

Summarised inspection findings

Helmsdale Primary School

The Highland Council

16 May 2023

Key contextual information

Helmsdale Primary School serves a large rural catchment area spanning from Forsinard to Loth. There are 48 children on the roll arranged across three multi-stage classes. There is also a nursery class located within the school building. Almost all children live in Social Index of Multiple Deprivations decile four.

Helmsdale Primary School nursery class was inspected by the Care Inspectorate within the past 18 months, therefore, the local authority and headteacher had the option to include the nursery class as part of this inspection. We have agreed with the local authority and school that the nursery class is not part of this inspection. The findings set out below are for the primary school stages.

The headteacher of Helmsdale Primary School has previously had shared responsibility with Brora Primary School. An acting headteacher has been in post since August 2022 and currently has responsibility for only Helmsdale Primary School.

The school building underwent major refurbishment, causing a period of disruption for staff and children between August 2022 and March 2023. This saw the refurbishment of the gym hall, upgraded heating and plumbing systems and redecoration. The school sits in spacious grounds, including an outdoor classroom.

Over the past year and a half, periods of staff absence led to changes in staffing. Children have experienced recent disruption to learning due to several school closures days arising from a variety of reasons, including severe weather and building issues.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment

satisfactory

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

- The school community were involved in refreshing the school vision and values last session. Staff encourage children to demonstrate the school values; kind, respectful, resilient, motivated to achieve, curious and creative. All staff know children and their families very well and positive relationships are evident between staff and children across the school. This supports the majority of children to be actively engaged in their learning. The refreshed school values are not yet impacting sufficiently on the creation of a calm purposeful environment for learning in all classes.
- Staff recognise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's resilience and have developed a range of relevant approaches to support children. This is beginning to enable children to be more resilient in their learning. Children are at the early stages of developing

their understanding of children's rights and how these relate to them through regular assemblies. As planned, staff should extend this understanding further through classroom experiences.

- In almost all lessons, staff share the purpose of learning with children. Staff should now involve children more frequently in identifying how they will know that they have been successful. In the majority of lessons, staff provide clear explanations and instructions. Staff should develop further their use of questioning to stimulate and extend children's learning. In a few lessons, teachers provide effective verbal and written feedback. This is not yet having sufficient impact on helping children make better progress in their learning. In the majority of lessons, children have some opportunities to work in pairs and small groups to undertake practical activities. Overall, the pace of learning should be increased. Staff need to ensure that all children are appropriately challenged in their learning. For example, the current carousel approach to active learning is not meeting the needs of all children. Staff should review the effectiveness of the soft start to the school day to ensure time in school is used effectively.
- Children's level of engagement is heightened when learning is relevant to their experiences and the local community. Children have access to expansive school grounds and a range of local learning environments, including the coastline. This supports them to engage in activities such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds national birdwatch. Senior leaders, and the very supportive Parent Council, have been highly successful in securing significant grant funding from a range of sources. This is beginning to enable staff to extend the range of learning experiences and environments provided to children, such as the recent addition of an outdoor classroom and associated resources. Staff use partnerships with the local community and organisations to enrich children's experiences of learning outdoors. For example, the developing partnership working with the neighbouring kitchen garden. Staff should now review the planning of outdoor learning to ensure children develop associated skills in a planned and progressive way.
- Staff should engage with national practice guidance and professional learning to inform the introduction of play-based learning for younger children. This should support staff to develop the play environment, provide experiences that are age and stage appropriate, and develop further their interactions with children.
- Children are not yet using digital technology as a regular feature of their learning experiences. Staff should develop children's use of digital technology for a range of purposes. Children have ready access to the spacious school library and a range of fiction and non-fiction books. There is significant potential to develop the use of this further to enhance children's learning experiences and foster a love of reading.
- Teachers use a wide range of standardised and summative assessment in different contexts across the curriculum. They should develop further their knowledge and skills in interpreting assessment data to ensure it informs accurately planned learning and teaching. Teachers should reengage with a planned programme of moderation activities to develop a shared understanding of children's progress through Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) levels.
- Staff capture examples of children's work, achievements and assessment information in individual profiles. They add to these profiles as children move through the school. Staff have correctly identified the need to involve children more closely in the selection of work for inclusion in their profile. The majority of children have opportunities for self and peer assessment, particularly in writing. As planned, staff should extend these opportunities across the curriculum. This should support children to understand better what they do well and what they need to do to improve.

- There are significant weaknesses in the approaches used by staff to plan learning. Staff highlight CfE experiences and outcomes and National Benchmarks to record planned learning. They also refer to local authority progression pathways for literacy and numeracy. This is not yet ensuring that children's learning is progressive and builds on prior learning across all areas of the curriculum. The lack of robust long and medium-term planning results in gaps in learning. Staff should ensure that children receive their entitlement to a broad, balanced curriculum. Assessment is not yet integral to planning. As a result, staff are not using assessment effectively to inform planning or to monitor robustly the effectiveness of universal and targeted interventions. Children have a few opportunities to contribute to planned learning and would welcome more opportunities to do so. Staff should review their approach to planning for learning involving a range of curriculum areas. There is a need to identify more clearly the experiences and outcomes being delivered through the chosen topics.
- The acting headteacher has introduced more robust quality assurance procedures to inform the development of more consistent approaches to learning and teaching across the school. The development of a new electronic tracking system is beginning to enable staff to capture children's progress more accurately. Staff now engage in learning conversations with the acting headteacher to discuss children's progress in relation to literacy and numeracy. This supports the identification of children who would benefit from additional support. As planned, the frequency of these meetings should be increased. Senior leaders and staff should now ensure that the outcomes of planned interventions are reviewed with greater rigour. This will help to support children to make the best possible progress.
- Support staff work effectively with a range of partners to meet the identified needs of individual children. Individual education plans (IEPs) include clear learning targets. Pupil Equity Funding is used appropriately to enhance staffing to support targeted interventions, such as supporting reading through games.

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.

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, attainment in literacy and numeracy is satisfactory. Across the school, the majority of children are making satisfactory progress in reading and numeracy. Children's progress in listening and talking and writing is weak. Around a quarter of children are making satisfactory progress in writing. The majority of children with additional support needs are making satisfactory progress in relation to their individual learning targets.
- Teachers' professional judgement is not yet sufficiently reliable. As planned, staff should reengage with moderation activities within the school and in partnership with other schools to address this. Inspection evidence and standardised assessments indicate that there are a minority of children who have the potential to be achieving more.

Listening and talking

- Children across the school demonstrate their talking skills through events, such as narrating the nativity play and speaking at assemblies. Staff should increase their expectations of children's listening and talking skills. Across all stages, children should demonstrate greater respect for others when talking and listening. Children should be supported to strengthen their tools for listening, such as taking turns and using visual cues such as eye-contact and body language. They should develop further their ability to build on the ideas of others by asking or answering questions.

Reading

- The majority of children at early level use their knowledge of sounds, letters and patterns to read words. The majority recognise accurately individual and blended sounds. Children at early level would benefit from applying their skills in listening and responding appropriately when watching, reading and listening to different texts. Children at first and second levels talk well about different authors and can explain their preference for a chosen text. They respond appropriately to different types of questions and offer their ideas about the author's use of characters and settings. Children are less confident when responding to inferential questions. Most children would benefit from reading a broader range of texts to develop further their reading for enjoyment. They should strengthen their skills in finding, selecting and using information for a specific purpose. When reading aloud a familiar piece of text, most children should do so using more expression.

Writing

- Across all stages, most children are not predicted to achieve expected levels in writing. As a matter of priority, staff need to raise children's attainment in writing. Children are most motivated to apply their writing skills when it relates to real-life experiences, such as writing persuasive letters or instructions. This supports children to use relevant vocabulary

appropriate to the context. Children across all stages need to improve their spelling skills, use of punctuation and the presentation of their written work. Children at early and first levels should be supported to improve the accuracy of letter formation. They would benefit from increased opportunities to write through imaginary and real-life situations through play. At second level, children should strengthen their skills in applying features of a chosen genre when writing imaginatively. Children need increased opportunities to write more often for a greater range of purposes. This will help them to strengthen their ability to convey information, describe events and share opinions in different ways.

Numeracy and mathematics

- Teacher's use of diagnostic assessment to identify gaps in children's understanding of numeracy is beginning to have a positive impact on children's attainment. The lack of regular planned learning for aspects of mathematics is having a detrimental impact on children's overall progress.

Number, money and measure

- At early level, the majority of children can count forwards and backwards to 30 with confidence. They add numbers to 20 with accuracy but find subtraction within 20 challenging. Children are not yet able to identify a range of coins to 20 pence and would benefit from applying their skills related to money through play. At first level, the majority of children apply a range of strategies to solve number problems. Most children have a strong understanding of different units of measurement and their purpose. They can apply their knowledge of measure during practical activities, such when making bird feeders. At second level, the majority of children understand equivalent forms of common fractions, decimals and percentages. Children should continue to develop their skills in identifying multiples and factors of whole numbers. They should apply these skills when solving relevant problems in number, money and measurement.

Shape, position and movement

- Across all stages, most children identify confidently a range of two-dimensional shapes. Their understanding of three-dimensional objects and their properties is less secure. Children at early level and first level understand the language of position and direction, including forwards, backwards, left and right. At second level, most children apply their knowledge of circumference and radius well to inform problem-solving robotics challenges. Overall, staff should ensure that children develop their skills and understanding of shape, position and movement in a planned, progressive way.

Information handling

- Children across all stages have had very limited experience of information handling since the start of the school year. Staff should plan more regular opportunities for children to develop and extend their skills in collecting, presenting and interpreting data in a variety of ways, including using technology. Children will benefit from applying these skills in real-life, meaningful contexts.

Attainment over time

- The system in place to capture children's attainment over time is not sufficiently robust to accurately inform children's progress. The acting headteacher has recently introduced a new electronic tracking system to track children's attainment over time. This should better inform approaches to raise attainment and identify attainment gaps. Teachers have begun to engage in regular learning conversations with the acting headteacher to discuss individual children's progress. It is too early to assess the impact of these changes on improving outcomes for children.

- Significant weaknesses in the approaches used to plan children's learning are having a detrimental impact on children's progress. Staff should ensure that assessment is used effectively to inform planning, enabling them to accelerate approaches to raising attainment. Greater use of progression pathways across all curriculum areas will support staff to ensure that children build on prior learning more effectively.

Overall quality of learners' achievements

- Staff ensure that wider achievement is celebrated and shared through assemblies, attractive displays, newsletters and social media. Children engage with a wide range of experiences through participation in activities both within school and within their local community. They participate in community events, such as the annual river opening parade. Children are beginning to develop their leadership skills through participating in a range of committees, including the recently re-formed pupil council, Rota-Kids and involvement in the local Playspace Project. Children undertaking official roles, such as president, vice-president and secretary, speak positively about how this builds their confidence. Staff should now track children's participation and skills development through wider achievement activities.

Equity for all learners

- All staff have a good understanding of the socio, economic and cultural context of the school. They use this well to inform the opportunities they provide. Staff ensure the school's rural location does not hinder children's participation in sporting tournaments and swimming. Children's participation in these events enables them to develop further their skills, engage with children from other schools and gain a sense of achievement.
- Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) is used appropriately to support groups and individuals in their learning through the provision of enhanced staffing. As a result, the majority of children facing barriers to learning as a result of their socio-economic circumstances are making satisfactory progress in literacy and numeracy.

Other relevant evidence

- The headteacher should ensure that all children experience two hours of physical education each week.

Explanation of terms of quantity

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

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|-------------------------|---------------|
| 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.