

14 December 2021

Dear Parent/Carer

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education 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 Linn Moor School, we said that we would engage with the school to report on progress. We recently engaged in discussion with staff and a representative of Voluntary Service Aberdeen (VSA) and carried out a virtual meeting to Linn Moor School. Our engagement helped us learn more about how children and 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 children's and young people's health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the headteacher and a representative from VSA 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

Linn Moor School is a residential special school which meets the needs of learners with complex additional needs, including autism. Situated beyond the village of Peterculter, the school's ethos is focused on providing learning in literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing and life skills.

The recently appointed headteacher has a clear understanding of the impact COVID-19 has had on learners at Linn Moor School. Commendably, the school did not close throughout the pandemic. Following national COVID-19 guidance, staff responded positively to measuring the risk COVID-19 posed against the need to continue to provide an individualised approach to learning. Using risk assessments, initially daily and then later weekly, the senior management team created small 'household bubbles' based in the residential services. A new school uniform for wearing when learning in 'household bubbles' helped learners to accept the change to their routines more readily. The 'bubbles' ensured that children and young people received continuity of care and education from a small team of familiar staff. Incidents of challenging behaviour reduced because of these measures. The greater collaboration between care and education staff helps learners to feel more secure and well supported.

Staff adapted the school building into individual rooms to shield the very few learners who were of high risk of infection. A small core group of familiar staff supported these learners. Parents were involved in the planning and welcomed the development of these individual care and education packages. Staff welcomed the strong COVID-19 measures such as regular testing, enhanced cleaning, the wearing of personal protective equipment and restrictions to movements around the school. Learners responded positively to staff taking these measures to keep them safe. Parents were able to visit their children safely, when national advice permitted, at the school's off site farm. Staff provided transport for parents so that these visits could continue. The school bought additional information technology equipment to enable children and young people to keep in regular contact with their families.

Individualised timetables ensured that all learners accessed timetabled campus-based outdoor learning and therapies, including music therapy and sensory circuits. The COVID-19 pandemic imposed significant restrictions on learner participation in the wider community. To counteract a potential negative impact on children's and young people's progress, staff focused on using the natural environment provided by the school grounds more effectively. Learners identified their favourite outdoor activities. Staff used learner's ideas to develop progressive, individualised and themed outdoor health and wellbeing learning activities. Whole school themes helped to create a sense of community during the pandemic. For example, staff engaged children and young people successfully by creating a map of the surrounding area to explore the countryside.

In supporting the wellbeing of staff, regular supervision sessions enable staff to share concerns and reflect on their practice. Independent counsellors and mental health first aiders were available for staff to consult when necessary. Senior leaders revised the school's staff competency framework. Staff welcomed the use of the revised framework, as this helped them to work with senior leaders to identify individualised learning needs, including safeguarding. Senior managers recruited more staff to ensure all learners' needs were met.

The headteacher has gathered the views of learners, parents and staff in developing a recovery plan as part of its improvement plan. The plan focuses on health and wellbeing and the resumption of community educational visits.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

Staff regularly review their practice as part of the school's self-evaluation processes. Through monthly meetings, prior to COVID-19 restrictions, staff identify the school's strengths and areas for development. This information is used to measure the impact of the school improvement priorities on their practice and identify where future work is needed. Professional learning days provide staff with opportunities for an in-depth focus on the progress they are making towards achieving the school's and national priorities. Staff share their thoughts on the school's improvement journey using the school's feedback forms. Key themes arising from these forms, such as the review of individual timetables and community visits, are addressed by the headteacher.

The headteacher regularly monitors the work of the school. She does this by reviewing information from assessment trackers, staff school improvement review meetings, 'have your say' forms, and pupil and parent comments. She works with the whole school community to identify the strengths of the school and the next school improvement priorities. The headteacher should now create a whole school monitoring calendar to support staff's understanding of school's yearly self-evaluation programme.

Staff work with children and young people to review regularly their learning stories. These stories provide examples of learners' progress over time, along with their enjoyment of and engagement with activities. Children and young people value the learning journeys. Staff celebrate children's and young people's achievements with them. This is contributing to raising learners' self-esteem and understanding of their abilities. The school's management system enables the headteacher to review the information from children's and young people's individual learning journeys to understand the progress they are making at an

individual and whole school level over time. This supports the headteacher to identify future curriculum improvement priorities.

Parents enjoy open and transparent communication with staff and the headteacher. Parents and partners views about learners' progress are gathered through the twice yearly looked after and accommodated reviews. Children's and young people's views are gathered using 'have your say' forms. Staff review learning plans and individualised education plans with parents at these meetings. This helps to inform the next steps in learning. Plans to reintroduce a parental questionnaire focusing on communication and wellbeing, delayed because of COVID-19, should now be taken forward. The information gathered should help inform the next school improvement plan.

A newly formed student council meets regularly with the headteacher to share their ideas about how to improve the school. Recently, they discussed how to visit the local community whilst maintaining social distancing and following other guidelines. The student council members recognise that sign language is a useful communication tool for learners to use to help them to communicate with others. To support the understanding of signs across the school, the student council introduced a sign of the week board. Learners decided on the new school uniform and on their favourite community visits. 'Have your say' forms are personalised to meet the communication needs of each learner. Children and young people successfully use these forms to express their views about campus life.

The curriculum has been designed to highlight how learners engage with their environment in order to develop important skills for learning, life and work. A three-year thematic plan across the broad general education helps learners to successfully build on prior learning. Teachers track learner's achievements. This helps teachers to identify and celebrate small steps of progress. The headteacher plans to increase the range and scope of national qualifications and awards in the senior phase of the school.

Learners use the extensive school grounds to support their learning outdoors and engage well with the onsite learning activities. Staff record learner's engagement in different activities. This helps teachers to plan appropriately interesting learning episodes to meet the individual needs of children and young people. Individual timetables are designed to provide personalised learning pathways for children and young people. These timetables build on learners' strengths and needs. During the pandemic, children and young people enjoyed music therapy, and yoga. These approaches aid learners to put into practice skills to help calm themselves during periods of distress.

Individualised education programmes focus on the individual needs of children and young people in literacy, numeracy and health & wellbeing and the termly theme. Team meetings, reinstated since the pandemic enable all staff to share their views about the progress learners make.

Professionals track learners' progress to secure positive outcomes for children and young people. Fundamental behaviour assessments help staff to understand better learners' behaviour, to reduce behaviour that is challenging and to promote inclusion. Commendably, behaviour-related incidents reduced during COVID-19. The school plans to review and streamline all of its tracking systems to help teachers gain a greater and more detailed understanding of learners' attainment.

Transitions are appropriately personalised to meet the needs of individuals and their families. Strong approaches to transitions into, through the school, and to positive destinations help learners to feel safe and secure.

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 implementing plans to support recovery. Staff have addressed the recommendations from the original inspection successfully. As a result, we will make no more visits to the school in connection with the original inspection. VSA will continue to inform parents about the school's progress as part of its usual arrangements for reporting on the quality of its education service.

Sue Williams
HM Inspector