

Agenda Item	9.
Report No	EDU/16/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Education

Date: 3 June 2026

Report Title: Improving School Inspection Outcomes

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - People

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides information regarding standards and quality of education in schools and all Early Learning and Childcare settings including Local Authority, Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) and Childminders across the Highland Council for the 3-18 learner journey.
- 1.2 The report sets out inspection activity and evaluations across the Highland Council during academic session 2025/26 and also over time; provides an overview of the current position of grades across the whole area and describes the themes coming through from external scrutiny that are worth sharing as effective practice and those that require focused attention to ensure improvement. It also provides information on internal quality improvement activity and scrutiny. Finally, it details the self-evaluation grades set by schools themselves as part of their ongoing improvement cycle using the same Quality Indicators as His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE).
- 1.3 **Appendix 1** provides a proposed approach to providing improved local Area Committee scrutiny of school inspection outcomes.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
 - i. consider and note the contents of the report.
 - ii. approve the plan for reporting to area committees shown in **Appendix 1**

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource - There are no additional financial costs in relation to this report.
- 3.2 Legal – There are no implications associated with this report.
- 3.3 Risk - There are no risks associated with this report.
- 3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) - There are no implications associated with this report.

3.5 Gaelic – There are no specific Gaelic implications and GME schools are reported within data.

4. Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children’s Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3 This is a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5. Background

5.1 As a requirement of the National Improvement Framework, HMIE will report on and provide grades on standards in school and ELC settings. HMIE Inspections use a selection of Quality Indicators (QIs) detailed within [How Good is our School? 4th Edition](#) (HGIOS 4)

For a full model inspection, the focus is on four Quality Indicators:

- QI 1.3 – leadership of change;
- QI 2.3 – learning, teaching and assessment;
- QI 3.1 – ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion; and
- QI 3.2 – raising attainment and achievement.

For a short model inspection, the focus on QIs 2.3 and 3.2.

5.2 ELC settings are subject to inspections from both the Care Inspectorate and HMIE and can experience joint inspections where both scrutiny bodies evaluate the quality of the provision.

[The Quality Improvement Framework for ELC](#) for the early learning and childcare sector, childminding and school-aged childcare is framed around the following four key areas:

1. Leadership
2. Children thrive and develop in quality spaces
3. Care Play and Learning
4. Children are supported to achieve

Following the publication of [Funding Follows the Child and the National Standard For Early Learning and Childcare Providers: Principles and Practice](#), all ELC settings must gain evaluations of good or better to be able to provide funded ELC either directly or in partnership with the local authority.

Alongside the requirement to meet the minimum quality inspection grades of good, there are additional criteria for settings to meet in order to meet the ELC National Standard.

6. Evaluations and Outcomes

6.1 Each QI is graded on a 6-point scale:

- 1 = unsatisfactory
- 2 = weak
- 3 = adequate
- 4 = good
- 5 = very good
- 6 = excellent

6.2 His Majesty's Inspectorate Education (HMIE)

Currently there are a number of actions that can follow on from an inspection visit. The school receives a grading of satisfactory or better and no further action is required by HMIE. Or, where grades are less than satisfactory HMIE are likely to plan a revisit within a year of the published report date, or they may ask for an update report on progress to be provided by the Local Authority.

6.3 Care Inspectorate

Recommendations and requirements may follow an inspection.

- Recommendations: statements that set out actions the care service provider should take to improve or develop the quality of the service; and
- Requirements: statements which set out what is required of the care service provider to comply with relevant legislation.

Care service providers must submit an action plan to the Care Inspectorate addressing any requirements and recommendations identified. Progress against the action plan is monitored by the Care Inspectorate through annual return and self-assessment forms submitted by the care service provider, and through subsequent inspection.

6.4 Where a school or ELC setting receives less than the national expectation from HMIE or Care Inspectorate, the Quality Improvement Manager for the school/setting works with the Headteacher/Manager to develop an action plan which will secure improvement in the areas of identified need.

7. Inspection Activity since August 2025

7.1 Schools

Since August 2025 there have been 15 Inspection of schools conducted and published or awaiting publication by His Majesty's inspectorate (HMIE).

Of the 48 quality indicators reviewed as part of the inspection process, 35 were satisfactory or better. Schools with grades of less than satisfactory are now working to action plans agreed with their Area Quality Improvement Manager (AQIM).

Of the 10 schools requiring follow up activity, 4 have been signed off. 6 schools continue to work toward the outcomes within their action plans.

7.1.1 Strengths coming through from inspection evidence across Highland schools highlight:

- Strong, positive learning communities underpinned by respectful relationships and a nurturing ethos.
- Children and young people are described as happy, motivated and well-behaved.
- Leadership at all levels emerges as a strength in a number of reports, with headteachers and staff teams working collaboratively, sharing vision and responsibility for improvement.
- Inspectors also note strong inclusive and wellbeing-focused practice, effective engagement with parents and partners, and growing opportunities for learners' voice and leadership, particularly at primary level.

7.1.2 Improvement Areas - The following themes are coming through as areas that will require improvement and will be reflected in the annual refresh of the Education and Learning Improvement Plan, where they have not already been identified as a key theme. These will also feature within our professional learning offer and be a focus of sharing effective practice across schools.

The key themes are outlined below.

- Consistency and Quality of Learning and Teaching
- Raising Attainment in Literacy and Numeracy
- Use of Data, Tracking and Evaluation
- Leadership of Change and Self-Evaluation
- Curriculum Rationale and Coherence
- Inclusion, Equity and Meeting Learners' Needs
- Wellbeing, Attendance and Aspirations (Secondary)

Although contexts differ, inspection findings show a high level of consistency in the areas identified for improvement. It is also worth noting that 80% of schools gaining less than satisfactory ratings have new or acting head teachers. This illustrates the critical role played by our school leaders in driving consistently strong performance and the service is therefore also looking at how support to new and acting head teachers can be enhanced by central officers and peer support networks.

7.2 Early Learning and Childcare

There have been 37 ELC settings conducted and published by the Care Inspectorate. Of the 128 Quality Indicators reviewed as part of the inspections, 61 were good or better. A further 48 were rated satisfactory.

7.2.1 Strengths coming through from ELC setting inspections common to many are as follows:

- Staff teams are generally dedicated, nurturing and caring
- Managers want to make a difference and support quality improvement
- Some examples of excellent family engagement

7.2.2 Improvement Areas - The following themes are coming through as areas that will require improvement and as a result will feature in our Early Years Service Improvement Plan and professional learning provision, as well as feed into capital programme planning with property colleagues:

- Spaces, experiences and interactions
- Management and leadership – quality assurance
- Observations planning and tracking
- Staffing and deployment, although all settings meet the ratio requirements, the needs of children and the layout of buildings make staffing deployment challenging with many requiring additional staffing
- Layout and facilities, challenges associated with old buildings which are not fit for purpose.

8. Inspection Data – performance over time

8.1 Section 7 captures information for the school session 2025/26. The following information shows our performance over time.

Overall, performance in schools and ELC in The Highland Council (THC) needs to improve further. The delivery of high-quality education needs to become more consistent with greater numbers of schools achieving satisfactory or better in the following Quality Indicators:

- 1.3 Leadership of change
- 2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment
- 3.1 Improving wellbeing, equality and inclusion
- 3.2 Raising attainment and achievement.

Under the current inspection model (introduced in Session 2016/17) our records show the following were satisfactory or better:

	Total	1.3	2.3	3.1	3.2
Primary	93	75%	78%	92%	81%
Secondary	15	75%	80%	75%	73%
Special	2	0%	50%	50%	0%

Please note:

*16/17 data not available

* No inspections were undertaken between March 2020 and July 2022

* No Data recorded between October 2019 – March 2020 (changes to central team)

8.2 When inspected by the Care inspectorate, ELC settings in the Highlands generally perform well with 78% settings delivering a service that is evaluated as Good or better by the Care Inspectorate across all areas inspected. 83% of LA settings, 61% of PVI settings and all commissioned childminders meeting the National Standard. Currently 98% have achieved an evaluation of good or better in at least one of the following Quality Indicators.

9. School Self Evaluation

9.1 Each school and Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) setting prepares and publishes their individual School or ELC Setting Improvement Plan (SIP) in collaboration with their children and young people, parents/carers, and partners. As part of this process schools publish a Standards and Quality Report (SQR) each year and evaluate themselves against the following Quality Indicators.

- QI 1.3 – leadership of change;
- QI 2.3 – learning, teaching and assessment;
- QI 3.1 – ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion; and
- QI 3.2 – raising attainment and achievement.

The significant relationship between effective self-evaluation and school improvement cannot be underestimated. Self-evaluation must be part of an ongoing process and schools must ask the questions:

- How are we doing?
- How do we know?
- What are we going to do now?

Through this approach, schools should look inwards to analyse their work, look outwards to find out more about what is working well for others locally and nationally and look forwards to gauge what continuous improvement might look like in the longer term. Robust self-evaluation allows schools to be confident with regard to their own evaluations.

Schools submit their SIP and SQR to the Local Authority and Area Quality Improvement Managers (AQIMs) scrutinise the information and provide feedback on their content. For session 2026/27 schools will also submit their School Self Evaluation Summary (SSES) for further internal scrutiny and dialogue around its content.

10. Internal Scrutiny and Quality Improvement and Activity

10.1 Schools

All schools received an initial engagement visit from their AQIM during term one. The focus of these visits was to update progress against the core Quality Indicators; Leadership of change; learning, teaching and assessment; wellbeing, equality and inclusion; and raising attainment and achievement. In addition, all school leaders met with their AQIM for an attainment discussion in Term three of the 2025-26 session.

Using a responsive approach, supported by a range of quantitative and qualitative data, schools are identified for universal, focussed or intensive support. This UFI system is under review to ensure even greater rigour around action planning and support for schools who require to effect improvement.

As part of the developing Highland Quality Improvement Framework, a cycle of Quality Improvement Visits has been arranged, to begin in August 2026. This activity

will enable the gathering of detailed performance information upon which targeted improvement activity can be based. The reviews will identify key strengths around the culture and ethos in schools; the effective use of data for improvement; targeted use of Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) to close the poverty-related attainment gap through implementation of effective interventions; and the impact of local authority driven work such as the National Improving Writing programme, learning and teaching developments. These visits will also identify some areas for development to inform the ongoing review and development of the Education and Learning Improvement Plan.

All schools have been mapped into a 3–5-year cycle. Headteachers will be consulted regarding where they sit within the programme ahead of year 1, commencing in August 2026. The strategic headteacher group focusing on quality assurance will work to review the framework with the lead AQIM.

10.2 **ELC**

Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings across Highland, including Local Authority (LA) and Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) provision, are supported by a central officer team. This team provides coordinated leadership across three key areas: operational delivery; learning and teaching; and business compliance and contracting - ensuring continuous improvement in line with the 10 National Standard Criteria.

All ELC settings are systematically reviewed using a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence and are categorised as requiring universal, focused, or intensive (UFI) support. This enables proportionate and targeted intervention. Support is delivered by central officers and includes:

- Operational guidance
- Support for learning, teaching, and children's progress
- Compliance and contractual support for PVI settings

From August 2026, ELC provision within school settings will be incorporated into the Council's Quality Improvement (QI) visit cycle, strengthening oversight and alignment across sectors.

Quality Improvement visits have been undertaken across both LA and PVI settings, with a particular focus on:

- The quality of staff-child interactions The creation of high-quality learning environments that promote curiosity, creativity and wellbeing
- Safe administration of medication
- Quality of snack and mealtime experiences
- Children's planning and learning profiles
- Leadership, quality assurance, and continuous improvement processes.

In line with the ELC Strategy, the forthcoming session will prioritise Career-Long Professional Learning (CLPL). This will be delivered through a coordinated and forward-planned programme; responsive and tailored support aligned with inspection findings and emerging themes.

This approach aims to ensure high-quality, consistent provision across all ELC settings and improved outcomes for children and families.

- 10.3 To address our current position and as part of the restructure, a number of new systems and processes have been introduced over this school session. For example, ELC Leadership and Headteacher (HT) Strategic Meetings where consistent messages and expectations are shared, with agenda points such as supporting additional support needs, school improvement planning and self-evaluation and raising attainment and data analysis. Individual HTs have also input on effective practice in a variety of areas relating to school improvement and self-evaluation. A robust professional learning calendar, aligned to the Education and Learning Improvement Plan, is being created to support staff in schools at all levels to support their work in improving experiences for children and young people.
- 10.4 These improvement approaches have been informed by close collaboration between the Chief Officer and the HMIE Head of Inspection for Highlands, with subsequent partnership working, in relation to quality improvement, between the AQIM team and the HMIE link inspector for Highland. This alliance has strengthened relationships, communication and built a shared understanding of both national expectations and our aspirations for consistent high quality learning provision for our children and young people.

11. Reporting to Area Committees

- 11.1 At the same time as the attainment report is presented, local inspection activity, results and associated self-evaluation and school improvement priorities will be reported on by the Area Quality Improvement Manager for schools and ELC settings. The timing of reporting may vary from one committee to the next, particularly in the case of committees with a large number of Associated School Groups. **Appendix 1** is provided as a sample of what would come to an area committee for approval by Education Committee.

12. Conclusion

- 12.1 The information within this report outlining the quality of Highland Council schools and nurseries and funded partners providing ELC highlights that the overall performance of schools and ELC settings is improving and where necessary, action plans put in place provide evidence of continuous improvement.
- 12.2 A report on Highland-wide Inspection outcomes and associated improvement activity will be brought to Education Committee on an annual basis.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - People

Date: 21 May 2026

Author: Bernadette Scott

Background Papers:

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Sample report for Area Committees

Appendix 1

Sample - Report to Area Committees

This report sets out information regarding standards and quality of educational provision across **(add area)**. It includes key findings following inspections of schools and ELC settings by Education Scotland/His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) and of early learning and childcare (ELC) settings undertaken by the Care Inspectorate.

Reporting is of inspections published since the **(add area)** Committee of the **(add date)**.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Area Committee consider and note the contents of the report.

Background

Education Scotland/HMIE Inspections

As required for the National Improvement Framework, HMIE will report on and provide grades for the following Quality Indicators (QIs) as part of full model inspections:

- QI 1.3 – leadership of change;
- QI 2.3 – learning, teaching and assessment;
- QI 3.1 – ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion; and
- QI 3.2 – raising attainment and achievement.

Short model inspections focus on QIs 2.3 and 3.2.

ELC Inspections

ELC settings are subject to inspections from the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland and can experience joint inspections where both scrutiny bodies evaluate the quality of the provision.

The Quality framework for the Early Learning and Childcare sector, childminding and school-aged childcare is framed around the four key areas

1. Leadership
2. Children thrive and develop in quality spaces
3. Care Play and Learning
4. Children are supported to achieve

Following the publication of Funding Follows The Child and the national standard for early learning and childcare providers: principles and practice, all ELC settings must

gain evaluations of good or better to be able to provide funded ELC in partnership with the local authority.

Evaluations and Outcomes

Each QI is graded on a 6-point scale in which 1 = unsatisfactory, 2 = weak, 3 = adequate, 4 = good, 5 = very good and 6 = excellent.

His Majesty's Inspectorate Education (HMIE)

Currently there are a number of actions that can follow an inspection visit. The school received satisfactory or better and no further action is required by HMIE. Where grades are less than satisfactory HMIE are likely to plan a revisit within a year of the published report date, or they may ask for an update report on progress to be provided by the Local Authority.

Care Inspectorate

Recommendations and requirements may follow an inspection.

- Recommendations: statements that set out actions the care service provider should take to improve or develop the quality of the service; and
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Recently Published Reports Education Scotland/HMIE Inspections

Since the **(add area) Committee** on **(add date)**, the following reports have been published by Education Scotland:

List each in area.

- **(add name)** school and Nursery was inspected in **date** by HMIE. HMIE will **(make no further visits/revisit)** in connection with this inspection. The evaluations against the QIs are shown in **Appendix 1**. At the time of the **(add year)** pupil census, the school had **(add number)** primary school children and **(add number)** nursery children enrolled. The primary school had a staffing complement of full time equivalent (FTE) teachers. The detailed Summarised Inspection findings for **(add name)** Primary School and Summarised Inspection findings are available on the HMIE website **add LINK**

Performance Summary

HMIE

(Add number) ELC providers, **(add number)** primary schools and **(add number)** secondary schools have been inspected since the beginning of this academic session.

For HMIE inspections “satisfactory” is expected nationally. In Highland we aspire to move towards a higher expectation of good or better.

Where a school or ELC setting receives less than a satisfactory evaluation, the Quality Improvement Manager for the school/setting works with the Headteacher/Manager to develop an action plan which will secure improvement in the areas of identified need.

The following table shows the percentage of schools and ELC settings in the area achieving satisfactory or better as evaluated by HMIE

	QI 1.3	QI 2.3	QI 3.1	QI 3.2
ELC	insert data			
Primary				
Secondary				

The table in Appendix 1 details all HMIE evaluations for each school inspected over the last year.

ELC

This section provides a summary of the performance of ELC settings in inspections carried out by the Care Inspectorate.

Care Inspectorate Inspections -

A total of **(add number)** inspections have been undertaken and published by the Care Inspectorate since the **(add area)** Committee on date.

For the **(add number)** indicators inspected; **(add number)** received a grading of good or better.

There is an expectation that ELC providers meet “good” evaluations in all QIs. Therefore, where an ELC provider receives less than a “good” evaluation, the Early Years Manager and Quality Improvement Officer for the ELC establishment works with the Headteacher/Manager/Leader to develop an action plan which will secure improvement in the areas of identified need.

The table in **Appendix 1** details all Care Inspectorate evaluations for each ELC setting inspected over the last year.

Conclusion

Inspection reports provide further information on the standards and quality of schools and ELC provision in **(add area)**. This report sets out the outcomes of HMIE and Care Inspectorate reports of schools and ELC settings inspected and published

since last reported to the **(add area)** Committee on **(add date)**. The overall performance of schools and ELC settings in is **(add description)** and where necessary, action plans put in place provide evidence of continuous improvement.

Appendix 1 will show an overview **(tabular form)** of all ELC Care Inspectorate and HMIE School and ELC and Inspection evaluations.