

8 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 Milltimber Primary School and Nursery 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 Milltimber Primary School and Nursery Class. 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

Since our previous visit, there have been significant changes to staffing at Milltimber Primary School and Nursery Class. This includes a new headteacher and a very recently appointed acting deputy headteacher. COVID-19 and periods of remote learning have understandably impacted on the pace of taking forward improvements. Staff prioritised providing online learning during remote learning periods effectively. Social distancing guidelines impacted negatively on children's ability to engage in pupil leadership opportunities that were in place previously. Staff have started to resume pupil leadership roles to provide children with opportunities to influence change across the school and nursery.

Teachers developed useful approaches to deliver learning using digital technology during remote learning periods. Children received prompt feedback from teachers about their work. Parents we spoke to told us this feedback was very useful in helping children to engage with their learning. A hub was available in the school for a small number of children who were well supported by staff. Staff made regular calls to parents to check on children's wellbeing during periods of remote learning. Staff rightly prioritised children's health and wellbeing upon return to in-school learning. Overall, surveys carried out by staff indicated that most children returned to school with positive wellbeing.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

In the short space of time the headteacher has been in post, she has provided strong leadership and has acted decisively to start addressing areas for improvement. She has developed a well thought out strategic plan for school improvement. This is now providing a clearer sense of direction across the school community. Senior leaders and staff are clearer about their roles in leading improvement priorities across the school and nursery. The headteacher's welcomed guidance is supporting staff to begin to implement the changes that are required. More time is needed for staff to implement changes fully and evaluate their impact to raise attainment and achievement across the school and nursery.

Staff now feel more confident to undertake leadership roles. They value the help from the headteacher in creating action plans for groups to develop children's leadership skills. Children we spoke to are keen to undertake more leadership roles. Staff should now take forward their plans to increase children's leadership roles which includes further opportunities for children to make decisions about the new school building.

Parents we spoke to were positive about the increased range of communication they now receive from the school. Parents are now beginning to be more involved in reviewing change and improvement. For example, parents report that a planned new homework policy is based on their feedback and suggestions. The new staff team in the nursery have focused on developing relationships with parents and children. They have worked effectively to communicate information to parents about children's experiences. This is building positive relationships and creating a climate of trust.

Professional learning is supporting teachers to have a clearer understanding of high quality learning and teaching across the school. Most children understand what they need to do to be successful in their learning. Teachers recognise a next step is to provide learning that is set at the right level of difficulty for all learners. Senior leaders have taken positive action to help to develop the skills of staff in this area. Children have regular opportunities to use digital technologies as a tool for learning in the school. This is supporting children to develop their digital skills well and motivates them in their learning. The nursery team have very recently introduced online planning as a way of enabling all staff to contribute more effectively to children's learning. This approach is in the early stages of development. Practitioners need more time to review and reflect on the impact this planning has on children's experiences and progress.

The headteacher and staff are at the early stages of reviewing the curriculum across the school and nursery. In P1, children now learn through play which is more suited to their age and stage of development. This approach will need further time to develop and embed. Staff worked together to develop programmes to support the teaching of aspects of writing, reading and implement a whole school mathematics programme. Teachers report that this is helping them to better support children's progression in learning in writing and mathematics.

Children in the nursery now have daily access to an outdoor area. Staff report that this is developing children's communication skills. Children have worked in partnership with the River Dee Trust to engage in meaningful outdoor learning experiences. Staff should now build on this positive start to develop a progressive programme of outdoor learning experiences which could be developed further in the new school premises. Staff are now rebuilding partnership working in line with COVID-19 restrictions. A strong partnership is developing with the builder of the new school premises.

Overall, progress in the development of the curriculum across the school and nursery has been limited as a result of the pandemic. Senior leaders have identified effectively key drivers for the curriculum such as pupil participation and diversity. Staff have developed useful plans to take this important area forward and have begun to use these to develop the curriculum. More time is needed for senior leaders and staff to review the curriculum and develop and embed changes.

Staff have introduced refreshed approaches to meeting the needs of children requiring additional support and these are now beginning to improve outcomes for children. For example, new tracking documentation enables staff to have a clearer view of children's attainment over time. This helps staff to have a more holistic view of children's needs and plan appropriate support more promptly. Parents we spoke to told us that the changes to approaches used by staff for children with additional needs are now more helpful to their children. Parents now receive information about their child's targets and have opportunities to contribute to their Child's Plan. Parents welcome these opportunities to contribute to their child's learning journey. As planned, the headteacher and staff should now develop a whole school policy to meet the needs of learners.

What happens next?

Milltimber Primary School and Nursery Class has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the particular challenges in terms of continuity of staff have impacted on the pace of change. Staff are implementing plans to support recovery. There is now a clear action plan for addressing priorities from the original inspection. Staff are now better placed to implement these priorities fully. Understandably, progress has been limited in areas and it is too early to assess the impact of recent changes. We recognise that Milltimber Primary School and Nursery Class needs some more time to implement fully its priorities for improvement. We have asked Aberdeen City Council to provide us with further information about the school's progress within one year of the publication of the letter. Following this, we will work together with local authority officers to agree whether any further engagement from Education Scotland is required. Otherwise, Aberdeen City 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.

Helen Mulholland
HM Inspector