

18 January 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 Lochnell Primary School and early learning and childcare (ELC) class, 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 Lochnell Primary School and ELC. Our engagement helped us learn more about how children 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 health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the headteacher, staff and local authority officers 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 and families through COVID-19

At the time of the most recent visit in November 2021, there were 117 children across the primary stages. The ELC class is registered for 32 children. There have been changes to leadership and staffing since the original inspection. The headteacher took up post in November 2019. Two principal teachers now share leadership duties for part of each week. As a result of COVID-19, the planned refurbishment of the ELC class in 2020 was delayed. This is now almost complete and offers children a bright and attractive learning environment.

In a very short space of time, the headteacher has gained rightfully the respect of the whole school community. Despite the significant challenges of leading the school through the pandemic, the headteacher has also led skilfully a programme of transformational change. Children are making better progress in their learning as a result.

The headteacher and staff have worked tirelessly to provide support for families. This has included carrying out 'doorstep' home visits; delivering school lunches; ensuring all families have access to a digital device; and providing ongoing reassurance and encouragement during uncertain times. This has ensured that the school community has felt connected and included throughout periods of learning at home.

The headteacher's foresight meant that the school was ready to move to learning online from the beginning of the first period of remote learning in early 2020. Teachers' and ELC practitioners' confidence grew in using digital technology over the course of the pandemic. Children benefited from being able to join in activities, lessons and whole school assemblies online. As children continued to learn from home, the headteacher's aim was to put some fun back in to school life. Teachers and practitioners planned many creative and memorable learning experiences for children. In one innovative example, teachers and children in P4 to P7 took part in a 'virtual school trip' to London from their own homes.

Improving the mental and emotional wellbeing of children continues to be a key priority for the headteacher and staff. Teachers use a helpful visual tool to 'check in' with children each day. This gives all children strategies to talk regularly about their own feelings.

Teachers and practitioners have used ongoing assessments to track children's progress in learning, throughout the periods of remote learning, and when children returned to the school buildings. This has helped to ensure that all children receive the right support or challenge when they need it.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

The whole school community has worked very well together to help the school continue to improve. Led very effectively by the headteacher, the school has made clear progress in meeting each of the recommendations that were identified at the previous inspection.

The headteacher has established very effective systems for quality assuring the work of the school and ELC class. She has created an ethos of trust and openness, where staff can reflect and discuss together what is working well and what needs to be further developed. As a result, staff feel empowered to lead improvements and to share good practice together. The headteacher ensures that the voices of children, parents and staff are heard. She values the views and opinions of all on what will help the school to continue to improve and grow.

Since the original inspection, staff have worked well together to improve how they use assessment information to inform next steps in children's learning. The headteacher and principal teachers have regular meetings with teachers and practitioners to check on the progress that children are making. Staff have participated in professional learning to refresh their approaches to learning and teaching. At the primary stages, teachers now plan lessons that are more challenging and have introduced better ways to give children feedback on their learning. They plan learning and share standards together to ensure that their professional judgements are secure and based on robust data. Taken together, these improved measures are leading increasingly to better attainment in literacy and numeracy.

In the ELC class, practitioners are improving their skills in using questions and conversations during play to support and extend children's learning. Since the refurbishment of the ELC setting, practitioners have worked extremely hard to ensure that the new learning spaces meet children's interests and needs. They are using the outdoors well to plan opportunities for children to explore, to be creative and to challenge themselves in their play.

Learning outdoors and learning about sustainability continue to be key features of the curriculum at Lochnell Primary. The school's community and business partners are helping staff to plan motivating and highly relevant topics and lessons. Working together, the whole school community has created a visual representation of the curriculum at Lochnell. Illustrated as a child's pathway from the ELC class through to P7, this curriculum rationale is meaningful to children of all ages. It celebrates the unique geography and heritage of the local area. Practitioners and teachers are focused on ensuring children develop the skills and knowledge they will need to be successful in their future learning, life and world of work. Under the highly effective leadership and vision of the headteacher, staff are making a difference for children.

What happens next?

Understandably, the school has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. 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. Argyll and Bute Council 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.

Lesley A Allan
HM Inspector