

### *Introduction*

In 2015, a team of inspectors from Education Scotland carried out a full inspection of Alness Academy. The report on this visit was published in May 2015. The conclusion of the report was that Education Scotland would continue to engage with the school until identified improvements had been made.

Subsequently, a team of Education Scotland inspectors visited the school in December 2016 to evaluate the school's progress since the original inspection. The Continuing Engagement Report following that visit was published in March 2017, and concluded that a further joint Education Scotland/Highland Council visit should take place early in 2018, to review the school's ongoing improvement work. In February 2018 this joint visit took place and, despite further improvements being identified, it was agreed that another, similar joint visit should be made to the school in March 2019 to check on continued progress with the school's agreed improvement agenda.

This further joint visit took place on 20 and 21 March 2019, and was led by the school's Quality Improvement Officer, Donald Paterson. Aileen Monaghan, HMI (part of the original 2015 HMI team) and Lesley Taylor, Highland Council Quality Improvement Officer were also on the team. During our visit, the team gathered evidence of progress made. This involved reviewing interventions put in place since the last joint visit as well as data and other information regarding attainment, staff development and the views of young people. Classroom visits across the departments and year groups were carried out to evaluate the quality of the experience of young people in their learning. Discussion groups were held with the school's Senior Management Team, young people from the school, middle leaders in the school, unpromoted teaching staff, parents and partners whose work supports the school. This report sets out what we found.

Since the last visit in February 2018, staffing at the school has been much more stable. A new permanent headteacher has been appointed and there are now two permanent and one acting deputy headteachers. Staffing at Faculty Head and class teacher level has been much more stable during the past year, and this stability at all levels across the school, together with the strong leadership drive of the headteacher, has helped to allow progress with the agreed improvement priorities. The visiting team found a very positive ethos in the school, with staff at all levels contributing well to improvement activities. Parents and partners told us that they felt that the school is making positive progress and that the new headteacher has supported the school strongly in addressing areas for improvement.

This report is organised under headings that reflect the areas for focus arising from the original 2015 inspection and subsequent continuing engagement visits. In the original inspection there were four areas identified for improvement. In this report two have been combined (self-evaluation and leadership leading to improved outcomes for young people) as there are strong links across the work done in these two areas.

### *Improve learning and teaching to engage young people and support them in attaining as highly as possible*

During the two-day visit the team observed twenty four lessons, covering all departments and the full range of year groups. Overall, we saw increased consistency in the classroom experiences of young people compared to previous Education Scotland and Highland Council visits. Teaching staff and the school leadership team are committed to sharing good practice and this work will continue to develop consistency in this area.

In almost all of the lessons we visited we saw learning intentions and success criteria being used effectively to help young people to understand the purpose of their learning. In a minority of the lessons we saw, pupils were involved in helping to develop the success criteria, and where this happened, it helped them to understand exactly how they would demonstrate successful learning. Young people told us that in a few classes they are given the opportunity to decide how to present their learning for assessment. They told us that they liked to be given this kind of responsibility and choice in class and would like to see that happening across more classes. Young people told us that they are feeling increasingly confident about what next steps they need to take in their learning and how to improve the quality of their work. This increased confidence is the direct result of the increase in consistency across classes in the use of learning intentions and success criteria.

In the majority of the classes we visited we saw young people being actively engaged in learning, using collaborative approaches. In most of the classes we visited we saw young people being given responsibility for leading learning. There is still scope for further professional dialogue to take place, in consultation with learners, about how to increase opportunities for young people to be active in their learning and to lead learning within lessons.

In most of the lessons we visited we saw work which was differentiated appropriately to meet the needs of all learners in the class. This included examples of classroom learning that was very clearly aimed at raising the expectations of young people about how much they can attain. This focus on maximising attainment will impact on the school's overall attainment data. Support staff, such as Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs), were used effectively to help learners access the curriculum. Staff are aware of the various barriers young people are facing as they make progress in their learning and are committed to doing all that they can to minimise the impact of these barriers.

Teachers were well prepared for all of the lessons we observed and instructions and explanations were clear. Relationships between teachers and young people were positive in all of the lessons we observed and, overall, there was a positive ethos in classrooms. Young people told us that they felt that staff cared about their learning and wanted them to do well, and this point was reinforced by the parents we spoke to. These positive relationships meant that in all of the classes we saw polite and courteous interactions between adults and young people, and learning was not affected by any inappropriate conduct by young people. Where young people needed to be reminded of the importance of good conduct, this was handled in a sensitive and supportive way. This evidence of increasingly positive relationships across the school is reflected in whole school data which shows a decreasing number of exclusions.

In fewer than half of the lessons we visited we saw digital resources being used to support and enhance young people's learning: there is scope to develop this aspect of learning and teaching further, and the arrival of laptops for all learners later in the session will provide many opportunities for this to happen.

Teachers told us about the way that they are using Curriculum for Excellence benchmarks and Scottish Qualifications Authority standards to help them to track young people's progress. This is beginning to allow staff to have greater knowledge about young people's learning and next steps. Further work on moderation of standards and assessment processes is planned and this will help to support work on tracking and monitoring.

All of the points mentioned above will impact positively on attainment at Alness Academy, though as yet such improvements have not been strongly evident in SQA performance data.

Data relating to literacy and numeracy attainment in the broad general education shows an improving picture. Staff used Curriculum for Excellence benchmarks and standardised assessments to demonstrate improved attainment to the team. Pupil Equity Fund money is being well used to close the attainment gap in literacy and numeracy in S1-S3.

In the senior phase, the attainment of young people in literacy and numeracy has tended to be in line with the attainment of young people from similar backgrounds in other parts of Scotland. Teachers are now planning for any learner leaving school to ensure they have a literacy and numeracy qualification before leaving the school.

There is still considerable scope for attainment in the senior phase to improve so that young people are attaining more highly than learners from similar backgrounds in other parts of Scotland. Work being done to improve learning and teaching (see above) and the curriculum (see below) should start to have an impact this session, and will continue to do so in the future. The school leadership team were able to show us compelling data and other information that indicates that improvements will begin to be evident in senior phase attainment when SQA results are published in August 2019. It is very important that this happens, because in some measures of the school's 2018 attainment, young people in Alness Academy performed at a lower level than learners from similar backgrounds in other parts of Scotland. While there are a number of measures where Alness Academy's young people are attaining in line with learners from similar backgrounds in other parts of Scotland, there is considerable scope to improve attainment further. This is being addressed in various ways in the school, for example by developing interventions to improve course presentation levels and to reduce the number of young people receiving "no awards" in SQA courses.

Raising attainment for the young people of Alness Academy remains the key focus for ongoing work right across the whole school community.

In terms of wider achievement, young people are achieving a range of skills and attributes through participation in sport, culture, citizenship and through developing leadership skills. Senior leaders and staff now need to put in place clear tracking data to show progress across the range of skills and attributes being achieved. This will ensure the school tracks all learners' overall achievement and enables them to better support learners who demonstrate a limited achievement profile. Learners achieve a variety of accreditation to support their development of skills for life and work. This includes through enterprise activities, work placement awards, community work and developing an understanding of the importance of wellbeing. Learners are developing their presentation skills through a variety of performances including dance and music performances in public. Citizenship skills are developing through participation in for example, the Highland Leadership Programme, Youth Achievement Awards, Saltire awards and Personal Finance Awards. Young people develop their physical fitness, confidence and leadership skills through participation in a wide range of sporting activities including football, badminton and basketball.

Over the last two years, almost all young people who left school have moved to a positive destination. This sits in line with the VC in four out of the last five years. In 2017/2018 the majority of learners left school for either higher education (HE) or further education (FE). For those going into employment the majority of employment opportunities are in construction and the care profession. The school is developing partnerships with local businesses to support young people moving into employment.

The school leadership team and staff at all levels in the school are, increasingly, analysing attainment data to ensure that young people attain to the best of their abilities. Sharing of

practice across the school is also being used to develop consistency in presentation policy and raising expectations of attainment. This work is ongoing and will be responsive to the 2018/19 attainment data when it becomes available. Faculty Heads and Faculty teaching staff attend attainment meetings with the headteacher and deputy headteachers to discuss attainment and this focus and rigour means that all staff are clear about their role in improving attainment, not just in their own departments but in terms of the school's overall data.

### *Review and develop the curriculum to ensure it meets the needs of all young people*

The last two Education Scotland visits had already identified improvements in the curriculum on offer in the senior phase (S4 to S6). This work has continued and the curricular offer in the school's senior phase (S4-S6) is increasingly meeting the needs of young people. New courses have been introduced and further courses (such as Skills for Work Construction) will be introduced in session 19/20. The concept of lateral progression in the senior phase has helped young people plan a coherent route through the curriculum. Young people are now much clearer about the support mechanisms in place to help them to make decisions when they are choosing subjects, and they now understand much more clearly how to plan their curriculum to help them to reach positive destinations when they leave school.

The school continues to work with partners to provide some courses beyond the school, for example in collaboration with the local college. Departments are being encouraged to make links with local businesses and organisations with a view to building curricular support involving the wider school community. Work has been ongoing in the last year to ensure that the curriculum young people experience is suitably challenging. For example, there has been a much more rigorous approach to the use of study periods, and systems have been put in place to ensure that young people do not drop out of courses when there is still a likelihood of success with appropriate interventions. There is much more rigour being applied to the way young people are supported in the senior phase curriculum to ensure that all young people are in the right courses and at the right level to maximise their attainment.

The school has developed and extended approaches to maximising attainment by gathering evidence of young people meeting assessment standards in S3, allowing for accreditation in the senior phase. Work has been done to explore ways in which the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework can be used to increase opportunities for attainment. Partnership working continues to provide flexible and meaningful learning experiences for targeted young people, and is supporting personal development, wellbeing and youth achievement awards.

There is still scope to develop the curriculum in the broad general education (S1 to S3) to ensure that young people are clear about the way courses contribute to their learning and development of skills and pave the way for success in the senior phase. Staff told us that this reconsideration of the broad general education is a key priority. Work has been done to review and develop the school's Personal and Social Education (PSE) courses to ensure that they meet the needs of young people, both in terms of supporting their health and wellbeing and developing their understanding of their progress through the curriculum. There is a greater focus on the health and wellbeing indicators in PSE now, which means that young people are increasingly able to speak about these matters. Young people now have greater input into the content of the PSE courses and there is scope for this to increase further, especially in the broad general education. Further development of the PSE curriculum will build on the recommendations of the national review of provision in this part of the curriculum.

Young people all receive their entitlement to cover the experiences and outcomes in the broad general education, though there is scope to revisit the delivery of religious and moral education

(RME). Young people were not able to describe how their skills and knowledge in RME were developing. Young people make some limited option choices at the end of S2, but continue to study in all curricular areas in S3. This process of making choices is appropriate in allowing a degree of personalisation and choice for young people in S3, while ensuring that they continue to access the full breadth of the curriculum. There is now scope for further consideration about how enhanced opportunities for personalisation and choice within courses will help young people to develop knowledge and skills at Curriculum for Excellence fourth level, leading to higher attainment in S4 and beyond.

Young people are now much clearer about who they would see as a key adult who knew them well as individuals and as learners. All of the young people we spoke to about this knew who they would talk to if they were facing difficulties with their health and wellbeing or about their learning overall. Young people were much clearer about the role of pupil support staff in the school and valued the one-to-one interviews that they have with these key personnel.

Continuing work is being done in departments to track young people's progress through the curriculum. Moderation of standards and assessment approaches is helping staff to become more consistent in their judgements about attainment, and this in turn helps young people to understand the way their skills and knowledge are developing over time. Continued work on moderation will help to make tracking and monitoring in the school increasingly rigorous.

The appointment of a member of staff to focus for one day per week on employability will help in the process of ensuring that young people are clear about how they can develop skills that will be relevant in the workplace after they have completed their education. This appointment will also be very important as the school continues to develop partnerships with the local business community.

Wider achievement opportunities have long been a feature of the curriculum at Alness Academy. An example of this is the work being done on Rock Challenge, which involves a large number of young people and staff (more examples are given above). In addition, young people and staff told us about many other opportunities in the curriculum for wider achievement of many different types, for example in sport, music, and science. Staff in the school are committed to helping young people receive accreditation for their work in the area of wider achievement, for example through the use of the Saltire Award. Staff are aware of the need to develop systematic tracking processes so that young people are clearer about the skills they are developing when they participate in wider achievement activities. This will be a priority in the coming year.

### *Develop self-evaluation and leadership further to ensure it leads consistently to improvements in young people's learning and achievements*

The school has continued to take steps to increase the involvement of young people in the life of the school, and there are now more opportunities for young people to develop leadership skills, for example through the expanded student committee and other pupil voice focus groups. Young people told us that their views are increasingly being sought and that they are able to contribute to improvements in the school. There are also more informal ways in which young people can express their views, for example in discussions with the headteacher, to which young people are randomly invited. Young people appreciated the ways that faculties increasingly seek their views about courses and approaches to learning. They felt their views were listened to when this happened. Young people are much clearer now about what has changed as a result of their views being expressed, and they feel that their entitlement to be heard is a reality. There is still scope to develop self-evaluation approaches that take even greater account of the views of learners, for example as the school develops the concept of an ideal lesson at Alness Academy

and in the development of next session's improvement plan. The headteacher has planned extensive work with young people to further develop leadership skills, including accessing Columba 1400.

Stability in terms of staffing has helped as community links have developed further in the last year. Partners to the school told us that they feel that the school is very open to engaging with them and gathering their views. It will be important that the school continues to develop these links with school community partners, especially in the areas of learning and teaching, curriculum development and revising the school's vision, values and aims.

There are also increasing opportunities for staff to be involved in self-evaluation and improvement planning. Staff working groups are in place and members of these groups told us that they feel that their views are being listened to and that conclusions reached will have an impact on improvement activity in the school. Staff were very clear about the newly agreed "unique selling points" of the school (leadership and aspiration) and felt that this focus was empowering. Staff are fully behind the work to be done in the coming months to turn this concept of leadership and aspiration into improved outcomes for young people. Alignment between departmental improvement plans and the overall school improvement plan is much clearer now, and staff are aware of the school's focus on closing the attainment gap and what this means in terms of their own day to day practice and strategic planning.

Self-evaluation processes in the school are becoming increasingly rigorous. Revised approaches to analysis of data, gathering people's views and direct observations have led to the school being increasingly self-aware. Ongoing development of self-evaluation processes involving the whole school community will help to embed the sense of all being fully engaged in the school's improvement activity.

Overall, there is a very clear strategic direction in the school and all of the groups we spoke to during the visit agreed that this was the case.

### *What happens next?*

While there is still scope for further improvement, especially in terms of raising attainment and tracking achievement, the visiting team concluded that we have confidence that the school leadership team and school staff in general have the capacity to bring about continuing progress. The stability in school staffing has been a significant factor in allowing us to reach this conclusion. As the school prepares for the move to the new building in 2020 there is a recognisable sense of excitement across the whole school community about what the future holds for Alness Academy. The role of the new headteacher in developing this sense of optimism and positivity has been of crucial importance and staff told us that they felt reinvigorated about their work at the school. Staff, pupils and members of the wider school community told us that they had an increased sense of pride in Alness Academy.

Education Scotland will, therefore, make no further visits to the school in connection with the original inspection of 2015. Highland Council officers will continue to work with the school to support the work being done to bring about further improvements in the year ahead.

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**Quality Improvement Officer**  
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