings involve learners, staff, parents and partners in designing their curriculum.

There is a strong appetite in Scottish schools and settings to focus on reviewing and enhancing the curriculum. It is encouraging to report on the evidence of schools and settings using national guidance to design high-quality, progressive curriculums that take account of the local context. Staff use their local area well to provide children and young people with learning that helps them understand their local historical, geographical and economic context. There is also evidence of schools providing meaningful opportunities for children and young people to develop a range of skills to help them now and in the future.

Staff in schools and settings recognise the crucial correlation that exists between curriculum quality and the quality of curriculum review. Participatory approaches that incorporate the views of children and young people, parents and partners should be standard practice when schools/settings are engaged in ongoing curriculum review. Future-orientated curriculums that ensure parity of esteem for children and young people require this level of ongoing curriculum review.

As Scotland’s education reform programme continues its progress, we know that there is much anticipation about the future characteristics of qualifications and assessment in Scotland following the [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (IRQA)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/) and the implications of the [Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape](https://www.gov.scot/groups/skills-delivery-landscape-independent-review/).

The IRQA reported that the narrowing of the S3 curriculum is incongruent with the aims of CfE. This national thematic inspection provides evidence that the picture of S3 curriculum-making across the country is varied, and that preparation for the senior phase can often deter secondary schools from ensuring a broad general education phase to the end of S3.

This report not only highlights Scotland’s progress in curriculum design but also looks ahead to the challenges and opportunities that lie before us. I hope the findings in this report will support schools, settings and their partners as they continue to review and develop their curriculum.

We as the education inspectorate now also need to do more. We are increasing our efforts through national thematic inspections to support the Curriculum Improvement Cycle. HM Inspectors look forward to continuing to work with settings, schools, local authorities and other partners, in driving further curriculum improvements for the benefit of Scotland’s children and young people.

**Janie McManus**

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education

# Introduction

All children and young people in Scotland are entitled to a curriculum which develops the skills, knowledge and attributes they need to succeed throughout their lives. Scotland’s curriculum, [Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)](https://education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/curriculum-for-excellence-documents/curriculum-for-excellence-benchmarks/), places learners at the heart of education. It helps children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century.

Scotland’s curriculum is “the totality of all that is planned for children and young people throughout their education” from age 3 to 18. This is represented through the four contexts of learning. These are:

* opportunities for personal achievement
* interdisciplinary learning
* ethos and life of the school as a community
* curriculum areas and subjects

The purpose of the curriculum is encapsulated in the four capacities: to help children and young people become:

* successful learners
* confident individuals
* responsible citizens
* effective contributors

These capacities reflect and recognise the lifelong nature of education and learning.

A [refreshed narrative](https://scotlandscurriculum.scot/) on Scotland’s curriculum was published in September 2019. This was designed to stimulate fresh thinking, promote professional dialogue about curriculum design and strengthen partnerships to co-design the curriculum. It emphasises the need for schools’ curriculums to be adaptable and responsive to the diverse needs of individual learners and reflect the uniqueness of their communities.

The underlying principles of CfE have regularly attracted favourable comments by international organisations and other nations. In the changing context of Scottish society after the COVID-19 pandemic, across the education system, there has been a renewed focus on curriculum design. Several national and international reports have supported the conversation around the further development of the Scottish curriculum.

More recently, the [All Learners in Scotland Matter - national discussion on education](https://www.gov.scot/publications/learners-scotland-matter-national-discussion-education-final-report/) and [It's Our Future - Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](https://www.gov.scot/publications/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/) reports recommended that the Scottish Government focuses again on developing the curriculum.

In order to support schools and local authorities in this work, His Majesty’s Inspectors of Education carried out an inspection of curriculum design in schools and settings across the Scottish education system as part of their annual inspection plan 2022 to 2023.

This national thematic inspection presents an evaluation of how well early learning and childcare (ELC) settings and schools:

* design a high-quality curriculum that takes account of national guidance and local needs
* involve the school community and other stakeholders in designing the curriculum

# Methodology

HM Inspectors visited 50 settings and schools within the ELC, primary, secondary and special sectors during academic session 2022 to 2023. Schools in the independent sector were out of the scope of this work. The settings and schools were nominated by all 32 Scottish local authorities.

Before the inspection visits, headteachers and heads of ELC settings undertook self-evaluation of their current approaches, strengths and challenges in relation to designing the curriculum. HM Inspectors used this information as the starting point for their discussions.

During the inspection visits, HM Inspectors spoke with learners, teachers, practitioners, parents/carers and partners. They observed learning, reviewed curriculum programmes and documentation, and discussed approaches to curriculum design. HM Inspectors shared verbal feedback with senior leaders at the end of each visit.

This report provides the professional view of HM Inspectors. Evidence is drawn from the selection of 50 schools and settings, alongside broader inspection evidence about the curriculum.

# Executive summary

## Designing a high-quality curriculum

Staff across all schools and settings use a range of national guidance to inform the curriculum. They demonstrate a strong desire to design a curriculum that takes account of the unique needs of their local community. Children and young people are learning outdoors more often. Staff use their local area well as a stimulus and context for learning. Staff in secondary schools are increasingly using local labour market intelligence to develop learner pathways.

Moving forward, staff in schools and settings should continue to take explicit account of how local, national and global issues are integral to the curriculum. Staff must ensure that the curriculum supports all children and young people to develop the skills and knowledge they will need to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Staff regularly review the curriculum with the intention of ensuring that it meets the needs of children and young people. The most notable changes to the curriculum in the last few years have been driven by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, adaptations to the health and wellbeing curriculum are supporting children’s and young people’s mental and emotional wellbeing needs.

However, too many children and young people are not receiving breadth and depth of learning across the curriculum.

As a priority, staff in schools and settings must ensure that all children and young people receive their full entitlement to a broad general education up to and including S3. Staff need to ensure that they provide breadth, coherence and progression of learning across all areas of the curriculum. This will help young people better as they progress from the BGE into the senior phase.

Senior leaders and staff have a strong understanding of the socio-economic context and needs of the communities they serve. Staff adapt specific areas of their curriculum effectively to address identified attainment gaps, and to meet the needs of learners who have additional support needs.

Senior leaders, working with staff, are particularly skilled at identifying and addressing gaps in learning that children and young people have as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they now need to increase the focus on how the curriculum is designed to raise the attainment of all and close gaps caused by socio-economic challenges.

## Engaging the school community in designing the curriculum

Although senior leaders and staff do engage with and gather views from the school community in a variety of ways, they need to involve children and young people, parents and partners more in designing, evaluating and developing their curriculum. This will help ensure that they are giving children and young people a curriculum that delivers knowledge, develops skills, and fulfils the ever-changing needs of society. Local authorities and national bodies should support senior leaders and staff to do this by ensuring that they produce clear structures, guidance, resources and appropriate professional learning across all curriculum areas and subjects.

Staff in schools and settings should continue to set curricular improvement priorities which are specifically related to their own context. These should support children and young people to build on their prior learning and promote high-quality learning experiences which are relevant and meet individual needs.

# Summary of recommendations

## Recommendations for schools and settings

As a priority, staff in schools and settings must ensure that all children and young people receive their full entitlement to a coherent, progressive broad general education that enables children and young people to build on their prior knowledge and skills more effectively.

In secondary schools, staff need to ensure a better balance between providing all young people with their entitlement to a broad general education in S1-S3, while providing appropriate depth in learning to prepare young people for progression to the senior phase.

In secondary schools, staff need to design the curriculum to support young people to make appropriate curricular choices in the senior phase where they build more effectively on their prior learning.

Staff need to increase the focus on how the curriculum is designed to raise the attainment of all and accelerate progress in closing any poverty-related attainment gaps.

Staff need to involve children and young people, parents and partners more actively in designing, evaluating and developing their curriculum to ensure it remains relevant in an ever-changing society.

## Recommendations for the Scottish Government, national bodies and local authorities

The Scottish Government, national bodies and local authorities need to enhance subject-specific guidance and facilitate professional learning to support staff in curriculum design and development.

The Scottish Government and national bodies should ensure that future national curriculum guidance is clear, concise, easy to navigate and accessible. This includes specific advice on developing a curriculum which meets the needs of children and young people with complex needs.

Building on work already started, national bodies and local authorities should enhance and expand their support for staff to develop a greater understanding of the principles and benefits of high-quality interdisciplinary learning.

Local authorities and school staff should ensure that all learners have suitable access to digital technology at appropriate times when required to support the delivery of the curriculum.

# National guidance

Senior leaders in all sectors use national guidance well as an essential foundation for curriculum design. They recognise that the guidance helps provide consistency for learners across Scotland, while allowing schools and settings the flexibility to adapt programmes and courses to meet the needs of their local community.

However, senior leaders and staff need to navigate a wide range of guidance and resources available. Staff in a few of the schools visited report that it can be challenging to differentiate between national guidance and published discussion papers. HM Inspectors are finding, through school inspections, that senior leaders and staff across settings and schools would welcome succinct and subject-specific guidance to support curriculum design.

As the Scottish Government responds to recent independent reviews, it will be important that future national guidance is clear, concise, accessible and easy to locate, thereby supporting practitioners.

## Curriculum for Excellence guidance

Staff across sectors continue to find the CfE guidance documents helpful to inform curriculum design. This includes the [Building the Curriculum document series](https://education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/curriculum-for-excellence-documents/building-the-curriculum/), the [experiences and outcomes](https://education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/curriculum-for-excellence-documents/experiences-and-outcomes/) for curricular areas and the [national benchmarks](https://education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/curriculum-for-excellence-documents/curriculum-for-excellence-benchmarks/).

The [refreshed narrative](https://scotlandscurriculum.scot/) aims to give staff with a clearer focus for curricular development. Staff in the majority of the schools and settings visited are using this narrative to review and refresh elements of their curriculum, in particular refocusing on the four capacities and how these shape and influence their curriculum.

However, senior leaders and staff could do more to use the refreshed narrative when reviewing their curriculum offer so that children and young people develop the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Additionally, staff across all sectors need to ensure that they design and deliver a coherent curriculum so that children and young people are able to build progressively on their prior learning.

Staff in primary and secondary schools continue to find [Building the Curriculum 4: Skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work](https://education.gov.scot/media/tcnk33qn/btc4.pdf) useful when developing approaches to skills based learning and [Developing the young Workforce](https://education.gov.scot/learning-in-scotland/programmes/developing-the-young-workforce-dyw/) (DYW). They are increasingly using the [Career Standard 3-18 guidance](https://education.gov.scot/resources/career-education-standard-3-18-suite-of-learning-resources/) to further support the development of skills across the curriculum.

However, there remains scope for a stronger focus on skills development and progression to feature across the curriculum from 3-18 to ensure children and young people develop relevant skills for life, work and learning. Where this is working well, children and young can articulate the skills they are developing and how these are helping them now and in the future.

Evidence from a range of inspection activity highlights that staff across specialist additional support needs (ASN) settings, use [Milestones: Supporting learners with complex additional support needs](https://education.gov.scot/media/pcvpeaeg/milestones-supporting-learners-with-complex-asn.pdf) alongside CfE guidance to inform curriculum design.

Much of the national advice, guidance and professional learning is designed for mainstream education. This means that staff in the special education sector often have to adapt guidance, advice and resources to best meet the needs of learners in these contexts. To better support staff in this sector there is a clear need for guidance that includes specific advice on developing a curriculum which meets the needs of children and young people with complex needs.

## Sector-specific national guidance

### ELC

Staff in ELC settings use the [Health and Social Care Standards](https://www.gov.scot/publications/health-social-care-standards-support-life/) and guidance from the [Care Inspectorate](https://www.careinspectorate.com/), alongside CfE guidance, to inform their curriculum. The development of play pedagogy has had a significant impact on curriculum design in ELC settings and in the early years of primary schools.

Staff in ELC settings make use of [Realising the Ambition](https://education.gov.scot/resources/realising-the-ambition/) and the [Early Level Play Pedagogy Toolkit](https://education.gov.scot/resources/early-level-play-pedagogy-toolkit/) to support their work in developing a curriculum designed for younger children. Staff now need to consider better how learning across the early level curriculum is planned and developed to ensure that children benefit from progression in their learning.

### Primary

As well as the national guidance referenced, staff in primary schools also continue to use [Building the Curriculum 2: Active learning in the early years](https://education.gov.scot/media/3mglewdo/btc2.pdf) and [Realising the Ambition](https://education.gov.scot/resources/realising-the-ambition/) to support the development of play across the early level.

A few primary schools are also beginning to incorporate play-based approaches in their curriculum for older children. There are positive examples of staff engaging with international research and professional learning opportunities which help them design a relevant curriculum.

### Secondary

Staff in secondary schools make good use of the arrangements documents from the national accreditation and awarding body for Scotland, and [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)](https://scqf.org.uk/) to inform their senior phase curriculum.

Staff in the majority of the secondary schools we visited are beginning to engage with national reports, including [Putting Learners and the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education](https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/) and [It’s Our Future: Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](https://www.gov.scot/publications/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/), when reviewing their curriculums. For example, staff are increasing the range of learner pathways in the senior phase and opportunities for achievement beyond the classroom. This includes National Progression Awards, Foundation Apprenticeships and college courses. Young people's opportunities for accreditation for developing skills and attributes continues to increase.

## Advice on national policy and legislation

Staff in the selection of schools and settings visited use national education policy well to support the design and delivery of the curriculum. Staff use guidance such as that set out for the [Scottish Attainment Challenge](https://education.gov.scot/learning-in-scotland/programmes/scottish-attainment-challenge/) and [Getting it right for every child](https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/) to support them to identify and respond to the needs of children, young people and their respective local communities.

The increased focus on children’s rights helps to ensure that children’s and young people’s needs are placed at the centre of curriculum decision-making. This will become even more important with the introduction of the [United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2024/1/contents?view=plain). Although the [National Improvement Framework](https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/national-improvement-framework/) remains the national plan for securing educational improvement, this is seen less often by staff as a key policy driver to support curriculum design.

## The broad general education

As part of their learner journey, all children and young people are entitled to experience a coherent curriculum which supports them to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to adapt and think critically in today’s world.

Staff in most of the schools and settings we visited are taking steps to ensure that children and young people receive a broad range of curricular experiences. However, HM Inspectors know from wider inspection evidence that too many children and young people do not currently experience the full range of experiences and outcomes they are entitled to in their broad general education (BGE).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that most of primary schools visited have focused on literacy, numeracy and wellbeing, to respond to gaps in children’s learning. Now, staff in primary schools are shifting their focus to ensure children are learning across the breadth of curricular areas and subjects. Nevertheless, there is a pressing need to accelerate this.

Despite staff efforts, young people in secondary schools can still experience constraints on how fully they can access specific subjects and pathways. Recruitment challenges in secondary schools can impact how the curriculum is planned and delivered and can result in some young people not receiving their full entitlement to a BGE.

In addition, in one-teacher departments, that teacher’s departure can result in difficulties for continuity in the subject in both the BGE and senior phase. Recruiting qualified staff is particularly challenging in business, drama, Gaelic language, home economics, mathematics and the technologies.

An increase in the use of online learning, for example through the [National e-Learning Offer](https://nelo.education.gov.scot/)[[1]](#footnote-2) and [e-Sgoil](https://e-sgoil.com/),[[2]](#footnote-3) is supporting staff to address this challenge for their learners. This is helping to ensure that young people can access curriculum areas and continue their learning.

Senior leaders and staff must improve young people’s experiences of the BGE in S3. In efforts to avoid the ‘two term dash’ for National Qualifications, young people in S3 are often given learning which is overly focussed on national qualifications. They are often required to specialise in specific curriculum areas too early which can result in a narrowing of the curriculum they experience.

Moreover, making course choices too early may lead young people to discontinue a subject area prematurely Senior phase examinations continue to overly influence the BGE curriculum. There remains a pressing need for work to take place to better align the BGE and the senior phase to ensure smoother progression for young people.

## The senior phase

Senior leaders and staff do not always ensure that young people in the senior phase receive their full entitlement to curriculum choice. Senior leaders frequently find that balancing timetables and matching staff availability with pupil choice present challenges.

Curriculums meet young people’s needs when staff have sought young people’s views about their subject choices. For example, carrying out provisional choice exercises provides staff with valuable information around the breadth and capacity needed in subjects and courses. This allows them to plan more effectively to ensure that curriculum options better meet the interests and choices of young people.

Young people in S5 and S6 continue to have opportunities to apply their learning in a range of situations. School staff and partners are working together effectively to provide extended work experience and improved college links. There is scope for staff to explore what would be a meaningful, motivational curriculum for those in S6 who have unconditional offers for higher education or who are likely to leave school at short notice.

Although most young people follow courses leading to National Qualifications, the senior phase curriculum is increasingly providing courses leading to, for example, Foundation Apprenticeships and Awards. Staff in secondary schools are taking steps to raise awareness among parents and employers about the benefits to young people of all available options. They are introducing positive approaches to equip and encourage young people to broaden their curriculum options and increase the uptake of these programmes. For example, young people are acting as ambassadors for the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) where the profile of a wider range of qualifications beyond senior phase examinations are highlighted.

# Designing a high-quality curriculum

## Interdisciplinary learning

Interdisciplinary learning (IDL)[[3]](#footnote-4) remains an underutilised element of curriculum design across all sectors. There remains lack of clarity regarding high-quality IDL and how it is distinct from other approaches to organising learning.

National and local efforts are needed to provide staff with a better understanding of the principles and benefits of IDL. Enhancing this understanding among staff will better equip them to facilitate rich learning contexts where children and young people to learn and apply knowledge and skills.

In schools that deliver high-quality IDL, teachers draw on experiences and outcomes from different curricular areas or subjects. They have a clear understanding of the purpose of IDL, whether it is to develop knowledge, understanding or skills in new and different ways or deepen learning by revisiting concepts or skills from different perspectives. Furthermore, teachers support learners’ progression by building on their previous learning considering next steps.

## Digital approaches to learning

Developing and improving digital approaches to enhance the curriculum remains a key focus for staff across all sectors. Building on the skills and experiences of periods of remote learning, staff use digital technology more routinely to deliver elements of the curriculum. However, availability of and access to digital learning is still a challenge across the country. Barriers include:

* intermittent or poor connectivity which disrupts online work
* websites and applications which are blocked by individual local authority systems

As a result, children and young people’s experiences of digital technology across Scotland vary significantly. Local authority and school staff need to work together to ensure that all learners have suitable, equitable access to digital technology to support the delivery of the curriculum where appropriate.

## Meeting local needs

Schools and settings are empowered to, and responsible for, ensuring that their curriculum meets local needs. Staff across sectors are taking important steps to design curriculums that are relevant to their learners, both now and in the future.

Factors such as the socio-economic context, wellbeing, an increase in children and young people who require additional support, local employment opportunities, diversity within the community and rurality are all features which staff factor in when designing their curriculum. For example, staff are strengthening links with local employers to support the curriculum through work placements that support young people to move into positive employment.

There remains a tension, however, between designing a curriculum at school level which takes account of national guidance whilst also meeting local needs. The increased focus staff have placed on raising attainment in literacy and numeracy in some schools has reduced the focus on improvements across other curricular areas. In addition, staff find it challenging to deliver breadth whilst also ensuring progression in learning across all curriculum areas.

There is scope for staff, across all sectors, to consider more closely local needs and the opportunities within the local context when planning the curriculum. This will help ensure that the curriculum is relevant to children and young people’s lives. In addition, there needs to be a greater focus, both locally and nationally, on the curriculum preparing young people to meet the changing local, national and global societal and economic needs.

In Gaelic Medium Education, schools, culture and language influence the ethos and life of the school and elements of the curriculum. This includes through poetry, art and music. Staff in schools with large refugee communities, with children and young people learning English as an additional language plan the curriculum to support and celebrate identity and heritage. This includes organising and engaging in-school and community events and adapting curricular programmes. This helps learners to feel part of the wider community and to better understand their role as effective contributors and global citizens.

## Promoting equity and addressing poverty-related attainment gaps

Senior leaders and staff across sectors have a very strong understanding of the socio-economic context impacting children, young people and their families. Staff work sensitively to help address issues that are having an impact on the lives of families. They make considerable efforts to ensure that the cost of the school day is not a barrier for children and young people to access the curriculum.

Senior leaders make use of Pupil Equity Funding where appropriate and seek additional grants or funding when needed. This enables staff to promote equity by subsidising educational outings, events or curriculum activity in areas such as food science, technologies or music. Staff have taken steps to ensure that the curriculum is designed to support children and young people to reflect on and learn about equity.

Senior leaders recognise the benefit of supporting all children and young people to develop a wide range of skills to address the poverty-related attainment gap. This is evident from the range of activities, approaches and flexibility they have built into the curriculum for individuals and groups of children. For example, staff design the curriculum to support children to develop social skills and resilience.

Senior leaders and staff use data well to identify children and young people who would benefit from targeted interventions. They adapt curricular programmes to address identified attainment gaps, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Staff in secondary schools develop a range of flexible learning pathways to meet individual needs.

Overall, whilst staff in schools and settings respond well to individual needs as they arise, it is not always clear how the curriculum has been designed to close poverty-related attainment gaps. There is scope for closer consideration of how the curriculum is designed to raise the attainment of all children, whilst closing gaps in attainment for identified learners, including those impacted by poverty.

## Supporting positive wellbeing

Staff make considerable efforts to ensure that their wellbeing curriculum is relevant and accessible to all children and young people. Staff across sectors have been quick to respond to children and young people’s changing health and wellbeing needs and adapting the curriculum to meet these. For example, since COVID-19, staff have redesigned the curriculum to have a greater focus on improving mental and emotional wellbeing. They take steps to develop a curriculum which supports individual wellbeing needs, whilst also developing all children’s and young people’s understanding of how to be healthy and manage wellbeing.

## Using the local area

Across ELC, special and primary sectors, staff make good use of the local area as a context for learning across the curriculum. They use local shops, parkland, forest and beach areas to deliver interesting, relevant and motivating learning experiences.

Primary school staff make increasing use of the historical context of their local area to support learning in social studies. In secondary schools, there are examples of individual departments making use of the geographical location and historical context in the local area to support learning.

Learning outdoors is becoming a more common feature of the curriculum. Staff recognise the health and wellbeing benefits for children and young people when they learn outdoors. They identify the opportunities the outdoors presents for children and young people to access the curriculum in different ways and to develop and apply skills and knowledge in new contexts. Staff are increasingly using school grounds and the local area to provide meaningful opportunities for children and young people to develop skills for learning, life and work.

Almost all ELC settings visited provide well-established free-flow access to outdoor spaces. A few settings noted physical constraints that limited their ability to provide free-flow outdoor learning despite a strong desire to do so. They continue to provide a wide range of interesting outdoor experiences to develop children’s natural curiosity. They use local woodlands well to facilitate forest school experiences to provide stimulating and challenging play experiences.

This approach is also becoming more established in primary schools. Children in primary schools increasingly access well-planned outdoor learning across a range of environments and across an increasing range of curricular areas. Staff in secondary school departments, such as geography and science, make good use of outdoor spaces.

Staff support young people to gain accreditation through their outdoor learning, for example through the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. Staff across sectors now need to ensure that they develop outdoor learning pathways to enable children and young people to build progressively on their skills.

## Transition, coherence and progression

Children and young people are entitled to experience a curriculum which is coherent and progressive. Transitions are an important aspect of this. Staff support children and young people well pastorally to move to the next stage of their learning. However, staff need to do more to ensure that learning communities design a curriculum that effectively supports children and young people at key points of transition. They should ensure that children and young people build effectively on their prior learning at all stages of their learning journey.

Across the ELC settings visited, staff work together well with school staff to build on play opportunities across the early level. Staff working in specialist ASN settings plan well for individual children to ensure that the curriculum is designed to meet children’s needs at their points of transition.

Staff across the primary and secondary schools we visited work collaboratively to jointly plan for successful transition to high school. In addition, staff work well together to provide enhanced transitions for those young people requiring additional support with their learning or wellbeing. In the most effective examples, the transitions ensure that the children continue to build on their prior learning in some curricular areas. However, staff could do more to ensure that children and young people receive progression and coherence in learning across the curriculum at all points of transition.

Secondary staff often report that curriculum transition is challenging when young people who have moved up from several associated primary schools have experienced different curriculum content when they reach S1. At times, young people repeat assessments or learning in S1 which they already covered when they were in primary. This impacts on their motivation, engagement and progression in learning. This impact is reduced when staff have a shared focus on ensuring the curriculum is designed to ensure progression in learning across an associated school group.

There are examples of staff across associated primary schools and a secondary school working together to design projects across different curricular areas which children start in P7 and complete in S1. In other examples, staff focus on ensuring enhanced challenge in within the curriculum for children working beyond CfE second level.

These approaches support children to build on their prior learning, most notably in literacy and numeracy. In other examples, shared teaching by staff between primary and secondary schools has a positive impact on children’s progression across the curriculum. Staff across sectors need to work together collectively on jointly designed curriculum transition to support children to build more effectively on their prior learning across the BGE.

Staff in secondary schools plan effectively in collaboration with partners to promote positive destinations beyond school, into employment or further learning. This collaboration includes work with Skills Development Scotland (SDS) colleagues and college staff. Careers fairs and events are common and appreciated by families and organisations alike. These help support young people to transition to positive destinations in the workplace or to further or higher education.

## Challenges and barriers

Whilst challenges vary from school to school, common themes arise in relation to designing and delivering the curriculum. The particular challenges in developing the curriculum that staff cite are:

* recruitment and retention of staff
* budget constraints
* lack of specialism in particular subjects

HM Inspectors know from wider inspection evidence that delivering children’s and young people’s entitlement to two modern languages is challenging in schools where staff do not have the necessary skills or knowledge to deliver this aspect of the curriculum. In some secondary schools, small subject-specialist staff teams and/or staff shortages in specific subjects present challenges in developing and delivering the curriculum.

Creative approaches to overcoming these challenges include developing links with other local schools and colleges. This can increase learner choice across subject areas and courses.

Finding time for staff to work together within and across settings can be challenging, particularly in rural areas. Ongoing staff professional learning is essential if children and young people are to receive a curriculum that continues to meet their needs. However, incorporating sufficient time for all staff to undertake professional learning also presents an ongoing challenge for senior leaders.

Balancing the need for both whole-establishment curriculum design alongside the development of individual curricular areas is important. In early learning and childcare settings, achieving this can be further complicated by the differing contractual arrangements and working hours of staff. These obstacles require flexible and imaginative strategies which ensure that all members of staff are included in professional learning. Where senior leaders protect time for staff to work together to review and improve the curriculum, staff feel valued and develop increased understanding of standards and expectations within curriculum areas.

A considerable challenge for staff in all schools is balancing breadth and depth of learning whilst still offering children and young people personalisation and choice in their curriculum. Most primary schools and early learning and childcare settings offer effective opportunities for personalisation and choice as part of their curriculum structures. For example, staff offer children the choice of topics to learn through and support children to have some choice in what and how they learn. This is helping children in a few schools to choose tasks which are at the right level of challenge for them. However, covering the breadth and depth of learning across the experiences and outcomes in all curricular areas remains a challenge.

At the secondary stages, staff provide personalisation and choice through subject options at different stages, and through wider involvement in the work of the school. Staff offer experiences and outcomes which include developing skills and knowledge in social enterprise and ‘world of work' initiatives. Young people choose from a range of accredited awards, partnership links with colleges and community initiatives to tailor their choices to their preferences. This is often aligned to leadership opportunities, for example as Young Sports Leaders.

Staff in ASN settings are skilled at designing individualised programmes tailored to meet the targets and commitments in formal plans for each child or young person.

Moving forward, senior leaders will need to contine to work with their staff teams within and across schools to find creative solutions to balance the challenges they face in their local areas.

# Engaging the school community

Staff in schools and settings use a variety of methods to engage with their stakeholders. Approaches to engagement vary, but often include surveys, workshops, focus groups and existing relationships such as the Parent Council and pupil leadership groups. Staff gather the views of parents, children, young people and partners about elements of the curriculum, most notably when developing or refreshing the rationale for the curriculum. Staff now need to move beyond consultation towards joint production to ensure that the curriculum offer in their establishment is relevant and coherent for their learners. In particular, there is scope for staff to strengthen the influence that children and young people have on the design of their curriculum.

## Staff

In most schools and settings, staff identify and take forward improvements through self-evaluation and school improvement planning. Senior leaders encourage staff to undertake leadership roles to develop specific areas of the curriculum. Staff often work together to lead curriculum improvements. This helps them understand the curriculum better and feel ownership of it. For example, in primary schools, teachers often work together to develop progressive learning pathways for specific areas of the curriculum. In secondary schools, middle leaders have a key role in leading curriculum development, at both whole school and department level. For example, they are often involved in developing the curriculum rationale with senior leaders and ensuring that the curriculum offer within individual subject areas meets young people’s needs.

Staff in special schools develop important networks with other schools who work with children with similar additional support needs. There are examples of staff in schools working in partnership across ELC, primary, secondary and post-school settings to ensure depth and challenge in areas of the curriculum but this is an approach that could be strengthened across the country.

Overall, staff are committed to undertaking professional learning to improve the curriculum. They would welcome more access to high-quality, subject specific professional learning to ensure curriculum programmes are based on the most up-to-date research and knowledge. In a few schools, senior leaders shared concerns that a few teachers do not see curriculum development as their role. They believe this level of development work is the remit of senior leaders, rather than being an integral part of the role of all teachers as outlined in the [General Teaching Council of Scotland Professional Standards](https://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-standards/professional-standards-for-teachers/). Senior leaders are tackling this through professional learning and as part of staff review and development processes.

## Children and young people

Senior leaders and staff recognise the need to ensure that the voice of children and young people contributes meaningfully to the design, delivery and evaluation of the curriculum. This has been driven by influences such as the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, and through explicit local and national statements of educational policy. It is crucial that schools encourage effective integration of the views of children and young people in curriculum design. Children and young people are clear that they want their curriculum to be relevant to them and to their lives in Scotland. They want greater choice in what and how they learn.

Staff in ELC settings design the curriculum through balancing adult-led planning with planning which is responsive to children’s interests and needs. Children’s views are often captured and used to plan experiences. In most primary schools, staff engage and consult with children about their learning. This helps to identify topics and approaches that appeal to children’s interests and motivations.

Across primary schools, children are increasingly contributing to discussions to plan and shape their learning, for example in developing outdoor learning. In a few schools, staff use the national evaluation resource [‘How Good is OUR School?](https://education.gov.scot/inspection-and-review/inspection-frameworks/hgios4/)’ well to support children and young people in identifying how their views are taken into account and what impact they have. Where this is most effective, children and young people are able to effect change and influence the curriculum and are more highly motivated in their learning.

Staff in secondary schools need to do more to ensure that views of young people influence the design of the curriculum in the senior phase. Positive examples include young people working with school leaders and partners to review curricular opportunities and vocational courses. For example, following consultation on career aspirations and interests, staff review the planned pathways available and which Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) courses might be added to meet needs and interests.

Moving forward, senior leaders and staff should ensure authentic engagement of children and young people in the full cycle of designing the curriculum from planning, through delivery, to self-evaluation.

## Parents and carers

During periods of remote learning, staff strengthened the way they communicated with parents and carers, often using a wider range of online platforms. Senior leaders regularly consult with parents and seek their views on aspects of the life of the school. Consultation often focuses on developing a clear rationale for the curriculum and seeking views on school improvement priorities. However, engaging parents and carers meaningfully and collaboratively in designing the curriculum remains a challenge across all sectors. Staff should now build on existing approaches to increase opportunities for parents and carers to be more actively involved in co-developing and co-designing the curriculum.

In ELC settings and special schools, staff work closely with parents to understand individual children and young people’s needs. Staff use this information well to plan the curriculum to meet these individual needs. Across sectors, parents often enhance children and young people’s learning within the curriculum through sharing their skills and knowledge. This helps children and young people see the relevance of skills for learning, life and work.

Parent Councils often support the delivery of the curriculum through fundraising to implement or enhance the curriculum offer, for example through trips and residential experiences. Staff now need to do more to involve parents and carers in shaping, reviewing and evaluating the curriculum. In secondary schools, parental involvement is at times limited to the number of subjects young people undertake in the senior phase.

## Partners

Partners play an important role in supporting and enhancing curriculum design and delivery, with individuals and groups contributing important, specific skills and knowledge. Staff across all sectors engage with a wide variety of partners to enhance their curriculum offer. This is helping to create choice and to support children and young people’s learning.

In ELC settings and primary schools, partners have a key role in contributing to the development of universal approaches, such as nurture or language development, as well as providing targeted support. Many partner organisations provide additional resources to support children to feel included and engaged in their curriculum. Staff draw on a wide range of local and national partners to enhance children’s learning through the curriculum, for example in religious and moral education and health and wellbeing. Partners could do more to support the design of the curriculum so that children and young people develop their skills and attributes to become responsible citizens and effective contributors to society.

Important links with SDS help staff in secondary schools to take account of labour market intelligence. This allows staff to relate their curriculum to employment opportunities and support young people to develop clear pathways for their career aspirations. Secondary schools often take creative approaches to ensure that departments offer as wide a range of qualifications as possible, for example offering politics and criminology qualifications within Modern Studies.

In schools that involve community learning and development (CLD) staff and CLD partners to support children and young people to access the curriculum, there are clear benefits. For example, CLD staff support children and young people to achieve a range of accredited awards such as Dynamic Youth Awards and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award.

However, it is not yet commonplace to involve CLD staff in curriculum design. Staff could develop stronger relationships with CLD colleagues to influence curriculum design and widen the curriculum offer for all learners.

Children and young people, parents and staff value the contributions of partners to delivering learning experiences within curriculum. However, settings and schools could strengthen the involvement of partners in planning, designing and evaluating their curriculums. This would enhance community confidence in the quality and credibility of the curriculum, as well as making effective use of an important resource in times of economic challenge.

# Conclusion

Overall, HM Inspectors found that the extent to which the curriculum takes account of national and local needs, and the way in which staff across sectors involve stakeholders in designing the curriculum, varies across Scotland.

The most notable changes in the curriculum in the last few years have been driven by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes building on learning with and through digital technologies, and focusing on addressing gaps in learning in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. Staff drew on digital strategies, refining their practice over subsequent phases of remote learning. This approach demonstrates how staff in schools and settings can and do adapt their curriculum to meet the needs of learners in a rapidly changing landscape.

Staff across all sectors want to ensure that the curriculum for their children and young people is relevant to their needs. Staff continue to use local and national curriculum guidance to help them develop their curriculum. Whilst there is a lot of positive work taking place, there are still a number of barriers to ensure the curriculum is designed to help children and young people to achieve the best possible outcomes.

It is clear that there are significant challenges for senior leaders and staff in designing and developing the curriculum: barriers exist in relation to recruiting and retaining staff, access to digital technology and balancing time for collaborative professional learning. Staff are using a range of creative approaches to overcome these challenges. However, they need to do more to ensure that they are delivering a curriculum that has breadth, depth and progression in learning to all children and young people.

Staff in settings and schools increasingly use their knowledge of their communities to ensure that children and young people’s needs are being addressed through the curriculum, particularly in relation to literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. Overall, this is helping children and young people to make better progress. Staff are using school grounds and the local area more regularly to facilitate learning outdoors.

Senior leaders need to implement efficient, responsive and effective improvement planning processes which include explicit, regular and robust reviews of their curriculum. Listening to the views, concerns, needs and aspirations of learners will support developing an up-to-date curriculum which takes account of technological, social, economic and environmental changes as they arise.

Children and young people are living in a rapidly changing world. Developments in technology, including Artificial Intelligence, climate change and global political issues, impact on the lives of our learners, now and in the future. Schools and settings must ensure that their curriculum is flexible and responsive to these needs and that it supports learners to develop the skills and knowledge needed to live and thrive in times of change.

# Appendix 1

## Schools and settings visited

HM Inspectors would like to thank children and young people, staff, local authorities officers, and parents for their engagement during this thematic inspection.

### Early learning and childcare settings

Duthie Park, Aberdeen City Council

Wallacetown Early Years Centre, South Ayrshire Council

Whitecrook Early Learning and Childcare Centre, West Dunbartonshire Council

Woodacre Nursery, Glasgow City Council

### Primary schools

Airth Primary School and Nursery Class, Falkirk Council

Allans Primary School and Nursery Class, Stirling Council

Auchterhouse Primary School and Nursery Class, Angus Council

Breasclete School, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Cannich Bridge Primary School and Nursery Class, The Highland Council

Carnegie Primary School and Nursery Class, Fife Council

Comrie Primary School, Perth and Kinross Council

Corstorphine Primary School, Edinburgh City Council

Deer Park Primary Primary School, Clackmannanshire Council

Dounby Primary School, Orkney Islands Council

Fraserburgh South Park Primary School and Nursery Class, Aberdeenshire Council

Garnetbank Primary School, Glasgow City Council

Gullane Primary School and Nursery Class, East Lothian Council

Hazelhead Primary School, Aberdeen City Council

Killermont Primary School, East Dunbartonshire Council

Kilmacolm Primary School and Nursery Class, Inverclyde Council

Kings Park Primary School, Midlothian Council

Mearns Primary School, East Renfrewshire Council

Mossvale Primary School, Renfrewshire Council

Newton Primary School and Nursery Class, Scottish Borders Council

Rosebank Primary School, Dundee City Council

St Winnings Primary School, North Ayrshire Council

Sorn Primary School, East Ayrshire Council

Sound Primary School and Nursery Class, Shetland Islands Council

Thornlie Primary School, North Lanarkshire Council

Ulva Primary School, Argyll and Bute Council

Westfield Primary School and Nursery Class, West Lothian Council

### Secondary schools

Alva Academy, Clackmannanshire Council

Arbroath High School, Angus Council

Bannockburn High School, Stirling Council

Buckie High School, Moray Council

Dalbeattie High School, Dumfries and Galloway Council

Doon Academy, East Ayrshire Council

Golspie High School, Highland Council

Inverurie Academy, Aberdeenshire Council

Kirkintilloch High School, East Dunbartonshire Council

Liberton High School, The City of Edinburgh Council

Marr College, South Ayrshire Council

Morgan Academy, Dundee City Council

Oban High School, Argyll and Bute Council

St Columba’s High School, Inverclyde Council

Trinity High School, South Lanarkshire Council

### Special schools

Fairview School, Perth and Kinross Council

John Fergus, Fife Council

Kilpatrick School, West Dunbartonshire Council

Windsor Park, Falkirk Council

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[Evaluation of curriculum design in Scotland](https://education.gov.scot/inspection-and-review/hm-chief-inspector-reports-and-guidance/national-thematic-inspections/evaluation-of-curriculum-design-in-scotland/) is also available on the Education Scotland website.

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1. The national e-learning offer brings together nationally available live events, webinars, recorded lessons and online resources into a since space to support learning. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. e-Sgoil is a national e-learning service established in 2016 which provides live, interactive, online learning using technology to remove barriers and improve outcomes for young people. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Interdisciplinary learning is a planned experience that enables children and young people to learn across and beyond individual curriculum areas. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)