



# Visit to community learning and development in The Highland Council

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# 1. Background

This report follows a visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education to The Highland Council, to look at community learning and development (CLD) provision. This follows a previous inspection where it was agreed that further engagement was required. During the visit we met with local authority officers, CLD partners, staff, volunteers, learners and community representatives. Our engagement enabled HM Inspectors to learn more about how learners and communities have been supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard about approaches that have been working well to support health and wellbeing, and learning. We also discussed progress in taking forward the recommendations from the original inspection.

This report sets out what we found during our visit.

## 2. CLD in the current context

The Highland Council covers a large geographical area including many rural and isolated villages and households. This adds complexity when supporting learners and communities and providing COVID-19 emergency responses. At the start of the pandemic, organisations and volunteers across Highland came together quickly in local areas, often in community resilience networks, to support their communities. They provided for care needs such as delivering meals and are now offering learning and social activities as restrictions allow. This increased partnership working is helping to create a greater sense of community cohesion in many areas. However, there is a risk of volunteers becoming exhausted and many community organisations are concerned about how COVID-19 has disrupted their normal recruitment and succession planning arrangements. Partners are aware of how COVID-19 has pushed many individuals and households into poverty and increased vulnerabilities that already existed. Increasingly, they are working together to address common challenges such as improving food security, getting everyone digitally connected and supporting mental health.

During the first period of school and facility closures, the initial challenge was to get learners online and connected. Highlife Highland (HLH) workers supported adult learners through telephone conversations and 'how to' guides. Learners gained confidence and essential skills such as how to keep connected online. In a few cases they applied these skills in new jobs or to access further learning. The move to more online provision is increasing access to services for many people in more remote communities across Highland. However, the need to upskill many adult learners to use technology is an ongoing challenge. Practitioners continue to adapt their practice to accommodate current COVID-19 guidelines and to meet the changing needs of learners. Partners are working hard to provide support to families, including those who have been most affected by COVID-19. For example, the Care and Learning Alliance now have buggy walking groups for families across Highland. Education Recovery Funding was used effectively to meet the needs and interests of young people through targeted support. In Dingwall, a detached youth work programme grew into an outdoor learning project. The young people benefited from taking part in a range of activities and the project had a positive impact

on the mental health of several participants. The Place is a strong example of a community run organisation adapting well to COVID-19 restrictions and securing a new site, now known as the Field, to deliver youth work sessions safely outdoors.

### 3. Progress with recommendations from previous report

Since the start of the pandemic, CLD practitioners have been redeployed at times to provide emergency COVID-19 support. In addition several practitioners were placed on furlough during periods of national lockdown, including CLD staff in HLH. Inevitably, these changes have delayed progress in taking forward aspects of the recommendations from the original report as partners focussed on addressing needs related to COVID-19. However, since our last visit there has been improvement in strengthening the structures that support the governance of CLD. In spring 2021, the Delivery Group changed to become a Strategic CLD Partnership responsible for setting direction and an Operational CLD group with a wide membership. Partners have a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each of these groups and their own place within them. Although at an early stage, this is already enhancing decision making in CLD planning. The recently approved 2021-24 CLD plan has a clear set of shared priorities that link to other strategies and drivers including the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan. The plan was developed through consultation with stakeholders and there is greater ownership by partners. There remains a need to improve shared self-evaluation and performance monitoring to support CLD governance and planning. However, the new governance structures, CLD plan, and an increasingly shared sense of direction provide a strong starting point for improvement. The Strategic Partnership now need to ensure that they monitor the plan effectively and that progress is reported regularly against each priority to all stakeholders.

Across Highland, skilled and ambitious community organisations and volunteers continue to improve their communities. Muir of Ord Development Trust is actively involved in CLD planning structures. They provide support to voluntary groups in the area such as Muir of Ord Men's Shed development group. They are also effective in attracting funding into the town to deliver recovery projects such as a new film festival for summer 2022. Progress is being made to involve communities in local planning. The move to a more thematic approach to locality planning is enabling many partners to better understand how they can contribute. In Caithness, community planning partners are working together well to address a range of inequalities across their communities. Local organisations are at the heart of this development, working alongside services as equal partners. Their multiagency partnership, Caithness Cares, is starting to address long standing issues around mental health and substance misuse by enabling partners to work together and share resources more effectively. There is an ongoing need to ensure that partnership structures reflect the CLD landscape across Highland and that any barriers to strong partnership working are overcome. There remain concerns about how well the Voluntary Youth Network is integrated into CLD planning. This now needs to be addressed with some urgency by senior strategic leaders in Highland Council in order to provide the best opportunities for children and young people to learn and achieve.

Across Highland there are many examples of well-planned and delivered community learning activities that are improving lives. For example, the children, young people and parents who participated in the Milton summer programme enjoyed six weeks of fun activities. Several of the parents are now taking part in a creative writing group, as a result of their participation. Almost

all members of the group have additional support needs and are benefiting from the friendly, supportive and encouraging environment. However, there remains a need to strengthen adult learning pathways.

## 4. What happens next?

Understandably, The Highland Council and its CLD partners have been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. They are implementing plans to support recovery. However, The Highland Council and its CLD partners need more time to take forward the areas for improvement. We will continue our engagement with this local authority and we will ask for a report on progress within six months of the visit. We will work together with The Highland Council and the CLD Strategic Partnership to agree what will happen next, which includes whether another visit is required.

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