

1 February 2022

Dear Parent/Carer

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) are currently carrying out visits to some schools and early learning and childcare settings across Scotland. When we wrote to you after the last inspection of Common Thread Schools, we said that we would engage with the schools to report on progress. We recently engaged in discussion with staff and the proprietor and carried out a visit to Common Thread Schools. Our engagement helped us learn more about how young people and their families have been supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard about approaches that have been working well to support young people's health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the acting headteacher and the Head of Care and Education the school's progress in taking forward the recommendations from our original inspection.

This letter sets out what we found during our visit.

### **Supporting children, young people and families through COVID-19**

The school continues to operate over two sites, referred to as hubs. One hub is based in Dumfries and one in Kilmarnock. The school previously had a third hub in Denny, which has now closed. The school has had significant changes in staffing both in leadership roles and staff at all levels. It has been challenging to recruit and retain teaching staff. Almost all education staff have been in post for less than a year. A leadership consultant is currently in the role of acting headteacher on a part-time basis. She is closely supported by a principal teacher.

COVID-19 has impacted significantly on the running of the school. Staff absence, coupled with the need to self-isolate has led to both hubs closing for short periods of time on a number of occasions. Most young people found the transition to online learning challenging. Whilst a few engaged fully with the variety of planned experiences provided by the school, a minority did not engage at all.

Staff have been responsive to the wellbeing of young people and families. Staff conducted regular wellbeing check-ins, including home visits, to maintain positive relationships and support young people's health and wellbeing.

Prior to COVID-19, the school did not have resources in place to deliver online learning effectively. Senior leaders correctly identified this as an area of priority and worked with partners to successfully address this issue. As a result, all young people have been given a digital device to support them to re-engage with learning.

A minority of learners had gaps in their ability to use technology effectively. Staff have worked well with partners to support young people to develop their digital skills and engage better in online learning activities. As a result, a minority of young people engaged well with education staff online and participated better in learning activities during periods of school closure.

## Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

The acting headteacher took the decision to review current practices and introduce new systems and approaches to provide the school with a renewed sense of direction. Aply supported by the principal teacher, she has made a purposeful start to providing the school with a clear sense of direction. They have produced a 'new model' with revised vision and values. The vision and values takes better account of the context of the school and the need to strengthen what young people are able to achieve at the school. However, the new model is still at an early stage of development and is not yet having any significant impact on young people's experiences or outcomes.

As part of the new model, senior leaders are aiming to have more consistent practices across the two hubs. Education staff in the two sites are communicating better, have started to share resources and are beginning to adopt a similar curriculum. This is a positive start but the two hubs continue to operate very differently. Although each hub provides a similarly welcoming environment, approaches to learning and teaching, health and wellbeing and promoting positive behaviour continue to differ greatly in each site.

Learners attendance continues to be a major area of concern. A number of young people are on part-time learning programmes. All staff need to consider new, creative and bespoke approaches to supporting young people to engage better with their learning. In doing so, expectations of what young people can achieve needs to improve.

The acting headteacher and principal teacher both recognise the importance of self-evaluation in ensuring continuous improvement. They have introduced a small range of worthwhile quality assurance activities to support self-evaluation, notably in seeking the views of learners, parents, staff and partners. Senior leaders now need to introduce more systematic self-evaluation activities. Tracking and monitoring of young people's progress with their attainment and achievement needs to play a far more prominent role.

Senior leaders have introduced a small range of activities aimed at better seeking the views of learners, parents and partners. Through participating in student councils, young people attending the Dumfries hub are able to contribute to future learning activities and offer their opinion on potential school trips and areas of focus for interdisciplinary learning. Senior leaders now need to ensure that the views of learners, parents and partners play a more prominent role in identifying ways to improve the school.

The school has undergone significant changes in leadership and staffing over recent years. As a result, curriculum development has been fractured and too slow. Senior leaders have recognised the need to increase the pace of change and to provide more structure and direction to the school curriculum. As a result, both school hubs are able to offer young people an appropriate length of school day. Staff now need to provide bespoke full-time learning programmes which meets better young people's needs and aspirations.

Education staff from across the two hubs are engaging more in professional learning activities aimed at building a shared understanding of assessment and tracking. A new health and wellbeing tracker has been developed for use across both hubs. Overall, the development of tracking systems remains at the early stages and will take time to be fully embedded across the school. Senior leaders need to continue to provide opportunities for

professional development to help staff plan effective learning which supports young people to make better progress.

Teachers continue to remain at the early stages of planning learning using Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes across the broad general education. In the senior phase, staff are more confident in planning and tracking young people's progress towards achieving National Qualifications.

### What happens next?

Understandably, the school has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These have had a significant impact on the work of the school. Staff are prioritising their plans to support recovery. As a result, the school needs more time to take forward the recommendations from the original inspection. We will carry out another visit to the school within one year of the publication of this letter. When we carry out another visit, we will write to you informing you of the progress the school has made.

Steven McPherson  
HM Inspector