

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 Sgoil Bhàgh a' Chaisteilⁱ, we said that we would engage with the school to report on progress for Gaelic Learner and Medium Education, particularly at the secondary stages. We recently engaged in discussion with staff and the local authority by carrying out a virtual visit to the school. This engagement helped us learn more about how children, 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 and young people's health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the headteacher, staff and a local authority officer the school's progress in taking forward the recommendations for improvement for Gaelic from our original inspection.

Supporting children, young people and families through COVID-19

Senior leaders and staff have shown dedication and care in coping with the challenges of COVID-19. Commendably, they describe their school as now 'feeling even more like a family'. Teams and departments across the school are in regular contact. Staff stayed in touch with children and young people during times of learning from home and in the hub. They have a strategy in place to support children and young people who may feel anxious about COVID-19. Staff now have stronger professional relationships with external health and wellbeing partners.

Staff are proud of how they have increased their skills in digital technology during the pandemic. They used these skills to maintain learning, through Gaelic and English, during times of working from home. Staff continue to focus on features of effective digital learning and teaching to strengthen their approaches. They are making more use of learning outdoors in their island environment. There is now an additional teacher in the sgoil àraich.ⁱⁱ This is to help children hear and absorb Gaelic as they learn and play through total immersion. At all stages, there needs to be a strong emphasis on very regular use of Gaelic as children and young people gain high levels of fluency on returning to school. Senior leaders need to ensure that written policy is clear on realising total immersion in the sgoil àraich.

Staff are embracing a much wider range of professional learning through access to online events, without the need for significant travel. Staff use this professional learning to address areas for improvement identified in the original inspection. For example, learning, teaching, assessment and promoting consistency in learners' standards of achievement. Staff have found that the challenges of COVID-19 have increased the time needed for preparing lessons and assessing learners' progress.

Progress with an area for improvement from the original inspection

Senior leaders are now clearer on the need to develop a shared vision for their school, including as a Gaelic status school. Staffing has been increased to deliver a greater proportion of Gaelic Medium Education. Parents and the island community continue to

support their school very well in taking forward the Gaelic language. They cherish Gaelic as an important aspect of their context. Staff have made very important changes to their roles, responsibilities and professional learning to lead change for Gaelic Learner and Medium Education. This includes a year-long immersion course in Gaelic, with others enrolled for the learners' course, 'Speak Gaelic'. Commendably, staff are using knowledge and skills gained from their professional learning to introduce social subjects through Gaelic at the secondary stages. This success has been celebrated with a Scottish Gaelic Award 2021. Senior leaders and staff should continue to apply the General Teaching Council of Scotland professional standards to Gaelic language and culture. This will assist in building and sustaining a shared vision for a Gaelic status school.

Senior leaders show creativity in how they form classes to make more learning and support available through Gaelic in secondary S1 to S3. They have added art and design through the medium of Gaelic to the curriculum. This is through a partnership arrangement for recruitment with the digital platform, e-Sgoil. The teacher is delivering art through the medium of Gaelic at Sgoil Bhàgh a' Chaisteil, and also to other schools across Scotland. Senior leaders should now monitor the curriculum to ensure young people have sufficient time to develop skills and knowledge in literacy and Gàidhlig.ⁱⁱⁱ Young people in Gaelic Medium Education also learn through projects. This is with partners and in opportunities for wider achievements. Young people are deepening further their understanding of the importance of Gaelic language, culture and music to their island and beyond.

Going forward, senior leaders need to ensure that a strong strategic overview drives continuous planning and delivery of the curriculum for Gaelic. The school's improvement plan needs to be explicit about increasing the number of young people achieving national qualifications and awards in Gaelic Medium and Learner Education. It also needs to define how the statutory duty of providing a greater proportion of learning through Gaelic is fulfilled. Senior leaders advised us of the greater use and celebration of Gaelic in the life and work of the school. They should ensure higher visibility of written Gaelic as one way of conveying value for learning in and through Gaelic.

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. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar are working closely with the school as part of strengthening the council's strategy for Gaelic. The council should ensure that the school has sufficient teaching resources to meet the aims of a Gaelic status school. Staff are taking appropriate action to address the recommendations from the original inspection on Gaelic. As a result, we will make no more visits to the school in connection with the original inspection. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar 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.

Joan Esson
HM Inspector

- i Sgoil Bhàgh a' Chaisteil is the Gaelic for Castlebay School.
- ii Sgoil Àraich is the Gaelic term for early learning and childcare setting. This is how the school refers to their provision for Gaelic and English.
- iii Gàidhlig means Gaelic.