

15 February 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 Ballater School, 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 Ballater School. 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 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**

Staff have been responsive to the needs of children and their families during the COVID-19 restrictions. Their response to support the school community during the pandemic reflects national expectations and guidance well. Additional guidelines and routines across the school and nursery continue to promote a safe learning environment.

Teachers worked well together to agree consistent approaches during periods of remote learning. They monitored how well children participated in learning activities and took action to contact families to provide additional support where needed. Staff built effectively on the challenging experiences of the first period of remote learning. They provided improved learning experiences and support for children during the second period of remote learning. Children were positive about the introduction of virtual class meetings during this period.

Staff, who were more experienced in the use of digital technology, led the development of the online learning offer. The use of technology enabled wider aspects of school life to be captured and celebrated. For example, the end of year prize giving ceremony was held online.

Staff are clear that the health and wellbeing of all is at the heart of their recovery plans. Staff have found the use of an emotional support programme has helped children to talk about their feelings. Staff report that on the return to school in August 2021, children were unsettled and were not showing previous levels of respect for others in their interactions. Staff have worked well to address these challenges, creating a calm and purposeful learning environment.

The school community has welcomed improvements in the use of digital technology and communication. Parents are particularly positive about the weekly school updates which are allowing them to keep up with the life of the school.

## Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

The school has had a range of challenges since the inspection in June 2019. This, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, has had a significant impact on staff's ability to take forward all areas identified for improvement.

In the nursery, practitioners use assessment information from observations to identify and plan for children's next steps in learning. All practitioners have a shared focus on children's progress. They are developing a clear understanding of what each child needs to do to progress in their learning. This weekly focus on planning next steps for all individuals ensures practitioners provide learning experiences which challenge and engage children. All practitioners demonstrate a shared understanding of high quality interactions with children. They are responsive to children's needs and interests and use questioning skills effectively to extend children's learning.

In the school, staff have worked together to develop a new learning and teaching policy, 'What learning looks like'. This is at the early stages of implementation. It is providing a useful framework for staff to think about their approaches to teaching and is leading to increased consistency in approaches. The pupil-friendly version is also beginning to help children to understand what approaches to learning they are experiencing.

Staff have worked well to increase the breadth of the curriculum. Children are positive about these changes. They enjoy experiencing learning from a greater range of curriculum areas, particularly when learning is linked across several curriculum areas.

Staff have introduced a consistent approach to planning across the school. Further consideration must be given to how staff are planning learning, teaching and assessment. There is a need to develop robust approaches to planning assessment. Staff should then use the evidence generated to plan next steps in learning. This includes supporting children to understand progress in their learning and any steps they require to improve their learning.

The school's attainment data is not yet reliable. Staff should develop a robust system for monitoring children's progress. This will support staff to understand better how well children are progressing in their learning and what their areas for development are.

### What happens next?

Understandably, the school has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and staffing. These have had a significant impact on the work of the school. Staff are prioritising their plans to support recovery and school improvement. 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 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.

Stuart Cathro  
HM Inspector