HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee:	**Education Committee**
Date:	**20 May 2021**
Report Title:	**Virtual Academy updates and next steps**
Report By:	**Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning**

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 **PART A**
This report provides an update on the Highland Virtual Academy (HVA), the progress made and summarises the work in progress to support inclusion and engagement in schools across Highland.

1.2 **PART B**
The report also details the expansion plans of the Highland Virtual Academy and commercialisation partnership working with Aberdeen City Council and partners in Highland.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

PART A
   i.   note the progress made with regards attainment and achievement in the Highland Virtual Academy;
   ii. note the plans and position for continuing to support Highland Schools; and
   iii. scrutinise and comment on the progress made to support inclusion and engagement of pupils in Highland.

PART B
   i.   Comment on the plans for the expansion of the Highland Virtual Academy.

3. Implications

3.1 **Resource** - As a response to the COVID pandemic, a number of additional teachers were recruited to support HVA. These teachers were appointed for the academic year 2021 - 22. The Highland Council (THC) has remained in the fortunate position that it had previously invested in an extensive digital estate.

3.2   **Legal** - THC has a requirement to implement the Gaelic Language Plan under the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act of 2005 and the Education Scotland Act 2016. The Education (Scotland) Act 2016 contains provisions on Gaelic Education, these include placing a duty on education authorities to promote and support Gaelic Medium Education (GME) and Gaelic Learner Education (GLE).

3.3   **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural)** - The report takes into account national, local area priorities as well as digital inclusion. THC's digital learning provision, its Chromebook deployment, and the additional Connecting Scotland resources used have helped to support digital inclusion and ensure that during the pandemic, THC has been able to support and sustain digital learning across the Highlands, and ensure that for our young people, as far as is practicable, the impacts of location, rurality, poverty and other socio economic factors, have been mitigated and education and learning sustained during periods of lockdown.

3.4   **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** - as the HVA learning is being delivered at home, there is likely to be a short-term windfall in terms of THC's own carbon impact of technology use.

3.5   **Risk** - the HVA has so far been provided at no cost to schools and there has been no commercial aspect to the Academy. The commercialisation of HVA in partnership with Aberdeen City, seeks to generate income beyond its existing delivery and expand the offerings of the Academy beyond the traditional Curriculum and school day

3.6   **Gaelic** – As per 3.2 above.

4   **PART A Overview** - **The Highland Virtual Academy and support for Vulnerable Young People**

4.1   The Highland Virtual Academy has now been running for 5 years. Originally it was introduced to support equity of curriculum opportunities for pupils across the Highlands. Working in partnership with schools, the HVA and base school have key responsibilities to support pupils.

4.1.1   **Vision, values and aims**
        To deliver high-quality, engaging learning & teaching delivered by *real* teachers in *real* time through active and collaborative experiences. Using digital technology, we strive to equip and empower people to become life-long learners. We aim to provide equity of educational opportunities across schools to ensure that all learners can access a wider, enriched curriculum which enables them to progress and succeed.

4.1.2   **Example of courses offered (dependent on demand and through consultation with Head Teachers).**

Advanced Highers	Higher	National 5
Maths	Human Biology	German
Physics	Photography	Spanish
Chemistry	Music	ESOL*
Music	German	Latin*
History	Spanish	
German	Modern Studies*	
	Latin*	

4.2   **Senior Phase staffing**

The Senior phase staffing for this session is 2.7FTE plus a full time Head Teacher.

4.3 **Pupil Numbers**
Applications for HVA senior phase courses have increased year on year and over the last 3 years' pupil numbers for the same subject choices have increased from 40 pupils in session 17/18 to 168 pupils in session 20/21. The highest applications are for AH Maths and AH Chemistry.

4.4 **Learning and Teaching**
HVA courses are timetabled throughout the week, National 5, Higher and Advanced courses have 5 periods allocated to them. The nature of the course may mean that not all periods will be required for direct face to face teaching and the other periods are used for drop-in sessions and giving feedback to pupils. On-line delivery is through google meet/google hangouts. Tutors use G-suite and google classrooms to support learning and teaching. Learning and teaching is of a high quality, with lessons having a structured beginning, middle and end with learning intentions and success criteria. Strategies used ensure pupils are active participants who are fully engaged, resilient, motivated and interact well during activities. Feedback is used to effectively inform and support progress in learning.

4.5 **Staffing**
All tutors are THC teachers and in their base school they have consistently demonstrated high quality learning and teaching which has been evidenced through THC Direct Observations procedures and the school's own self-evaluation procedures such as Learning Walks. They also have a proven track record of having high attainment in SQA examinations. Tutors with the HVA have been recommended by their Head teacher and they have expressed an interest in digital learning.

4.6 **Monitoring & Tracking**
Three monitoring & tracking reports are completed in the session; working grade, target grade, effort and homework. They use a numerical 1-4 SEEMiS scale. If required, the base school can request written comments from tutors. To ensure that HVA supports the agenda of high aspirations, target grades are always at least 1 band higher than the working grade. They are based on prior attainment and performance in the HVA course. The working grade is based on robust evidence and takes into account the different components of the course. Data is analysed after each tracking period and performance and progress is categorised as red, amber or green. Pupils that have been categorised as red, the base school is contacted and interventions are discussed.

4.7 **Attainment**
Pupils completing senior phase HVA courses are very successful in SQA examinations, with a 3 year pass rate of approximately 97% and a high number of pupils achieving upper grades (As and B's). We can demonstrate that we have added value.

4.8 **COVID Support Teachers**
Scottish Government funding allowed for the appointment of 7 teachers (6.4FTE) to support pupils across primary and secondary schools, whose learning has been affected by coronavirus. The team was appointed after the October holidays 2020 and started delivering curriculum from Monday 30th November.

4.8.1 Referrals were originally based on 3 criteria and came through a word application referral:

- Short term 10 days' self-isolation
- Long term absence due to mental health issues
- Long term absence due to shielding issues

Post December - referrals were then made through an on-line application form and information stored in SharePoint site. This system has now been automated to go directly to lead teacher. The vast majority of referrals have been for long term absences from school, generally consisting of 3 groups: **(Appendix 3 - Pupil Numbers)**
- Absent from learning for 1 year and over
- Absent from learning since August
- Pupils unable to return to school as per guidelines due to anxiety or shielding
- Other pupils supported through exceptional circumstances were identified e.g. out of authority.

4.8.2   Teachers' remits have expanded to best support pupils beyond learning and teaching to mentoring and guidance, whilst pupils supported receive a bespoke learning and mentoring experience, generally on a 1:1 basis.
COVID support teachers work as a team – sharing good practice, lessons learned and they use a variety of strategies to engage pupils who have been out of learning for some time including:
- Perseverance;
- working with base school and parents/carers;
- start slowly with an interest grabber e.g. yoga, birdwatch, movie reviews; and
- bespoke learning tailored to pupil's interests (stated on application form).
- Mental health and well-being support
- Basic support in numeracy and literacy
- Engagement and next steps for positive destinations

4.9   **Next Steps for the HVA within Highland**
The next steps for the HVA in consultation with Children and Young People, staff, parents and Education Scotland is to continue to provide a timetable of live, interactive online classes for some of our most vulnerable children and young people who find it difficult to access full time education. Bespoke packages will be created with a focus on health and well-being, numeracy, literacy and career ready mentoring.

4.10   **Gaelic Medium Education and Gaelic Language Education**
There is scope within teacher capacity and timetabling to enhance the current provision of qualifications in GME and to offer learners a national qualification at an earlier stage. It has been noted by some schools, that the acquisition of a National 4 or National 5 earlier on, would support young people to have more flexibility of subject choice, whilst achieving a national qualification in Gaelic Medium.
At secondary level, SQA currently makes a number of National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher examinations available through the medium of Gaelic — Geography (Cruinn-eòlas), History (Eachdraidh), Mathematics (Matamataig), Applications of Mathematics (Gnìomhachas Matamataigs), and Modern Studies (Nuadh-eòlas).

4.10.1   It is possible to connect classrooms virtually across Highland and small numbers of pupils could join actual lessons from different settings virtually, allowing access to Gaelic Medium Specialist teachers. The aim would be to maintain and build on current provision by providing support materials and expanding the offer of Gaelic-medium subjects available at Senior Phase in secondary schools. This would require support for staff and young people with training and equipment, however this method of a hybrid curriculum delivery (virtual and actual) is already established in some schools in Scotland. Our offer of GME & GLE will also form part of the commercialisation of HVA.

4.11   **In summary**
        The HVA will continue to provide high quality learning and teaching through a variety
        of subject offers, this will be extended to wider achievement qualifications to support
        the enhancement and richness of the curriculum offer.

5.   **Part B – The Expansion and commercialisation of the Highland Virtual Academy**

5.1   **Recommendations -** Comment on the plans for the expansion of the Highland Virtual
        Academy.
        A digital collaboration between the Highland Council, Aberdeen City Council,
        Arts, Language, Culture & Leisure Sectors
        "Scotland's future will be forged in a digital world. It's a world in which data and digital
        technologies are transforming every element of our nation and our lives – people,
        place, economy and government."
                "A changing nation: how Scotland will thrive in a digital world," March 2021

5.2   Context - During the last year, strong collaborations have formed across local schools,
        communities, Local Authorities and also nationally and internationally. We need to
        consider how we move from a sharing of ideas and approaches to utilising skills and
        expertise from a wider range of partners to benefit our citizens.

5.3   Over the last year Highland and Aberdeen City have demonstrated high levels of
        innovation in their use of digital technologies and have been recognised nationally for
        their work. Both organisations are currently considering how to build back better by
        fully utilising established teams of digital experts who have promoted the adoption of
        digital pedagogies and pioneered digital innovation. The last year has shown that
        digital delivery can help remove barriers to engagement be they geographical in rural
        communities or structural due to timetables or transport routes and we can't afford to
        lose this.

5.4   Both Highland and Aberdeen City have their own Google Workspace tenancies
        allowing agile decision making and personalised adaptations for individuals. Both
        authorities have invested in upskilling staff and young people and there are strong
        cultures of digital expertise, innovation and confidence. This has been enabled by
        Local Authority investment in the provision of Chromebooks.

5.5   The last year has accelerated digital pedagogy across both Local Authorities and
        central teams now see digital as a means of opening up new opportunities and more
        flexible routes for some. The Highland Virtual Academy (established in 2017) has
        gone from delivering senior phase subjects, to delivering the CfE and supporting
        learners disengaged from school. With an existing 97% pass rate and a high
        proportion of learners gaining an A or B, there are solid foundations to build upon for
        young people and adult learners.

5.6   THC and Aberdeen City Council are keen to collaborate to innovate in order to widen
        access to learning, celebrate our culture and support economic recovery for the
        future. Both education services believe that digital tools and technologies could help
        remove some of the inequalities that are likely to be further exacerbated by the
        pandemic and support learners to acquire the skills required for personal future
        growth.

5.7   **What do we want to do?**

Our Vision is to reimagine and expand the Virtual Academy by utilising our key partners and resources. A new brand and name will be developed to reflect the collaboration and partnership. Our online collaborative will celebrate the education, arts, music, culture, languages, technology and wellbeing services & industries. Aberdeen City and Highland are keen to take advantage of the opportunity to create a new and innovative approach to future learning and skills acquisition. Highlife Highland and Eden Court will both be key partners in Highland and similar is planned with Aberdeen City.

5.8   The digital platform we will develop will offer an unprecedented opportunity for reaching the socially isolated, build confidence and offer an alternative between learning at home and face to face learning for those who are socially excluded or interrupted learners. The arts are known to provide a useful 'gateway' back into education or employment for students who may otherwise struggle and could be a key tenant in our recovery from COVID.

5.9   This online collaborative would offer opportunities for engagement with learning and ultimately a drive to improve wellbeing/attainment outcomes in a flexible way. On-line mentors for the more vulnerable learners would support highly flexible learning pathways for those at risk. Key partners - 3rd sector partnerships, creatives/skilled professionals in local contexts who can share skills and expertise, skilled young people are well placed to steer what needs to be in place for local sustainability and future relevance.

5.10   **What are the opportunities?**
        This collaborative has the potential to expand the digital offer in Scotland and reach global audiences and global markets. Both Local Authorities celebrate unique traditions and cultures; the Gaelic Language, history and culture remaining firmly at the heart of this offer.
        It would:
        - widen access to learning for all;
        - link communities online;
        - provide flexible, high quality adult learning opportunities;
        - provide coaching & mentoring;
        - support the voluntary sector;
        - offer affordable, accessible subscriptions to both leisure, wellbeing and fitness;
        - provide a flexible, creative and engaging qualification structure (including wider achievement accreditation) for young people;
        - support digital culture, the digital agenda and digital thinking;
        - prepare our children for the workplace of the future; and
        - focuses its education and training systems on expanding its pool of digital skills and capabilities.

5.11   We are working with our partners to develop a business plan based on a 'wave approach' (prototype schemes, refined and developed over time). In order to do so successfully on a larger scale, we would require a financial investment. This investment would be into an online collaborative that embraces a strong digital economy, place based approach and celebrates our culture, languages and the arts recognising Scotland as a digital nation of the future.
        Our key next steps are:
        - Develop an overarching business plan for all workstreams within the Academy Project;
        - identify key staff to lead the development; and

- identify funding streams to support development.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning

Date: 10 May 2021

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Appendices: Appendix 1 - Highland Virtual Academy 19/20 data analysis
                Appendix 2 - Session 19/20 Information
                Appendix 3 - Pupil Numbers (Dec to current date)
                Appendix 4 - Engagement & Feedback

Appendix 1 - Highland Virtual Academy 19/20 data analysis

Course	Number of pupils	% of A grades	% of B grades	% of C grades	% of D grades	% completing Units only
AH Chemistry	13	70	15	15	0	0
AH History	7	57	14	0	14	0
AH Maths	27	74	19	4	0	4
AH Physics	12	17	50	8	8	16
AH German	5	40	40	0	10	0
H German	4	100	0	0	0	0
N5 German	8	75	0	0	12.5	12.5
H Human Biology	16	12.5	12.5	37.5	12.5	25
H Modern Studies	4	0	50	25	0	25
H Photography	19	47	42	5	5	0
H Latin	4	75	25	0	0	0
N5 Latin	1	100	0	0	0	0
AH Spanish	1	100	0	0	0	0
H Spanish	5	80	20	0	0	0
N5 Spanish	8	37.5	50	12.5	0	0
AH Music	3	67	33	0	0	0
H Music	1	100	0	0	0	0

Appendix 2 - Session 19/20 Information

School Uptake

School	Number of pupils - August	Number of pupils - December
Alness Academy	0	0
Ardnamurchan	8	3
Charleston Academy	7	4
Culloden Academy	1	0
Dingwall Academy	5	2
Dornoch Academy	3	2
Farr High School	0	0
Fortrose Academy	28	21
Gairloch Academy	6	2
Glenurquhart High School	3	3
Golspie High School	8	4
Grantown Grammar	16	13
Invergordon Academy	1	1
Inverness High School	15	5
Inverness Royal Academy	20	10
Kilchuimen Academy	0	0
Kingussie Academy	0	0
Kinlochbervie	4	1
Kinlochleven	2	1
Lochaber	0	0
Mallaig	8	7
Millburn	0	0
Nairn	16	7
Plockton	5	2
Portree	62	31
Tain	17	6
Thurso	6	1
Ullapool	9	6
Wick	21	15

Subject Uptake

Course	Number of schools August - December	Number of pupils August - December
AH Chemistry	4	18 to 14
AH German	3	6 to 4
H German	3	3
N5 German	11 to 8	17 to 13
AH History	5 to 3	11 to 5
H Human Biology	6 to 5	29 to 18
H Latin	3 to 2	4 to 2
N5 Latin	5 to 4	6 to 5
AH Maths	7	37 to 24
H Modern Studies	5 to 2	24 to 4
AH Music	5 to 3	12 to 4
H Music	2	2
H Photography	13 to 10	47 to 19
AH Physics	8 to 7	17 to 13
AH Spanish	1	1
H Spanish	5 to 3	6 to 4
N5 Spanish	4 to 2	28 to 11

Appendix 3 - Pupil Numbers (Dec to current date)

Charts based on 218 pupils and does not include additions nor mass referrals made by Culloden and Dingwall in December
Current – 89 pupils plus 9 light touch pupils and 33 N5 and H Maths pupils at Ardnamurchan and 6 N5 and H German pupils at GHS
Closed referrals – 129 pupils

All Pupils by Area

Area	Number
West	32
South	113
North	45
Mid	28

All Pupils by Sector

Secondary, 114, 52%
Primary, 104, 48%

All Pupils by Year Group

- S6, 22, 10%
- S5, 22, 10%
- S4, 42, 19%
- S3, 16, 7%
- S2, 10, 5%
- S1, 2, 1%
- P1, 25, 11%
- P2, 12, 6%
- P3, 14, 6%
- P4, 12, 6%
- P5, 13, 6%
- P6, 17, 8%
- P7, 11, 5%

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