

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 Dingwall Academy, we said that we would engage with the school to report on progress. 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 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 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 virtual visit.

Supporting children, young people and families through COVID-19

Under the direction of the headteacher, the challenges associated with delivering education during the pandemic are being managed well. The headteacher took steps to promote equity, providing all learners with access to appropriate learning resources. Senior leaders and staff continue to ensure that arrangements are in place to maintain the safety of the school community. Staff adapted practices to take account of the particular challenges of the pandemic and the required changes to the way education is delivered.

Teachers produced resource packs for young people experiencing difficulty in accessing the internet. Digital devices and access to the internet were made available as a priority when required. Additional support to learners and their families ensured access to online learning. Staff reviewed their approaches to delivering learning and teaching to take account of the need for online learning. They worked well collaboratively to upskill each other and deliver remote learning. Senior leaders and staff adapted well to the changing circumstances of remote and in school learning, with the school timetable adapted accordingly. Provision was made to enable all young people to access their learning online or in school in a planned programme that retained the breadth of their curriculum. The headteacher told us of how technology was used as a solution to enable learners of Dingwall Academy to meet together for assemblies. Technology is now becoming more embedded in the work of the school to enhance the quality of learning and teaching and as a means of communicating with parents.

In their handling of COVID-19, regular contact is maintained with young people and their families. Staff, both teaching and non-teaching, assume designated roles to support the wellbeing of young people and ensure continued engagement with their learning. Daily registration maintains regular contact with learners. Planned reviews monitor the wellbeing and progress of young people and inform targeted actions. Weekly wellbeing checks and clear procedures to identify and respond to concerns further support young people and their families. Young people with additional needs, or those facing barriers to their learning, benefit from provision delivered in school. Working closely with young people and their families,

senior leaders and staff now share an even better understanding of the different challenges facing learners.

The wellbeing of young people is a key feature of the school's recovery plan. Identifying any gaps in young people's learning as a result of the pandemic continues to be a priority as part of the recovery process. The headteacher is confident that subject specialists are successfully addressing gaps in young people's learning. Weekly wellbeing checks draw on the experience of the pandemic and are being embedded as a feature of school life. The importance of wellbeing is at the heart of the school community. Staff effectively supported young people and their families in handling the challenges of the pandemic. The wider school community appreciate their efforts and the pressure this has placed on them.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

The headteacher, supported by colleagues, is building capacity across the school around three key drivers: 'rigour, accountability and consistency'. The headteacher and the local authority are confident that this is raising ambition across the school community.

Staff work well collaboratively. Most principal teachers recognise their key role in developing consistent learning experiences. Improved feedback is encouraging young people to be more independent as learners. Digital technologies are now being embedded within existing practices to enhance the quality of learning and teaching. Information technology is now also being used to improve communication channels with the wider school community.

Staff are empowered to refine practices with the creation of a new learning, teaching and assessment working group, supported with sub-groups. Staff take lead roles in encouraging discussions across subject areas. Wider professional enquiry on approaches to teaching is building capacity and providing a context for the sharing of practice. Teachers are also engaged in working with colleagues across the local authority including an initiative to refine teaching approaches. The headteacher highlights an increased staff confidence in applying digital technology to support learning and teaching.

The focus on self-evaluation for self-improvement is impacting on the quality of learning. Working with the headteacher, all members of the school's senior management team have a central role in ensuring a whole school approach to quality improvement. The school continues to engage with a range of parties and is working actively to extend these links.

Learners are encouraged to be more involved in planning and evaluating learning. School information indicates that learners are developing a better understanding of their strengths and how to improve. This builds on work undertaken during the pandemic where young people were invited to reflect on their learning. Valuable information will be provided by embedding the approach in classroom practice. This will support teachers to plan appropriate levels of challenge and a pace of learning to suit the needs of individual learners.

The opportunity for young people to express their views is being extended. Across subjects, young people have the opportunity to influence learning experiences. Young people are also assuming additional school responsibilities.

The school launched successfully a new tracking system to monitor young people's progress across the broad general education (BGE) and the senior phase. A refined target-setting process, introduced for young people in the senior phase, is now extended to include all year groups. This information is enabling staff to identify better those young people requiring targeted support.

The headteacher reports that the young people learning in Gaelic Medium Education continue to flourish and develop their fluency during periods of learning from home. Specialists in Gaelic now meet with all young people in Gaelic Medium Education at Dingwall Academy for an assembly. This is increasing the situations in which young people speak Gaelic and build connections with other speakers of Gaelic. Teachers are also planning Gaelic-related inputs for English medium assemblies. Staff have increased the visibility of Gaelic on their website, with some very relevant information now available. This is in part promoting Gaelic as a skill for lifelong learning, life and work. The headteacher aims for Gaelic to be part of all young people's learning as an important element of their local area. To achieve this, senior leaders should continue to empower all staff to contribute to promoting Gaelic. Clearer identified roles and responsibilities for leading Gaelic, as a medium of learning and immersion, will help to sustain a whole school approach. Senior leaders are still to make deep use of resources bespoke to Gaelic to inform more robust whole-school strategic planning. A starting point would be to consider how the recent review of the S3 curriculum, the increased use of digital learning and specialist Gaelic partners can lead to more learning through Gaelic.

Through professional learning, staff are developing a greater expertise in the use of national attainment information to know better what is going well and identify issues to be addressed. Moderation activities across the local authority are increasing confidence in the reliability of the assessment information being gathered. There is now a sharper focus on the monitoring and tracking of young people's progress and development. Young people's progress is discussed with learners through the school's tutor time programme. A revised e-portfolio has been introduced for learners in the BGE, with support sessions for young people and their parents.

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. 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. The Highland 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.

Charles Rooney
HM Inspector