

6 September 2022

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 Sandwick Junior High, we said that we would engage with the school to report on progress. We recently engaged in discussion with staff and the local authority and carried out a visit to Sandwick Junior High. 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 local authority officer 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

COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on staffing. Recruitment, retention of staff and covering staff absences have been and continue to be challenging. During the pandemic, the headteacher aimed to ensure continuity of learning through the provision of remote learning. An online learning policy was developed, and staff were upskilled in the use of digital platforms. In those instances where learners did not have access to suitable digital devices or needed to share these with others in the home, the school ensured that children and young people were provided with hard copies of learning materials and resources. The school was also the Shetland Council's South mainland hub for vulnerable children and young people. Senior leaders are proud of the high levels of uptake at the hub although there were some operational challenges. The school supported the wider local community through the delivery of food parcels in partnership with Shetland Islands Council's Early Help Team. A number of measures were also put in place to support learning such as online parents' meetings and transition events. Stakeholders hold mixed views on the effectiveness of these measures introduced during remote learning.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

The vision and values of Sandwick Junior High have been refreshed to reflect the uniqueness of the school. The values of the school are referenced consistently by class teachers. They are displayed on signage throughout the school and aligned to approaches to celebrating success in the form of praise postcards linked to school values. However, the vision and values and aims are not yet informing the work of the school. Staff and parents would welcome greater engagement with senior leaders and regular timely communication to instill a greater sense of confidence in the direction of the school. The headteacher should capitalise on the willingness and enthusiasm of staff and parents to support the wider life and work of the school.

There continues to be important areas of weakness across a number of aspects of school practice and provision such as the curriculum, learning and teaching, and strategic

leadership. Senior leaders recognise the need to accelerate efforts in moving forward with these important areas of school practice and provision. More effective direction, guidance and leadership is required in taking forward improvement priorities across the school in a more structured, consistent and collaborative way.

Senior leaders developed a monitoring calendar in 2019 which provides a comprehensive outline of a range of approaches to monitoring and evaluating the work of the school. Approaches include learning observations and monitoring and tracking meetings. There is an urgent need to fully implement this planned approach to quality assurance taking into account the pandemic.

Staff have developed new courses and programmes across the school that provide more relevant learning contexts to children and young people. For example, the space station topic is linked to the local space station in Shetland. A number of new courses have also been developed such as forensic science and lifeguarding. In the primary department, curricular frameworks have been introduced to help teachers with their planning. There is now a need to ensure that all staff adopt a common approach is using these frameworks. This has the potential to support teachers planning that builds on children's prior learning and supports children's progress across the curriculum.

Across the school, children and young people better understand the purpose of their learning. However, they are still not sufficiently aware of their strengths and next steps in learning. Teachers do not sufficiently check the progress that children and young people are making in their class on a day to day basis. Far too often, all learners are asked to undertake the same learning activity. This means that many children and young people are not appropriately challenged in their learning and therefore do not make as much progress as they could.

The school has begun to improve its approaches to recording the progress of children and young people. At the primary stages assessment is being used more effectively to record children's progress in writing. At the secondary stages, there is now an overview of children and young people's progress across the curriculum. However, senior leaders recognise that there is more work to do to ensure approaches to assessment and recording are sufficiently robust or reliable across the school.

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 also carry out another visit to the school within nine months 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.

Guch Dhillon
HM Inspector