The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Education Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday 21 February 2024 at 10.35 am.

Present:

Ms S Atkin Mrs I Campbell (remote) Mrs M Cockburn Ms H Crawford Ms S Fanet Mr J Finlayson (Chair) Mr D Fraser Mr J Grafton Mr D Gregg Ms M Hutchison Ms L Johnston Ms L Kraft Ms M MacCallum Mrs I MacKenzie (remote) Ms J McEwan (substitute) Mr J McGillivray (remote) Mr D Millar (Vice Chair) Mrs P Munro (remote)

Religious Representatives (non-voting):

Ms S Lamont Mr I MacDonald (remote) Mr W Skene

Youth Convener (non-voting):

Ms O MacLeod

Non-Members also present:

Mr M Baird Mr M Cameron (remote) Mr A Christie (remote) Mr B Lobban Mr G MacKenzie (remote) Mr D Macpherson (remote) Mr C Munro (remote) Mr P Oldham (remote) Mrs M Reid Mr K Rosie (remote) Ms M Ross

In attendance:

Ms F Grant, Head of Education, Learning and Teaching Ms C Macklin, Head of Education, Lifelong Learning and Gaelic Services Ms A MacPherson, Head of Resources Ms B Brown, Senior Lead Manager, Performance and Improvement Ms T Stones, Senior Lead Manager, Professional Learning Ms A Jansson, Area Education and Learning Manager (North) Ms F Shearer, Area Education and Learning Manager (South) Ms B Cairns, Principal Educational Psychologist Mr I Jackson, Education Officer Ms L Burns, Head Teacher, St Columba's Primary School Mr D Hayes-MacLeod, Head Teacher, South Lodge Primary School Ms A MacLennan, Head Teacher, Auchtertyre and Shieldaig Primary Schools Mr J Naples-Campbell, Head Teacher, North West Sutherland Schools Mr N Ross, Head Teacher, Dornoch Firth 3-18 Campus Mr F Thomson, Head Teacher, Noss Primary School Ms J Douglas, Care and Learning Alliance (Third Sector) Ms S Fowler, Thriving Families (Third Sector) Ms M Chemonges, Highland Parent Council Partnership

Ms M Murray, Principal Committee Officer Ms R Ross, Committee Officer

Also in attendance:

Ms A Footitt, Information Officer, National Autistic Society

An asterisk in the margin denotes a recommendation to the Council. All decisions with no marking in the margin are delegated to the Committee.

Mr J Finlayson in the Chair

Business

1. Calling of the Roll and Apologies for Absence Gairm a' Chlàir agus Leisgeulan

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr R Gale.

2. Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt/ Aithris Fhollaiseachd

The following Members made general Transparency Statements but, having applied the objective test, did not consider that they had an interest to declare:-

Mr J McGillivray, as a retired member and former Highland District Secretary of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association.

Mr J Grafton, on the basis that his partner was a secondary school teacher in Highland.

3. Good News/Outstanding Achievements Naidheachdan Matha/Coileanaidhean Air Leth

A presentation on outstanding achievements by pupils and schools had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting. To formally recognise the outstanding achievements at the Committee the presentation was shown, together with a video of music from primary schools in south Lochaber.

The Committee **NOTED** the outstanding achievements.

4. Continuing to Raise Attainment and Achievement A' Sìor Thogail Buileachadh agus Coileanadh

There had been circulated Report No EDU/1/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

The Chair commented that the report put into context the realities of the attainment story in Highland and, because of the scrutiny and debate at previous meetings of the Committee and the requests made by Members, there was now a better understanding of what was happening in terms of attainment from 3-18 and where it was necessary to be more strategic in both supporting and improving, in collaboration with school staff, different aspects of learning, teaching, assessment, moderation and data collection so that the Council was not only accurately reporting attainment but ensuring consistency across all Highland schools using a variety of strategies, resources and knowledge.

As had been asked by Members of the Committee, officers were working with agencies like Education Scotland and other local authorities to learn from them in terms of what could be done better with respect to all aspects of improving and assessing attainment. They had also, as could be seen in the appendices to the report, developed clear raising attainment strategies to articulate what was being done in schools, supported by the Council, which he was sure Members would see as being positive and responsive to what had been asked for.

However, the overarching message from the report was that, at the senior phase, attainment in Highland was in line with the national average. The building blocks for attainment at the senior phase were always underpinned by what happened in primary schools and it was necessary to recognise the great work staff were doing in all settings including nurseries, primary schools and secondary schools. The good news was that because officers now had so many different types of data and were working with schools to improve the moderation material needed to support them, there was now a better understanding of what needed to be driven forward as part of the Raising Attainment Strategy.

- the report was not about the quality of teaching in primary schools but about working with teaching staff to improve reporting against national standards;
- primary education set the foundation for pupils, and getting it right was critical to future performance. If pupils were going into secondary school not fully prepared, secondary school head teachers would be flagging that as an issue;
- secondary senior phase attainment was in line with the national average which
 was positive and confirmed that teaching and attainment in primary schools was at
 a high level;
- consistency was key in terms of assessment and moderation. However, it was difficult to get consistent assessment and moderation reporting across Scotland, and in Highland there were particular challenges with rurality and small schools;
- it was right to have a focus on assessment reporting but it was absolutely not a criticism of teaching staff;
- the data in the report was fascinating and indicated that attainment was better than was being portrayed;
- information was sought, and provided, on a number of points including when the dip in attainment in P4 had begun and whether consideration was being given to what came before P4 – ie was the leap too big in terms of the curriculum; whether there was any evidence that the secondary school structure suited young people more than primary school; whether the Progress and Achievement tracking module referred to in the report would lessen the administrative burden on teachers; and whether, from a practical perspective, the end of term two was the best time to gather predictions;
- making meaningful change was complex and could only be achieved by hardworking teachers and support staff working with families and pupils;
- the way the data in the report was presented showed the commitment by teaching staff and officers, and Members looked forward to further updates;

- it was necessary to look behind the numbers and remember that young people were at the centre of this matter;
- in relation to the cohort attainment timeline set out in the report, it was questioned how certain officers were that the 2016 cohort was representative. It was added that it would be interesting to see the same data for the 2015 and 2017 cohorts if it was available, and that it was necessary to be aware of what the picture was currently;
- the statement in the report that secondary senior phase attainment was firmly in line with the national average was questioned given the attainment report presented to the Committee in November 2023 had indicated that the gap to the national average remained steady;
- teachers erring on the side of caution when undertaking assessment was understandable. How it was intended to address that was outlined in Appendix 2 of the report, and the improvement activity and proposed next steps described therein were welcomed;
- disappointment was expressed regarding what had been reported recently in the press, which bore no resemblance to what was contained in the report, and members of the press were encouraged to read the report in more detail;
- concern was expressed that no other theory had been advanced as to the reason for the discrepancy between primary and secondary attainment, and it was queried whether consideration had been given to other factors such as the impact of tutors and parental input. The Head of Education, Teaching and Learning, confirmed that the impact of tutors had not been considered and that might be something that could be looked at. However, there was not a large number of tutors operating across the Highland area;
- moderation and standardisation of marking had been rolled out in 2023, which had led to an uplift in the attainment statistics, and it was questioned whether it was appropriate for this to happen twice. In response, the Chair explained that moderation and assessment was not something that was carried out as a one-off but an ongoing exercise;
- concern was expressed regarding the wording of the recommendations in the report and the impact on staff morale. However, other Members contended that the negative comments in the press and by some Members of the Committee were what was impacting the morale of hard-working teachers and education staff;
- teachers might feel there were being put under some pressure, and an amendment was proposed in that regard. The Chair expressed serious concern regarding the terms of the proposed amendment, which questioned the integrity of the Education and Learning Service by suggesting teachers would be pressurised to inflate attainment;
- the recommendations in the report invited the Committee to approve next steps including recommendations from Members raised at previous Education Committee meetings, and it was queried which particular recommendations from Members were being taken forward;
- on the point being raised, it was confirmed that a list of the local authorities the Council was working with in terms of raising attainment would be circulated to Members following the meeting;
- there were standalone papers on today's agenda in respect of attainment, finance and behaviour in schools. These issues were interlinked and it was suggested there was a need for a more holistic approach;
- in response to comments suggesting attainment in primary schools was poor, the Chair emphasised that Highland was the second highest authority in terms of

improvement in attainment over the past few years, and predicted attainment for the coming year was above last year's national average;

- whilst further improvement was desired, the data indicated that the correct foundations were being laid in primary school. The report showed that attainment in Highland was getting better each year and there were strategies in place to support school staff and pupils going forward;
- the hard work that had gone into the report was recognised and thanks were expressed to all those involved;
- it was necessary to remember that children were different, and it was felt this was missing from the report which talked about national standards and universality;
- Highland was a unique area due to its size and rurality, and sometimes it would not fit into the national picture. The Chair concurred, commenting that it was necessary to look behind the statistics at individual pupils and schools, and promote and support a holistic approach to education;
- it was necessary to support and listen to staff, not simply instruct them;
- teachers might rather have a pupil sit a level they knew they could pass than put them through a higher level and risk a lower grade, which might knock their confidence;
- it was possible that the choice of subjects in secondary school had a positive impact on attainment as young people were more engaged in subjects they had chosen;
- it was not believed that experienced teachers would underestimate pupils' attainment, and it was suggested that teachers should be left to assess using their own judgement. To increase Members' understanding of the issues around assessment and moderation, the Chair proposed that a report be presented to a future meeting;
- it would take time for teaching staff to become confident in assessing to the standards required;
- the previously agreed Raising Attainment Strategy was now coming alive and Members were sure that the Head Teachers presenting today would instil further confidence as to how it was being embedded in schools; and
- thanks were expressed to officers for their ongoing generosity with their time in terms of responding to Members' questions and enabling them to fully understand the issues.

Following discussion, Mr J Finlayson, seconded by Mr D Millar, **moved** the recommendations as set out in the report.

As an **amendment**, Ms H Crawford, seconded by Ms J McEwan, moved that the following be added at the end of recommendation iii:-

"ensuring that no teacher will be pressurised to inflate their assessment of a pupil's attainment."

On a vote being taken, there were eleven votes for the **motion** and five votes for the **amendment**, with two abstentions. The **motion** was therefore **carried**, the votes having been cast as follows:-

For the Motion:

Ms S Atkin, Mrs I Campbell, Mrs M Cockburn, Ms S Fanet, Mr J Finlayson, Mr D Fraser, Ms M Hutchison, Ms L Johnston, Ms L Kraft, Mr D Millar, Mrs P Munro.

For the Amendment:

Ms H Crawford, Mr J Grafton, Mrs I MacKenzie, Ms J McEwan, Mr J McGillivray.

Abstentions:

Mr D Gregg, Ms M MacCallum.

Decision:

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** that a young person's attainment and achievement was a 3-18 journey culminating in National Qualifications and positive sustained destinations;
- ii. **AGREED** the improvement focus for Primary 4 stage and that a progress update would be brought to a future Education Committee;
- iii. **AGREED** that the service would continue to work with primary colleagues to improve accuracy of teacher judgement and build capacity within the system, improving moderation and standardisation within our schools; and
- iv. **APPROVED** the next steps linked to the previously agreed Raising Attainment Strategy including recommendations from Members raised at previous Education Committee meetings.

It was also **AGREED** that a report on assessment and moderation be presented to a future meeting of the Committee.

5. Presentation: Primary Strategic Network Taisbeanadh: Lìonra Ro-innleachdail nam Bun-sgoiltean

The Chair explained that this item followed on from the preceding report as it was important for Members to appreciate how things were working at grass roots level in schools to improve all aspects of education, including attainment, with school staff being right at the centre.

The Primary Strategic Network fed directly into the improvement agendas for schools including raising attainment, learning and teaching, assessment and monitoring and supporting wellbeing which were all integral to ensuring schools supported pupils in a holistic way while also ensuring improvements in all aspects of achievement and attainment.

He went on to welcome Fraser Thomson, Head Teacher, Noss Primary School, Alison MacLennan, Head Teacher, Auchtertyre and Shieldaig Primary Schools, Leah Burns, Head Teacher, St Columba's Primary School, and John Naples-Campbell, Head Teacher, North West Sutherland Schools who, following an introduction by the Senior Lead Manager, Performance and Improvement, gave presentations on the four key workstreams within the Primary Strategic Network which supported the direct involvement of Head Teachers and schools, working with central officers, in the development of key aspects of policy and improvement activity and provided a mechanism to communicate these developments across schools with an Associated School Group representative framework.

- thanks were expressed for the uplifting and encouraging presentation, which had brought the preceding report and appendices to life, and for the work the Head Teachers were doing both in their own areas and in terms of the collaborative approach taking place throughout Highland;
- information was sought as to how the work described in the presentation was developing because of the diversity and rurality of Highland and whether the IT systems that were in place and the opportunities to meet were supporting that work. In that regard, it was explained that the use of Microsoft Teams had been revolutionary in terms of connecting with colleagues and practitioners and provided a strong platform to collaborate and continue the improvement journey;
- some young people in rural areas felt isolated, and the identification of health and wellbeing support was welcomed;
- in relation to the National Improving Writing Programme, the statistics were impressive and the fact that it involved reflective, evidence-based practice and a whole-family approach was welcomed;
- professional isolation being addressed was welcomed, and it was queried whether there were any measurements in place in that regard and whether a teacher who came into post and found themselves isolated would automatically be picked up and supported;
- the Primary Strategic Network represented true collaboration which was raising attainment and achievement for all young people in Highland including vulnerable young people. Thanks were expressed to the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning, and her team for working with Head Teachers to ensure they were heard, understood and well supported;
- the inclusion of the cost of the school day in the Health and Wellbeing areas for improvement was welcomed, as this could have a huge impact on how a family interacted with a school;
- the whole family wellbeing approach and the identification of young carers and care experienced young people were welcomed;
- further information was sought on the Raising Attainment in Literacy and Numeracy area for improvement relating to Reading Schools;
- in relation to consulting young voices, some young people might be more vocal than others and it was queried who was being consulted and by what means, and how it was intended to reach those less likely to engage; and
- the collaborative and supportive approach was welcomed and would benefit teachers and pupils.

The Chair thanked the Head Teachers for giving up their time to present and asked them to feed back to colleagues that the Committee appreciated the hard work taking place in all school settings and supported them in the good work being taken forward.

The Committee otherwise **NOTED** the presentation.

Service Performance Reporting and Quarter 3 Monitoring - 1 October to 31 December 2023 Aithris Coileanadh Seirbheis agus Sgrùdadh Ràith 3 – 1 Dàmhair gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2023

There had been circulated Report No EDU/2/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

- almost half of children and young people in Highland had Additional Support Needs, which was a significant area of expenditure with the Education and Learning Service, and it was queried whether there was an opportunity to establish a strategic group with a specific Additional Support for Learning remit that could include Third Sector input and potentially feed into the Integrated Children's Services Board. The Chair confirmed this would be discussed, emphasising the importance of avoiding duplication;
- it having been queried whether Education and Learning officers were working with colleagues in the Health and Social Care Service to ensure a joined up approach to third sector commissioning and procurement, it was confirmed that discussions were ongoing and an update could be provided at a later date;
- congratulations were expressed in respect of the projected underspend. However, much of this appeared to be a result of increased staff turnover which was unlikely to be replicated and was undesirable in the long term;
- libraries were a lifeline for some, and concern was expressed that if the number of memberships continued to reduce library services would be seen as an easy area to cut. It was confirmed that further information on the reasons for the reduction in library memberships could be sought from High Life Highland;
- information was sought, and provided, on the historical issue relating to the establishment within Special Schools; the scoping work in relation to establishing a Highland-wide 3-18 formula for schools; and why school attendance rates were only reported to Committee every two years.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Service's revenue monitoring position;
- ii. scrutinised and **NOTED** the Service's performance and risk information; and
- iii. **AGREED** that discussions take place regarding the possibility of establishing a strategic group with a specific Additional Support for Learning remit.

7. Leadership Framework Frèam Ceannardais

There had been circulated Report No EDU/3/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

The Chair explained that focussing on leadership at all levels continued to be a key workstream for education over the next few years as it was crucial for developing the next generation of leaders. Developing leadership also included involving children and young people as well as all practitioners in Highland's educational establishments.

To help Members understand better what was happening in terms of leadership in schools, he welcomed David Hayes-MacLead, Head Teacher, South Lodge Primary School, and Norman Ross, Head Teacher, Dornoch Firth 3-18 Campus who, following an introduction by the Senior Lead Manager, Professional Learning, gave presentations on Learner Participation and Values-Based Leadership across a 3-18 Campus.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

• thanks were expressed for the inspiring presentation which highlighted the importance of leadership at all levels, and Members commended the Head Teachers

involved for the work they did in their respective schools and the positive impact it had on the community;

- the reference to a whole family approach was welcomed, as was the induction for new and acting Head Teachers;
- in relation to learner participation, it was queried what impact allowing pupils choice as to how they wanted to be involved had had;
- using the right language was crucial and could have a significant impact on children;
- there were people who wanted to stay in Highland who might not yet have the skills to be leaders. It was important they were developed to take on positions of leadership, and the report set out an excellent way to do so and replenish retiring experts; and
- the inclusive approach being taken to learner participation was commended.

The Committee NOTED:-

- i. that the development of a Leadership Framework would need to work for both the Education Service, and across the wider organisation, to support management and leadership development at all levels and across all services at a time of financial complexity, supporting the concept of one Council;
- ii. the necessity of partnership working across services to ensure a consistent approach to leadership and management across all levels of the Council; and
- iii. the progress made to date on Cohort 1 of the New and Acting Head Teacher Induction and the Professional Learning and Leadership Academy.

8. Presentation: Thriving Families and National Autistic Society Taisbeanadh: Teaghlaichean Soirbheachail agus An Comann Òtasamach Nàiseanta

The Chair welcomed Sarah Fowler, Chief Officer, Thriving Families, and Alison Footitt, Information Officer, National Autistic Society, who gave a presentation on the work done by their respective organisations and The Pines, Inverness, to support young people with Additional Support Needs (ASN), their families and the professionals who worked with them.

- it was recognised that the transition from children's services to adult services could be challenging and, in response to a question, it was confirmed that although the organisations presenting supported people up to the age of 25 they could signpost older people to other organisations such as the Highland One Stop Shop;
- Thriving Families ensured that families with a child with ASN knew that they were not alone, and that the wellbeing of the child was at the centre of all the support provided;
- the resources available to help schools and the work done in linking up with schools to support young people were commended;
- it was important to recognise that while teachers were professionals they were not medical professionals, and the help and support provided by organisations like Thriving Families and the National Autistic Society was crucial to allow teachers to support children with ASN and help them develop a love of learning;
- The Pines website was very clear and easy to understand and was a valuable resource both within and outwith Highland;

- information was sought, and provided, on the issues surrounding the current long waiting lists for Neurodevelopmental Assessment Services, and it was confirmed there was an active group within Education and Health and Social Care looking at this matter;
- the importance of organisations and Council services working together to support young people with ASN and their families was emphasised;
- it was helpful to be able to signpost people to where they could get help while awaiting diagnosis;
- services such as the National Autistic Society, Thriving Families and the Highland One Stop Shop were working hard but did not have the capacity to help all those who needed it;
- there was a lack of services for autistic adults which was a particular problem as many adults discovered their own autism when their child received a diagnosis; and
- the importance of GIRFEC (Getting it Right for Every Child) having been emphasised, it was confirmed that a report would be brought to a future meeting of the Committee, and the Chair undertook to liaise with the Chair of the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee in that regard.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the presentation; and
- ii. **AGREED** that a report on GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child) be presented to a future meeting of the Committee.

9. Promoting Positive Behaviour A' Cur air Adhart Deagh Mhodh-ghiùlain

There had been circulated Report No EDU/4/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

The Chair explained that this report had been requested given the concerns in the media about behaviour in schools nationally. It indicated not only the challenges being faced but why they might be arising and what support was being offered at Council and school level to pupils, parents and staff.

- the ability of teachers and non-teaching staff to work holistically was commended;
- the use of trauma informed practice was welcomed;
- the importance of the language used and the connection between a positive school ethos and attainment were evident in the earlier presentations by Head Teachers;
- the number of severe instances of challenging behaviour were relatively low;
- it was reassuring that Head Teachers had access to the tools they needed to deal with challenging behaviour;
- it was emphasised that encouraging pro-social behaviour and emotional regulation may not work as well for neurodivergent children and that modifying the environment was often more effective than trying to modify behaviour;
- on the point being raised, it was clarified that a universal approach was not a one size fits all solution and that a person-centred approach was still used;

- information was sought, and provided, on the process for reporting incidents of challenging behaviour, what constituted challenging behaviour and the policy on mobile phone use in schools;
- it was important to realise the effect challenging behaviour had on the learning of other pupils;
- on the point being raised, the Chair confirmed that consideration would be given to the possibility of Safe, Strong & Free either presenting at a future meeting of the Committee or providing a workshop for Members;
- concern was expressed regarding the rise in misogynistic views among male pupils, the increase in racist comments, the issues caused by social media and the increase in the use of vapes by young people. In relation to the latter, it was confirmed that it was intended to include a specific question on vaping in the next Lifestyle Survey;
- information was sought, and provided, on several points including the renaming of violent incidents as pupil-staff incidents, the impact of small schools and in-school accommodation on behaviour, and the effect of Covid on the behaviour of younger pupils;
- what was seen as bad behaviour could sometimes be a difference in generational expectations since children were now much more aware of their rights;
- more public education was needed around exclusion to explain that it was about safety rather than a sanction or punishment; and
- concern having been expressed regarding behaviour on school buses, it was confirmed that Members' comments would be fed back to the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy, whose service had responsibility for school transport.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the outcome of the national survey;
- ii. **NOTED** the actions taken to address concerns in schools and the training and support available to school staff;
- iii. AGREED to endorse the approach taken in the Highland Framework and Guidance on Promoting Positive Relationships as being in line with current research and national guidance from Scottish Government and Education Scotland; and
- iv. **AGREED** that consideration be given to a future presentation or Members' workshop involving Safe Strong & Free.

10. Review of Statutory Consultation Exercise - Closure of Gergask Primary School Ath-sgrùdadh air Eacarsaich Cho-chomhairleachaidh Reachdail – Dùnadh Bun-Sgoil Gharbhghaisg

There had been circulated Report No EDU/5/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

- the closure of schools could make areas less attractive, leading to further depopulation;
- the consultation process was commended, and generally the community supported the closure of the school; and

- it was emphasised that the most important factors were the education and wellbeing of the children, and in this instance parents had removed their children from the school and enrolled them in a nearby larger school.
- * The Committee AGREED TO RECOMMEND to the Council that it discontinue education at Gergask Primary School, transferring its catchment to that of Newtonmore Primary School. Gergask Primary School had not been operational since September 2022 and a closure decision would formalise the current operational situation.
- 11. Statutory Consultation Exercise Duror Primary School: Request to Proceed to Consultation on Permanent Closure Eacarsaich Co-chomhairleachaidh Reachdail – Bun-Sgoil Dhùrair: Iarrtas a Dhol air Adhart gu Co-chomhairleachadh mu Dhùnadh Maireannach

There had been circulated Report No EDU/6/24 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the community was very fond of the school and had been worried about its closure;
- it was queried whether the school had received enough support in previous years and what effect changes such as new families moving into the area in the next few months would have on the consultation process; and
- in response to a question, it was confirmed that transport would be provided for children to attend a nearby school if their school was closed.

The Committee **AGREED** to proceed to statutory consultation on the basis of the Proposal Paper set out in Appendix A of the report.

The meeting concluded at 3.25 pm.