



ORKNEY
ISLANDS COUNCIL

Item: 11

Education, Leisure and Housing Committee: 4 June 2025.

National Thematic Inspection:

Local Authority Approaches to Supporting Self-evaluation.

Report by Director of Education, Communities and Housing.

1. Overview

- 1.1. In June 2024, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education announced a national thematic inspection of local authorities in Scotland. The focus of this thematic inspection was on how local authorities support schools to improve.
- 1.2. This national thematic inspection enabled HM Inspectors to explore current priorities for improving school performance across all 32 local authorities in Scotland.
- 1.3. The inspection, which took place early in the academic year 2024-2025, gathered evidence on the following themes:
 - The implementation of effective improvement planning and standards and quality reporting.
 - Self- evaluation and quality assurance.
 - Professional learning.
 - Universal and targeted support and challenge.
- 1.4. The report, National Thematic Inspection: Local authority approaches to supporting school improvement, was published in March 2025.
- 1.5. As part of the national inspection, a team from Education Scotland visited Orkney in September/October 2024. During the visit, inspectors talked to senior leaders, local authority officers, parents/carers, headteachers, teachers, representatives from professional associations and elected members.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. It is recommended that members of the Committee:
 - i. Note the National Thematic Inspection: Local Authority Approaches to Supporting School Improvement Summarised Findings report, in respect of Orkney Islands Council, attached as Appendix 1 to this report

3. National Inspection Outcomes

- 3.1. Nationally, against a backdrop of significant fiscal challenge, the inspection found much to commend. The national report indicates that inspectors had seen strong examples of strategic leadership, robust data-driven self-evaluation, and collaborative cultures, where schools and local authorities work together to improve outcomes for children and young people.
- 3.2. They note that positive relationships, grounded in professional trust and respect, underpin many of these successes. In particular they cite effective leadership at all levels – central officers, school leaders, and middle leaders – as a powerful driver for sustainable improvement.
- 3.3. However, the national inspection also identified areas where improvement is needed. Inspectors point to variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities.
- 3.4. The report suggests that the effectiveness of self-evaluation processes requires strengthening, to maximise the progress of children and young people. It also suggests that strengthening leadership development at all levels is essential for building capacity for continuous improvement.

4. Local Inspection Findings

- 4.1. The summarised findings, arising from this visit to Orkney, which were then assimilated into the national report, are attached at Appendix 1.
- 4.2. Overall, the summarised findings offered few surprises. However, generally they support the local authority's understanding of itself as well as the success and challenge it has with respect to supporting school improvement.

For Further Information please contact:

Peter Diamond, Head of Education, extension 2436, Email peter.diamond@orkney.gov.uk.

Implications of Report

1. **Financial** – There are no financial implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.
2. **Legal** – There are no legal implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.
3. **Corporate Governance** Not applicable.
4. **Human Resources** – Not applicable.
5. **Equalities** – Equality Impact Assessment is not required for performance reporting.
6. **Island Communities Impact** - Island Communities Impact Assessment is not required for performance reporting.
7. **Links to Council Plan:** The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Council Plan strategic priorities:
 - ☐ Growing our economy.
 - ☒ Strengthening our Communities.
 - ☐ Developing our Infrastructure.
 - ☐ Transforming our Council.
8. **Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan:** The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priorities:
 - ☐ Cost of Living.
 - ☒ Sustainable Development.
 - ☐ Local Equality
 - ☐ Improving Population Health.
9. **Environmental and Climate Risk** – Not applicable.
10. **Risk** – Not applicable.
11. **Procurement** – Not applicable.
12. **Health and Safety** – Not applicable.
13. **Property and Assets** – Not applicable.
14. **Information Technology** – Not applicable..
15. **Cost of Living** – Not applicable.

List of Background Papers

[National Thematic Inspection: Local authority approaches to supporting school improvement,](#)

Appendix 1: National Thematic Inspection: Local authority approaches to supporting school improvement Summarised Findings for Orkney Islands Council

National Thematic Inspection: Local authority approaches to supporting school improvement

Summarised Findings

Local Authority	Orkney Islands Council
HM Lead inspector	Jacqueline Gallagher

In September/ October 2024, a team of inspectors from Education Scotland visited Orkney Islands Council. During our visit, we talked to senior leaders, local authority officers, parents/carers, headteachers, teachers, representatives from professional associations and elected members.

Purpose and themes

The purpose of the visit was to gather evidence about how Orkney Islands Council supports school improvement, with a focus on how they support schools to improve the quality of education through:

- the implementation of effective improvement planning and standards and quality reporting
- self- evaluation and quality assurance
- professional learning
- universal and targeted support and challenge

Context of the local authority

Orkney covers some 990 km² and comprises more than seventy islands and islets, of which about 20 are inhabited. It is the smallest local authority in Scotland and has a population of around 22,550. Between 2001 and 2023, the population increased by 14.5%. The biggest impact of this increase has been seen on Mainland Orkney. In contrast, the population numbers on the inner and outer isles are slowly reducing. The authority provides direct education services in eleven of the islands, which means some children and young people's journey to school each day is by boat.

No children and young people in primary and secondary schools live within deciles 1-2 of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).

Approximately 30% of children in primary and 55% of young people in secondary have been assessed as requiring additional support with their learning.

The average attendance in 2022/2023 was 91.4%. The national average is 90.2%.

Across the Orkney islands there are 2 senior secondary schools, 3 junior high (2-16) schools and 18 primary schools. On the mainland there are 2 schools (one primary and one secondary) which are additionally resourced in order to provide

for children and young people with multiple and complex additional support needs.

In the past five years, new headteachers have taken up post in all but two schools.

The Corporate Director Education, Leisure and Housing has responsibility for education, UHI Orkney, community learning development and employability, leisure and cultural services, housing and homelessness, school care accommodation, corporate catering. He has been in post since 2019 and is supported by the Head of Education, the Head of Community Learning, Leisure and Housing and nine service managers.

Theme 1 - How do local authorities support schools to improve the quality of education through implementing effective improvement planning and standards and quality reporting?

- *How clear and effective is the local authority's arrangements and advice to schools on self-evaluation, improvement planning and standards and quality reporting?*
- *How does the local authority ensure that schools' self-evaluation is accurate, rigorous and robust, based on reliable and comprehensive data and information?*
- *In what ways does the local authority promote collaboration with all stakeholders, especially learners, as essential to effective self-evaluation and identification of priorities?*
- *What is the role of central teams in providing critical feedback to school leaders on the quality/robustness of their self-evaluation and school improvement planning processes?*
- *To what extent does the local authority use the data from individual school or cluster improvement plans and standards and quality reports, to direct their officers' work?*

The local authority education plan (2022-2025) is entitled 'Excellence and Equity in Education'. Colleagues from Education Scotland, the Association of Directors of Education (ADES) in Scotland, counterparts from across Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles as well as local stakeholders were involved in the creation of the plan. It is aligned to Orkney Islands Council's Strategic Plan and contributes to the overarching themes of 'Growing our economy, strengthening our communities, developing our infrastructure and transforming our council'.

Central officers gather and review a range of data and intelligence about schools. The authority has standardised detailed reports for schools: standards and quality reports, school improvement planning and Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) plans and reports. All schools use these report templates and submit them within required timescales, generally in June. Central officers collate the information, including information attainment data, attendance and exclusion figures and parental complaints. The standardised reports have improved the consistency of approaches to self-evaluation and school improvement across the LA. They facilitate discussions between LA officers and headteachers. Central officers know which schools' self-evaluation is accurate, rigorous and robust and if the comprehensive data and information is reliable, based on their own extensive

working knowledge of schools. Central officers plan to embed service-wide approaches to self-evaluation for continuous improvement beyond the current documentation. They aim to ensure transparency and promote further consistency and thus improve the quality of education across the islands.

Local authority officers moderate school improvement plans. They provide clear feedback and recommend areas for improvement or further action as they deem necessary to support improvement. They monitor implementation of these plans through school performance records. These records provide a clear summary of self-evaluation activities and scrutiny of quantitative and qualitative data for each school. As a result, central officers maintain a strategic overview of the level of capacity to improve, and/or the support required, for each school. Central officers provide support tailored to the needs of schools, where weaknesses in provision have been identified. This is helping to lead to better outcomes for children and young people in those schools.

Central officers have a clear overview of school improvement priorities across Orkney. Currently, central officers identify common priorities and make connections between schools to support collaborative working. This approach has informed the rationale for schools working together in trios. The central team has carefully designed these trios to match schools where practice is strong with schools who might require more intensive support. This development is at very early stages. It will be important to share the rationale for the creation of the trios with headteachers. Headteachers will benefit from regular support and guidance as they improve their knowledge and skills in this model of validated self-evaluation. A helpful next step will be to share the overview of school improvement priorities with all schools to support them in fostering other areas of collaboration.

The local authority prioritises consultation with key stakeholders at the early stages of improvement activities. Learners were involved in the creation of the education plan through focus groups. The Director works closely with elected members, who highlight the importance of the positive, constructive relationships that exist between themselves and the Director. Elected members attend information seminars, facilitated by central officers. This helps them to interrogate data and reports that they receive more effectively.

The central team, supported well by the Attainment Advisor (AA) provided a programme of support to schools to understand their data. As a result, local authority and school staff are confident in both the reliability and validity of data in the primary sector. A similar programme of support has begun for secondary staff with a focus on S1-3. The central team could give consideration to focusing this work on points of transition, especially from P7 to S1, to help increase the pace of improvement. This could support staff to develop a stronger understanding of Curriculum for Excellence levels that extends across the primary and secondary sectors and improve the rate of progress in learning made by children and young people.

The central team makes effective use of information from school improvement plans to drive their own work in supporting schools on a school-by-school basis.

They challenge robustly when data indicates that school performance has fallen below expected standards and use stretch aims to challenge headteachers constructively to improve outcomes for children and young people. There is a need to balance the desire within the central team to be responsive to demand from headteachers with their own capacity to support.

One example of the use of data from school improvement plans is the pilot approach with the new attendance policy. Attendance rates have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, although overall attendance in Orkney remains above the national average. Headteachers are leading this approach, supported and challenged by central officers, who interrogate attendance data across the LA. This approach is helping to improve attendance for selected children and young people, although the LA has not yet reached the stretch goals at this early stage.

Theme 2: How do local authorities support schools to improve the quality of education through self-evaluation and quality assurance?

- *What methods does the local authority use to evaluate school performance (review the quality of education) for example, gathering evidence from stakeholders, review/validated self-evaluation visits, attainment analysis)? How effective are these methods? How often does this take place?*
- *To what extent do officers carry out regular and rigorous evaluation of the quality of school provision? How is this work quality assured?*
- *How does the local authority evaluate the quality of learning, teaching and assessment?*
- *How clear and effective is the advice and support for schools on approaches to self-evaluation and their quality assurance? How effectively does the local authority moderate this at strategic and school levels?*
- *How does the local authority identify and share effective practice through quality assurance? Is this making a difference across the authority?*

A culture of continuous improvement underpins the work of education officers, headteachers and staff in schools. Central officers use different improvement approaches to support evaluation and quality assurance to help improve the quality of education. This includes improvement meetings with a focus on school priorities, headteacher networks and ensuring key policies and procedures are accessible on a secure online platform for headteachers.

The local authority has a robust quality assurance calendar which is clearly understood by headteachers and is designed to be the model for schools. It has the capacity to be a key driver for planned improvement. It provides a timeline of key actions aligned to the quality indicators (QIs) from How good is our school? 4th Edition (HGIOS?4) to be undertaken by schools and the local authority across the year. Headteachers receive support and challenge from central officers to support ongoing approaches to self-evaluation and their quality assurance. Sector-based service managers and quality improvement officers review and provide feedback on school reports and plans; carry out quality improvement visits; analyse data and participate in monitoring and tracking discussions; and deliver professional learning to headteachers and wider staff teams. Additionally, schools may receive an enhanced bespoke level of support. Reasons for this

additional support include when a headteacher is new in post, when a school is preparing for inspection and where improvement in attainment is required.

Central officers meet regularly as a team to discuss and reflect on school improvement. This provides them with an effective forum to moderate standards across the islands. These meetings are helpful in supporting the team's development and consistency in the different approaches used to support and challenge individual schools. However, headteachers perceive the level of support and challenge provided by central officers as inconsistent. They are unaware of the criteria for more intensive support. Going forward, it would be helpful to ensure the rationale for the allocation of support is known by all.

The LA promotes the role of data as a key driver in staff understanding both the need for progress and the methods of supporting this. All schools track children and young people's progress using SEEMiS. The data is uplifted at key points during the year, allowing staff to track and identify trends over time at school and local authority level. Central staff use this information well to support and inform plans for interventions to improve children and young people's outcomes. This is a key driver for improvement.

Central officers have created a broad general education (BGE) tracking toolkit for primary schools. This is supporting headteachers and staff well to analyse data to inform learning and teaching. Central officers have developed guidance, templates and a timeline to support headteachers and teachers in using the very detailed tracking toolkit. The attainment and achievement quality improvement officer (QIO) delivers training for headteachers and school staff. The QIO and AA meet with identified primary schools following analysis of predicted data. They provide appropriate support and challenge to headteachers and teachers on their evaluation of children's progress. The visits have a particular focus on reviewing the progress of those children who are at risk of not achieving expected levels. The QIO and AA support school staff to identify any gaps in children's learning, plan interventions to address these gaps and evaluate the impact of interventions. The central team and headteachers report teachers have an improving understanding of school data. They are increasingly using data better to plan learning and teaching and track children's progress. As a result, attainment information shows year-on-year improvements in performance in primary schools.

Secondary BGE data shows variance in improvement year-on-year. The Director and central officers believe current data is not a true reflection of young people's performance. They have identified the need to improve teacher professional judgement of achievement of a Curriculum for Excellence level. The QIO and AA meet regularly with secondary school headteachers and the Secondary and Tertiary Education service manager. They plan to take forward tracking of attainment in S1-3 that more accurately reflects the progress in learning young people are making. This will help to improve outcomes for young people.

The LA recognises high-quality learning and teaching as a key factor in improving children and young people's learning and achievement. All schools have learning and teaching in their school improvement plans for this session. Central officers work in partnership with external agencies including the Northern Alliance and

Education Scotland to increase staff understanding about what high-quality learning and teaching looks like. Following professional learning, all schools have created their own principles of high-quality learning and teaching and a lesson evaluation toolkit. Headteachers are confident these frameworks will support consistency of practice in their individual schools.

The local authority is committed to all schools reporting an evaluation of good or better in relation to HGIOS4 QI 2.3 learning, teaching and assessment by June 2025. To support this, they are implementing a new self-improving system approach using 'moderation trios' to provide support and challenge to schools. The expectation is that headteachers work collaboratively to improve the quality of learning and teaching across Orkney. There are set expectations of roles including those of central officers. Templates and timelines have been provided to support implementation. Headteachers recognise the value of this new approach. They would welcome greater opportunities to have an active role in developing the model. Robust evaluation of the impact of this model for improvement is important. It will support central officers in collaboration with headteachers to develop future empowered systems that contribute positively to improving outcomes for children and young people across the authority.

Central officers facilitate the sharing of effective practice that is having a positive impact on children and young people at headteacher face-to-face meetings. Headteachers value these opportunities to hear about the implementation and impact of new initiatives and effective and embedded practice. There is scope for central officers, in partnership with headteachers, to develop this work further.

Theme 3: How do local authorities support schools to improve the quality of education through professional learning?

- *What professional learning does the local authority currently provide to support school improvement?*
- *What is the impact of this on developing the skills and knowledge of school leaders and staff on school improvement?*
- *What support systems (e.g., mentoring, networks of practice, peer support groups, cluster support) are available for school leaders and staff? How are these approaches improving school performance and outcomes for learners?*
- *To what extent do senior leaders have opportunities to support improvement beyond their own establishment? What difference is this making?*
- *How effectively does the local authority utilise Associate Assessors (if applicable) to support school improvement across establishments.*
- *Does the local authority's professional learning strategy draw on support from national organisations?*

The central team, headteachers and teachers are resilient and solution-focused in finding ways to promote professional learning. They recognise, and are creative in, finding ways to mitigate the considerable additional challenges of cost, connectivity, travel time and transport within Orkney. School leaders are very keen to feel empowered to support continuous improvement at local authority level and to have opportunities to lead on strategic priorities and co-create effective systems and processes.

There is a plan in place to collate professional learning priorities from schools through the professional review and development (PRD) process to ensure that the local authority professional learning offer responds to identified need. It might be helpful to consider this as part of the development of a wider professional learning framework. Targeted professional learning based on 'understanding the standard' delivered alongside this approach would support the local authority ambition of improving standards in schools.

The local authority has facilitated face-to-face engagement days for school staff over the last three years. These have involved inviting nationally recognised speakers. Engagement days have focused on the LA improvement plan, covering themes such as inclusive practices and learning, teaching and assessment. These events have been well received by staff and have provided opportunities for staff to consider improvements and application within their own contexts. Staff are keen to lead and develop these approaches further as part of an authority-wide approach to improvement. Professional learning has been provided to all headteachers on the use of the BGE tracker.

The development of high-quality play pedagogy across Orkney has also been a particular professional learning focus. The early years team has started to deliver a well-constructed programme which involves an enquiry-based approach spanning a number of sessions. It develops teacher and practitioner understanding of the key principles of play pedagogy. There is a clear plan to roll this out across several cohorts to ensure all teachers and practitioners have the knowledge and understanding required to plan high-quality early learning experiences and environments.

A number of networks are in place to support staff across the LA. These include large school, linked school, and Peedie school networks. These are valued by staff but operate with varying degrees of success. New networks are organically emerging across the mainland and islands based on headteacher initiative and local needs. These new groupings have the potential to promote focussed professional discussion and sharing of effective practice. There is scope to continue to develop a networked learning system to support class teachers and to accelerate improvement across junior high schools and high schools. This will help to develop a self-improving school system.

New and experienced Associate Assessors are supporting schools to prepare for inspection. This work is very much welcomed by headteachers. The engagement sessions have drawn from the experience of headteachers who have been recently inspected by HM Inspectors, as well as facilitating schools to engage

with documentation and safeguarding checks. New headteachers welcome the support they receive, in particular the bespoke one-to-one arrangements. The induction programme has recently been rebranded as headteacher learning and development sessions. More experienced headteachers have requested to opt in to sessions as appropriate to their own professional development. This will open up opportunities to a wider range of staff.

Staff are supported to engage in a small number of programmes delivered by national organisations, including Education Scotland. These include participation in Middle Leaders and Into Headship courses. However, there are significant financial and accessibility barriers to wider participation in courses being run on the mainland. As more and more courses return to face-to-face delivery, this makes attendance extremely challenging and reduces opportunities for Orkney staff. The local authority funds Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) membership for senior officers to allow them to engage in high-quality professional learning and to connect into national networks and advice to support continuous improvement to mitigate in part the impact of these financial and accessibility barriers.

The AA has provided extensive support to schools across the LA and provided professional learning in key areas such as defining outcomes and measures and moderation of listening and talking as well as writing. This has supported staff to focus on identifying outcomes for learners and develop confidence in teacher professional judgement when defining attainment of a level. This learning should be revisited and evaluated regularly to ensure staff continue to develop a deeper understanding in these areas and to ensure that there is ongoing impact of the learning offer.

Theme 4: How do local authorities deliver universal support and challenge for all schools, and/or targeted support for specific schools to improve the quality of education?

- *What is the universal offer of support and challenge for all schools?*
- *How does the local authority use the data from individual school or cluster improvement plans and standards and quality reports, to provide targeted support?*
- *What measures are used to identify the need for targeted support?*
- *Is there targeted support for specific schools? What might that look like? (examples?) What action is taken if a review of a school concludes that a school is not performing satisfactorily and requires targeted support?*
- *What support systems (for example: mentoring, networks of practice, peer support groups) are available for school leaders and staff?*
- *What is the role of central staff in facilitating/contributing to collaborative approaches, which improve school performance and outcomes for learners?*

Service managers discuss individual school performance weekly at team meetings. This supports the planning of universal and targeted support. Headteachers can also request support from central officers to help improve outcomes for children and young people.

Service managers lead universal support and challenge for sector-specific schools. Quality improvement officers support this work well. Central officers discuss school improvement with headteachers at meetings (either face-to-face or online) throughout the year. These meetings focus on aspects of self-evaluation, learning, teaching and assessment and raising attainment. Central officers are aware of the importance of providing pastoral support as part of their universal offer to schools. Headteachers speak positively about the levels of pastoral support that they receive.

Schools receiving the universal offer of support and challenge have: a comprehensive improvement plan in place, are demonstrating sustained or improved outcomes for children and young people through ongoing evaluation of their impact through data analysis, and evaluative grades from inspection or self-evaluation activity.

Central officers facilitate a range of universal networks for headteachers to attend to support school improvement. These include headteachers briefings, learning and development sessions and termly face-to-face meetings. Central officers also provide a weekly electronic bulletin which signposts headteachers and school staff to local and national updates and offers of professional learning. Headteachers would like to work collaboratively with central officers to set the agenda of these meetings. They would welcome increased opportunities to share practice with colleagues across the authority to accelerate school improvement.

The range of targeted support varies according to the needs of the individual school, as well as the nature of individual requests from headteachers. Targeted support includes regular headteacher and central officer meetings, new headteacher induction, analysis of data, and professional learning. Central officers use information and contacts from Education Scotland to provide schools with further support and challenge. Headteachers talk positively about the bespoke support provided by central officers and the AA, particularly the support in using the BGE data toolkit. This is supporting staff in schools to address barriers faced by some children and young people and help improve outcomes for them.

The QIO is member of a variety of local and national organisations. Through school support meetings and professional learning opportunities, they signpost headteachers and school staff to important information. As a result, the impact of poverty is now better understood across schools. Staff are more aware of the need to be mindful of learners who may be experiencing poverty and how to mitigate this.

Schools requiring intensive support are required to have an action plan with clear baseline measures. Central officers are developing processes to monitor and

evaluate the impact of focused and intensive support. This will support them well to identify the supports that make the biggest difference. This work is at early stages.

The Director is committed to promoting a collaborative culture to support improvement in the quality of education. Headteachers and staff value opportunities to work collaboratively with colleagues across the LA to improve outcomes. The local authority is at the early stages of implementing a self-improving system approach. The introduction this session of the moderation trios approach should enable headteachers to support improvement beyond their school. Central officers believe this will help build capacity and capability further. Secondary Associate Assessors now participate in quality improvement visits. Central officers believe this will help improve accuracy of self-evaluation against national standards and support all schools to have an evaluation of good or better for QI 2.3 learning, teaching and assessment.

Central officers analyse the information and data from universal and targeted support and challenge activity to inform corporate and service planning. They use findings to direct resources where support and challenge is required, including professional learning. Headteachers and school staff are not always clear on the rationale for decisions made by the local authority. They would like greater responsibility in driving forward improvement priorities. Central officers recognise it is important they communicate back to stakeholders the ways in which their feedback has been heard and how it influences improvement priorities. This would increase stakeholder ownership of improvement.

5. Any other relevant information

A challenge for the LA is achieving both a balanced budget and contributing to the delivery of Orkney Council's medium-term target of savings amounting to £9m.

Orkney Council experiences considerable additional cost in moving school and central staff around the LA in both time and money. For example, there are significant costs for flights and ferries, as some staff travel daily from one island to another. There is considerable cost in the equitable provision of music tuition. Additional costs are also incurred in the provision of services such as free school meals. On one island school, the actual cost per head of providing free school meals is approximately £30 per week, once all associated costs are taken into account.

Staffing issues

In the past five years, new headteachers have taken up post in all but two schools. This means that all schools now have a headteacher in post, which the local authority welcomes warmly. However, school leaders often have to teach to cover absences and/or staff shortages. This can have a significantly negative impact on their ability to contribute to the improvement agenda. Staffing shortages can also impact on the delivery of planned initiatives to support children and young people. For example, work needed to be paused on the

introduction of a wellbeing indicator programme and the establishment of the emotional support assistants programme at Kirkwall Grammar School.