

**Altnaharra Primary School
and Nursery Class
Sutherland
The Highland Council
11 March 2008**

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1. Background

Altnaharra Primary School and nursery class were inspected in December 2007 as part of a national sample of primary and nursery education. The inspection covered key aspects of the work of the school at all stages. It evaluated nursery children's and pupils' achievements, the effectiveness of the school, the environment for learning, the school's processes for self-evaluation and innovation, and its capacity for improvement. There was a particular focus on attainment in English language and mathematics.

HM Inspectors examined the quality of the children's experience in the nursery class, pupils' work and interviewed groups of pupils, including the pupil council, and staff. Members of the inspection team also met parents,¹ including the chairperson of the Parent Council.

The school serves the village of Altnaharra and the surrounding area of central Sutherland. At the time of the inspection the roll was six, including three children in the nursery class. There were no pupils at P2 or at the P4-P7 stages. There was no provision for school meals. Pupils' attendance was in line with the national average. The headteacher was also headteacher of Lairg Primary School, in accordance with the Council's shared leadership initiative.

2. Key strengths

HM Inspectors identified the following key strengths.

- High quality teaching in the primary class, and very good interaction between staff and children in the nursery.
- Staff expectations of pupils, and their efforts to help pupils socialise with pupils from other schools.
- Enthusiastic pupils who were keen to learn, and their attainment in English language and mathematics.
- The excellent ethos in both the nursery and primary classes, including very positive links between parents and staff.

3. What are the views of parents, pupils and staff?

HM Inspectors analysed responses to questionnaires issued to all parents and staff. Information about the responses to the questionnaires normally appears in an Appendix 2. However, as there were fewer than five respondees in each group, in

¹ Throughout this report, the term 'parents' should be taken to include foster carers, residential care staff and carers who are relatives or friends.

order to maintain confidentiality, the analysis is not provided. HM Inspectors also interviewed staff, parents and pupils during the inspection. The following is an analysis of the views expressed by staff, parents and pupils.

Parents, pupils and staff were very positive about all aspects of the school's provision. Parents of children in the nursery class confirmed that their children enjoyed coming to the nursery, and that staff showed a clear concern for children's care and welfare. They believed that they were kept well informed about the activities of the nursery through their daily contact with the staff. Parents of pupils in the primary class felt that their children were treated well, and that they were making very good progress. They felt that their children enjoyed school, and that teachers were good at letting them know their children's strengths and weaknesses. Pupils confirmed that they were very happy in the school, and that they enjoyed being in a very small school where they all worked very well together. Staff believed that they set high standards for pupils' attainment and behaviour, and that pupils were enthusiastic about their learning. They believed that there was mutual respect between adults and pupils, and that the school was well led.

4. How good are learning, teaching and achievement?

Pupils' learning experiences and achievements

The curriculum in the nursery class was very good. All areas of children's development and learning were included effectively, and staff had provided a wide range of interesting activities for children. The overall quality of the curriculum in the primary classes was good. Staff provided a wide range of interesting and challenging activities for children, which helped them make appropriate progress. Time was well used, for example, to involve nursery children with the primary class, and develop pupils' social skills through frequent visits to other schools. The school had recently become involved with the Highland Literacy project and this had improved the programme for the teaching of English language. Pupils participated in daily physical exercise as part of two hours of physical education each week, in line with national recommendations. They had also benefited from swimming instruction. Information and communications technology (ICT) was well used as part of the ongoing work of pupils. The school had achieved Health Promoting School status, and pupils were aware of the benefits of healthy eating, exercise and daily toothbrushing. Pupils had designed very good Christmas cards in an enterprise in education project. These were then produced commercially and sold by pupils to raise funds for the school. In citizenship, the staff had focused on helping pupils develop respect and tolerance for others. All pupils were also involved in regular recycling in order to help the environment. The programme for environmental studies should now be reviewed to ensure that pupils made appropriate progress as they moved through the school. Interactions between children and staff in the nursery were very good and helped to develop children's talking and confidence. The teaching in the primary class was of very high quality. The class teacher was very well organised and planned very effectively to improve pupils' learning. She introduced lessons very well and checked pupils' knowledge and understanding when they were finished. She explained matters very clearly, and used praise appropriately to encourage pupils to give of their best. Overall, her direct teaching was very effective in helping pupils make progress. Homework was interesting, and helped to consolidate pupils' learning.

In the nursery class children were making very good use of ICT for a range of purposes. They enjoyed using the wide range of art materials and musical instruments, and were developing control of their hands and fingers through using a range of small tools and construction toys. Pupils in the primary class were making very good progress in their learning. They were enthusiastic and keen to learn. They were very active in their learning and quickly became involved in all of their activities. The pace of work was very good, and helped pupils achieve. At times, nursery children and primary pupils worked very well together, and this was a positive advantage for all of them. Pupils in the primary class were developing good skills in art and design, and were developing their knowledge of cool and warm colours. They sang and performed a play with great enthusiasm and expression. In science, they had developed some knowledge of the life of bumblebees. Pupils had been involved in fair testing in technology to determine the strength of different materials. They had made their own predictions of the results of experiments, and subsequently recorded and interpreted the results of testing effectively.

In the nursery class, children were learning to cooperate with one another and become familiar with the nursery routines. In the primary class pupils were learning about the local environment, and birdlife in particular, through their involvement in an after school Wildlife Explorers Club. They had made very good bird cake which they hung outside. In this, they had benefitted from their membership of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. They had taken part in activities organised by a Countryside ranger which had helped them develop positive attitudes to the environment. They had learned of the needs of others in raising funds for the local community and a range of local, national and international charities.

English language

In the nursery class, staff worked very well with children to help develop their skills in talking. Children listened well and were beginning to talk at length. They enjoyed listening to stories read to them and had begun to write their own stories with the help of adults. The overall quality of attainment in English language in the primary class was very good. Pupils had made a very good start to developing their skills in listening, talking, reading and writing and were making very good progress. Pupils listened very well to adults and each other, and responded very well to instructions given. They responded positively to their teacher's encouragement to talk at length, and were confident in talking to visitors about their work. They had received good guidance on how to improve their talking. By P3, pupils read well and with some fluency. They had a good knowledge of books, and were developing a good reading habit. They benefitted from regular visits of the mobile library. Pupils were developing effective skills in writing for a variety of purposes, and made good use of their individual targets in writing to help them improve. They also used ICT to present their finished work well.

Mathematics

In the nursery class, children were beginning to use a range of shapes and were being introduced to numbers during their play activities. The overall quality of attainment in mathematics in the primary class was very good. Pupils had made a very good start to developing their knowledge and understanding and were making very good progress. They had conducted a range of surveys in information handling, and had a good understanding of coordinates. Daily mental mathematics practice was used very effectively to encourage pupils to think for themselves and calculate quickly. Pupils were developing a good

understanding of a range of numbers and, at P3, had made a good start to using multiplication tables. Pupils recognised and could identify a range of two-dimensional shapes, and by P3 had a good knowledge of three-dimensional shapes and their properties. Pupils were involved in regular problem solving activities, and at P3 used their knowledge of mathematics to tackle problems effectively.

5. How well are pupils' learning needs met?

The school met the learning needs of the pupils very well. In the nursery class, the staff had a very good knowledge of children and used the information appropriately to plan for children's learning. Staff in the primary classes also had a very good knowledge of pupils and used it well to meet pupils' needs. They built effectively upon pupils' prior learning to ensure that pupils made appropriate progress. Tasks and activities were very well chosen to involve all pupils, and to ensure that pupils at P3 were sufficiently challenged. The teacher in the primary class used very effective assessment and marking strategies to show pupils how to improve. Pupils were involved in setting their own targets for improvement and this was having a positive effect on, for example, the quality of writing. The system of assessment, however, would be improved if the teacher met with teachers in other schools to moderate their assessments.

6. How good is the environment for learning?

Aspect	Comment
Pastoral care	The overall quality of pastoral care was good. Staff showed a very clear concern for the care and welfare of pupils, and took account of their social and emotional needs. They emphasised the need for good behaviour, and pupils responded appropriately. There were no reported incidents of bullying and pupils took care of one another. Not all staff had been trained in child protection procedures. Nursery pupils were very well involved in the life of the whole school and joined the primary class daily. Although there was a very good induction programme for children entering the nursery, there was not an equivalent programme for parents of pupils entering P1.

Aspect	Comment
Quality of accommodation and facilities	<p>The overall quality of the accommodation was adequate. Classrooms were spacious, and staff had created stimulating learning environments to encourage pupils to give of their best. Staff used display and photographs very effectively to showcase the activities and work of pupils. The displays in the corridor areas and reception hall were attractive and provided parents with a good overview of much of the work of the school. Security arrangements were effective, and there was suitable access for those with physical disabilities. There was no large indoor area for physical education. Although the school had reported safety concerns about the temperature of the water, the authority had not acted quickly enough to remedy the situation. Large parts of the outdoor area were inaccessible for pupils, and there was no secure outdoor play area for nursery children.</p>
Climate and relationships, expectations and promoting achievement and equality	<p>The climate in both the nursery and primary classes was excellent. Relationships between staff and pupils were very good and built upon mutual respect. Parents, pupils and staff were proud of the school, and enjoyed being involved in it. The school was extremely welcoming to everyone, and pupils' behaviour was very good. Pupils worked and played very well together, and primary pupils acted as 'buddies' to nursery children. Staff were very supportive of one another, and the visiting nursery coordinator teacher provided very effective support for the nursery assistant. Pupils at P3 had responsibility for evaluating healthy packed lunches. Religious observance took place weekly, and the school was well supported by a local minister. The full time teacher had very high expectations of pupils' achievement and behaviour. She set clear standards and expected pupils to achieve these. She used a reward system very effectively to encourage pupils to achieve well and pupils responded very positively. She used praise very well, but also made it clear when pupils did not achieve the expected standards. The school was very inclusive and welcomed all families and their children. Staff focused on developing positive attitudes to others, and celebrated the different backgrounds of pupils. Issues of tolerance and diversity were addressed from the very early stages.</p>

Aspect	Comment
Partnership with parents and the community	Links with parents and the wider community were very good. Members of the community and parents supported the school very effectively. Parents had regular contact with the nursery assistant and teacher, which was very helpful in helping staff meet pupils' needs. The school provided very informative newsletters for the wider community and helpful reports to parents on their children's progress. Meetings to discuss children's progress were very well attended. A Parent Council had recently been formed and was in the process of extending its membership. Liaison between the nursery class and the primary teacher was very good, with staff and pupils benefiting from daily links. The school was well supported by external agencies, and by staff in neighbouring schools.

7. Leading and improving the school

Appendix 1 provides HM Inspectors' overall evaluation of the work of the school.

Altnaharra Primary School provided a very high quality of education for children in the nursery and pupils in the primary class. The quality of teaching and interaction with children and pupils were very good, and pupils were highly motivated to learn. Staff met the needs of pupils very effectively, and levels of attainment in English language and mathematics were very good. Relationships between adults and pupils were excellent, and the school was very well supported by parents and the wider community. The school had shown that, as a consequence of the commitment of the nursery assistant and teacher it had the capacity to maintain high standards and improve further.

The headteacher had the support of staff and parents. As a consequence of their efforts the school was now a stimulating environment for learning. The headteacher, however, was only in the school on one day each week. This resulted in too great a responsibility being placed on the very willing and cooperative class teacher and nursery assistant. The headteacher had implemented a system of evaluation of provision. She discussed forward plans, reviewed pupils' work and also visited the nursery and primary classes on a regular basis. She had not yet, however, fully implemented a rigorous system of monitoring in the nursery as required by a previous inspection. Nursery staff were aware of the implications of the Scottish Social Services Council's Codes of Practice.

At the last Care Commission inspection of the nursery class there was one recommendation which has been partly met.

Main points for action

The school and education authority should take action to improve aspects of leadership and management. In doing so they should take account of the need to:

- review the overall leadership and management arrangements in the school;
- improve the monitoring in the nursery by the headteacher;
- ensure all staff are trained in child protection; and
- address the safety issues identified by this inspection

What happens next?

The school and the education authority have been asked to prepare an action plan indicating how they will address the main findings of the report, and to share that plan with parents. Within two years of the publication of this report parents will be informed about the progress made by the school.

Dr Roddy Duncan
HM Inspector

11 March 2008

Appendix 1 Indicators of quality

The sections in the table below follow the order in this report. You can find the main comments made about each of the quality indicators in those sections. However, aspects of some quality indicators are relevant to other sections of the report and may also be mentioned in those other sections.

How good are learning, teaching and achievement?	
Structure of the curriculum	good
The teaching process	very good
Pupils' learning experiences	very good
Pupils' attainment in English language	very good
Pupils' attainment in mathematics	very good

How well are pupils' learning needs met?	
Meeting pupils' needs	very good

How good is the environment for learning?	
Pastoral care	good
Accommodation and facilities	adequate
Climate and relationships	excellent
Expectations and promoting achievement	very good
Equality and fairness	very good
Partnership with parents, the Parent Council, and the community	very good

Leading and improving the school	
Leadership of the headteacher	weak
Self-evaluation	adequate

This report uses the following word scale to make clear judgements made by inspectors:

excellent	outstanding, sector leading
very good	major strengths
good	important strengths with some areas for improvement
adequate	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses

How can you contact us?

If you would like an additional copy of this report

Copies of this report have been sent to the headteacher and school staff, the Director of Education, Culture and Sport, local councillors and appropriate Members of the Scottish Parliament. Subject to availability, further copies may be obtained free of charge from HM Inspectorate of Education, Longman House, 28 Longman Road, Inverness, IV1 1SF or by telephoning 01463 253115. Copies are also available on our website www.hmie.gov.uk.

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