

National Thematic Inspection: Local authority approaches to supporting school improvement

Summarised Findings

Local Authority	Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
HM Lead Inspector	Joan Esson

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

Purpose and themes

The purpose of the visit was to gather evidence about how Comhairle nan Eilean Siar supports school improvement, with a focus on how they support schools to improve the quality of education through:

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

Context of the local authority

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar comprises a group of islands in the Outer Hebrides. It is a rural area of Scotland.

There are no children and young people residing within deciles 1-2 of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).

Approximately 32% of children in primary and 35% of young people in secondary have been assessed as requiring additional support with their learning.

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

There are 22 sgoiltean (schools) in the comhairle, four of which have àrd-sgoil (secondary) provision. Two of the àrd-sgoil provisions are within 3-18 sgoiltean. There are 1740 pupils receiving bun-sgoil (primary) education and 1477 receiving àrd-sgoil education.

Gàidhlig (Gaelic) Medium Education is growing over time within the comhairle. However, there is not yet a sustained pattern of improving numbers enrolling at

P1. Sgoiltean where the majority of children in a sgoil learn through the medium of Gàidhlig are designated as having Gàidhlig status. Children and young people in English Medium learn Gàidhlig as their first additional language – Gaelic (Learners). This is available across 3-18, leading to qualifications in the senior phase.

A Chief Officer for Education and Children's Services and a Head of Education lead a central education team. This team has responsibility for school improvement. It comprises Executive Headteachers and recently appointed Quality Improvement Officers. Executive Headteachers lead a cluster of bun-sgoiltean (primary schools). These bun-sgoiltean have an individual headteacher, or head of school. Àrd-sgoil and 3-18 sgoiltean are led by an individual headteacher. Their link to support improvement has been a senior comhairle officer within the central education team. A Quality Improvement Officer now has this role.

The comhairle has had the challenges of a major cyber-attack on their online services resulting in a significant loss of documents. As a result of this cyber-attack, comhairle officers are recreating policies and other records over time.

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

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

Comhairle senior officers provide clear strategic direction to support sgoiltean to improve. They identify strategic priorities for sgoiltean such as learning, teaching and assessment, raising attainment, improving attendance and Gàidhlig Education. Senior school staff and, overall, teachers understand these priorities. Comhairle senior officers are consulting on a refreshed vision, values and aims for the education service. They are also producing a new strategic plan. This will serve as a new single service plan across a number of other themed plans. The Chief Officer has taken these steps to create a clearer strategic direction to connect services related to education.

The central education team has in place clear arrangements for school improvement through Gàidhlig and English. In consultation with senior school staff, the central education team updated their guidance and approach to self-evaluation and school improvement this year. Their new approach

incorporates the standards and quality report (SQR), school improvement plan (SIP) and Pupil Equity Funding plan (PEF) in one document. Overall, headteachers, heads of sgoil and executive headteachers report that the standardised approach gives clarity and consistency on the school improvement cycle. The central education team should continue giving sgoiltean critical feedback on their plans to achieve sustained impact.

The central education team uses and provides sgoiltean with a variety of data to support school improvement and to measure progress. This includes Curriculum for Excellence and senior phase attainment data, free school meal data and additional information connected to PEF. The Chief Officer values peer collaboration with other local authorities. Comhairle officers work with other councils comprising islands, and Scottish Government and Education Scotland to look at more relevant ways of measuring poverty in rural areas. Through time, they intend having a specific benchmark to use to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap. A Quality Improvement Officer has a remit for raising attainment and further work on data analysis. Senior school staff look forward to this extra support and meeting targets to raise further attainment.

A link officer from the central education team links to clusters of sgoiltean on improvement planning. They provide advice, support, challenge and critical feedback for improving sgoiltean. The central education team should be consistently clear on how sustained improvements are achieved in Gàidhlig Education. The central education team observes learning and samples learners' work. The central education team reviews SQRs and SIPs. They discuss the progress and impact of the SIP with sgoiltean throughout the year, both through formal and informal meetings. These meetings include visits from the central education team, the Attainment Advisor and the Chief Officer. Senior staff in sgoiltean should ensure teachers are more fully involved and informed in how school improvement works.

The central education team supports àrd-sgoiltean with improvement planning and quality assurance. This support could be stronger. Senior comhairle officers identified this as a gap. A Quality Improvement Officer, with secondary specialism, has recently been appointed to strengthen further the support àrd-sgoiltean receive. The central education team should continue with their plans to improve further the quality of SIP in àrd-sgoiltean.

Comhairle officers gather information from SIP, attainment data, headteachers' Professional Review and Development (PRD) and self-evaluation activities across all sgoiltean. This helps direct future professional learning, connect schools on joint development work and directs targeted support. The central education team should gather data to analyse how well they support sgoiltean over time.

Gàidhlig Medium Education is growing over time in the comhairle. However, there has been a dip in the number of pupils enrolling into P1 in 2024. The comhairle has analysed and address this change of pattern. The comhairle rightly has an ambitious statutory plan for Gàidhlig. It sets objectives across sgoiltean and communities to sustain the language. The central education team should now

consider how they lead specifically on a relevant aspect of the comhairle's Gàidhlig Language Plan to support further school improvement. They should identify how progress will be measured. This should include increasing outcomes for Gaelic (Learners). The numbers of learners leaving sgoiltean with a qualification in Gaelic (Learners) and Gàidhlig Medium Education is too low. Elected members provide scrutiny on Gàidhlig through a dedicated committee. The comhairle recognises that there needs to be more thorough strategic and operational arrangements between education and Gaelic committees to support schools to improve.

Across sgoiltean, the quality of gathering and using parent, learner and partner views is not yet consistent. In stronger practice, senior leaders in sgoiltean work with stakeholders to identify planning priorities. Stakeholders assist in self-evaluation activities. This varies in its effectiveness across sgoiltean. Senior comhairle officers identify that engaging with stakeholders, particularly parent/carers, as an area for further development.

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

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

The comhairle recognises that they are building more consistent approaches to improving sgoiltean.

The Chief Officer and the Head of Education set successful conditions for supporting sgoiltean to improve. They have a high profile within the sgòil sector. Stakeholders highlighted their availability, respect and supportive approach. The Chief Officer is visiting all sgoiltean in the comhairle. His focus supports improvement, challenges, builds accountability and quality assures the work of the central education team.

Overtime, the Head of Education invests in well-received professional learning, as part of in-service days and senior managers' conferences. At these events, senior comhairle officers set the education strategic direction and how staff are expected to meet priorities. Professional learning events also support networking and solve issues connected to delivering education in rural areas. Senior school leaders appreciate the quality of professional learning they get, which results in their ownership of change.

The central education team produced a new quality assurance framework in August 2024. This details a rationale for quality assurance and key activities that the central education team take forward. This framework is currently subject to consultation. All staff would now benefit from having further professional learning to help embed the framework, particularly teachers. The framework builds on the national and comhairle's priorities. It builds on the central education team's working with groups out with the comhairle. This includes the regional improvement collaborative, the three island collaboration and the Association of Directors of Education.

The central education team produces a calendar of useful quality assurance activities and key events. These activities focus on accountability for local and national priorities, such as raising attainment and achievement, ensuring the quality of learning, teaching and assessment and Gàidhlig. This assists headteachers to know what support and challenge they may expect, and from whom on a termly and annual basis. The activities in the calendar could connect further to priorities to assist with evaluating how well outcomes are met. This would support sgoil staff join different approaches for quality assurance to improvement priorities.

The central education team gains much valuable support from having an assigned Attainment Advisor from Education Scotland. The Attainment Advisor has been central to initiating quality assurance activities, while providing valuable mentoring and coaching opportunities to the central education team and school-based staff.

Headteachers take part in quality assurance visits to other sgoiltean. Those involved in these visits use a range of evaluative activities. These include observing learning and teaching. The central education team shares feedback with teachers and headteachers. Headteachers contribute to comhairle projects. Their capacity to do so is enhanced through having first-hand experience and evidence of the quality of education beyond their own sgoil.

The comhairle is at the early stages of piloting a learning and teaching toolkit with certain sgoiltean. This toolkit targets improving practice in areas such as pace, challenge and differentiation. A quality improvement officer is beginning to lead on improving the quality of learning, teaching and assessment. Going forward, they should ensure that observing learning and teaching is thorough and measures the impact of this toolkit. The central education team will now be better able to take forward regular quality assurance visits with their improved staffing capacity. They should ensure that the distinctive approaches of teaching through immersion are consistently accounted for at the outset of initiatives, such as the content of the toolkit.

The comhairle provides data overviews across all sgoiltean to support senior leaders and teachers with interrogating data. The central team has identified gaps in improving aspects of learners' attainment, as well as in closing the poverty-related gap. As a result, the central education team initiated a thematic review in literacy and numeracy in selected schools.

The central education team create research questions and methods bespoke to the sgoil and/or department for thematic reviews. Findings are reported and actions are then followed up to look for further improvement and change. A wider school audience would appreciate access to these research questions and approaches to enable their use by individual sgoiltean. This is while protecting the confidentiality of individual situations and sgoiltean.

Stakeholders report that thematic reviews make a difference, with emerging signs of improvement in attainment. The comhairle is developing common approaches to monitoring and tracking children and young people's progress, attainment and achievement across bun-sgoil and àrd-sgoil. This will assist in ensuring that children and young people's progress is tracked more consistently. The central education team will also have better access to school data. They should ensure that the two tracking tools are compatible and support transitions from bun-sgoil to àrd-sgoil.

The comhairle's arrangements to have executive headteachers lead a cluster of schools' quality assurance is resulting in more consistency within groups of sgoiltean. This model is only being applied to bun-sgoiltean in Lewis and Uist. The comhairle is now addressing gaps for quality assurance on other islands by appointing quality improvement officers. This increases the central education team's capacity to support sgoiltean improvement, particularly in areas such as àrd-sgoil. Teachers at the àrd-sgoil stages are still looking for more specialist support and networking opportunities for subjects. They should continue to maximise the use of technology for networking.

Senior officers and the central education team recently produced a position paper on how well they support school improvement. This has summarised areas of strengths, and areas of challenges and barriers related to four aspects of supporting sgoiltean improvement. The central education team clarified how producing this paper supported their understanding of their own self-evaluation and next steps. This is particularly useful given that there are recently appointed officers on the team. The central education team should now consider how more self-evaluation of this type becomes a regular feature of their work. They should continue with their plans to identify more support and challenge from inward and outward perspectives on their work.

Elected members have a strong awareness of national and local educational priorities. Those who hold senior positions have informative weekly meetings with the Chief Officer for Education and Children's Services. The wider elected members team would appreciate seminars to support their scrutiny of such areas as raising attainment. Recently, the Education and Children's Services rotated the location of their meetings to be on different islands. This was very well received in enabling deeper understanding of local education and sgoiltean.

The central education team has identified the need to increase using parents' and learners' views to shape their work. Parents' and learners' views are collated by headteachers at school level. Parent Councils would like more professional learning to support their roles. The development of a co-constructed parental

engagement strategy would help to overtake the identified areas identified by parents and parent councils.

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

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

The comhairle has a range of professional learning opportunities in place. The central education team identified that teachers, particularly àrd-sgoil, need more tailored professional learning. Senior comhairle managers prioritise their own professional learning to maintain a strong knowledge of national developments in policy and practice. They support comhairle officers with professional learning connected with their remits and responsibilities. This enables comhairle staff to support senior leaders and school improvement.

The central education team identifies professional learning needs through a range of information, including sgoiltean evaluations, PRDs, surveys, collaborative improvement reviews and local intelligence. Comhairle officers have a good understanding of the professional development needs of sgoiltean. However, some senior school staff and teachers are not always clear on how and why professional learning is identified. The central education team should now rebuild a clear strategy of professional development linked to strategic priorities.

School staff have robust comhairle PRD procedures and guidance in place. Senior school staff report the benefits of PRD and the opportunities they must engage in as professional learning. Comhairle staff support and guide senior leaders towards targeted programmes or professional learning opportunities. This includes leadership programmes with Education Scotland. Specific senior school staff would welcome opportunities for more national professional learning and collaboration.

Teachers have mixed views on the quality and access to professional learning. Secondary teachers would welcome more opportunities for professional learning and visits to other sgoiltean that are subject-specific. Some teachers have not engaged in subject professional development for a considerable time. This could adversely affect their understanding of national standards. School staff acknowledge that travel and budgets are significant barriers to professional

learning. Some staff do not always comply with travelling for face-to-face mandatory in-service training.

All senior school staff have had extensive professional learning on self-evaluation and improvement planning. The Education Scotland Attainment Advisor delivered this. Senior school staff report that the training has increased their confidence and understanding on quality writing, evaluative language and planning improvement. As a next step, senior school staff need to engage with teachers and middle leaders in further professional learning in this area. This should include promoting self-evaluation as a responsibility of all.

School leaders have support systems in place. New and acting headteachers and comhairle officers are offered a mentor to support ongoing personal and professional development. Cluster support networks are established in the primary sector. Where they work well, this provides opportunities for staff to share good practice, share resources and have professional discussion on subject improvement.

Across the authority, there are different approaches for identifying and sharing good practice. Quality assurance visits, headteacher nomination and knowledge from thematic or Education Scotland inspections are used to identify practice worthy of sharing. Practice is shared informally and formally through cluster schools, in-service days, the senior managers' conference, associate assessor training and collaborative improvement development. The comhairle has shared effective practice by working with HM Inspectors for the Scottish Learning Festival. Teachers need to be more involved in sharing practice across sgoiltean. A next step for comhairle senior managers is to formalise how effective practice is identified and shared. This should ensure that effective practice shared links to the local authority improvement priorities and is of high-quality.

The comhairle benefits from having associate assessors and other links with HM Inspectors. Associate assessors support professional development of senior school and local authority staff. This includes in-service inputs, headteacher meetings and targeted school support.

Individual teachers have opportunities to support improvement beyond their own school. This includes comhairle working groups, Scottish Qualifications Appointees and cluster development. The authority has developed progression pathways, supported how to teach aspects of the health and wellbeing programme and Gaelic (Learners).

Senior staff value the 'Excellence and Equity' monthly update produced by the Attainment Advisor. This supports professional learning and promotes local and national policy and practice. Senior school staff should consistently share this monthly update as not all teachers are aware of this professional reading.

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

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

The comhairle's programme for universal and targeted support for sgoiltean is developing. The central education team is formalising what they do within a policy. The central education team provides ongoing support for sgoiltean, as well as targeted support. This is more embedded within the bun-sgoil sector. Officers with responsibility for raising attainment link to all clusters of sgoiltean across the comhairle. Headteachers and teachers have autonomy to collaborate with other sgoiltean on common issues and solutions.

The central education team meets weekly with the Head of Education to discuss the outcomes of all quality assurance activities. These meetings should continue to identify sgoiltean that need targeted support to improve at a more accelerated pace.

The Head of Education has an overview of all strategic themes for education. Specific members of the central education team have identified strategic themes on which they lead. These include raising attainment, learning, teaching and assessment, secondary and digital learning. The central education team follow these themes through to providing universal and targeted support to sgoiltean. The central education team could consider how other strategic themes can be distributed across their team. This would assist with supporting further collective improvement of sgoiltean.

School-based staff benefit from working collaboratively on moderation. Last session moderation focused on writing, with numeracy a focus this session. The quality of moderation is more mixed at the secondary stages.

Staff have worked together on curriculum progression pathways for literacy and English and Gàidhlig, numeracy and mathematics and Gaelic (Learners). They should continue to plan progression in learning using the design principles of the curriculum. It would be helpful to increase the pace of planning consistent approaches to delivering progression in the curriculum, while recognising local contexts.

The comhairle has engaged with a national programme for improving writing. This has enhanced the use of data, learner participation, assessment, teaching and approaches to improving sgoiltean. It has raised attainment. Teachers are empowered to lead further training in writing.

e-Sgoil is a successful comhairle initiative from which sgoiltean receive much universal and targeted support. It offers a local and national e-learning service to sgoiltean to increase equity in learning and improve outcomes for children and young people. e-Sgoil supports staffing shortages by providing subject specialist supply from an online teacher bank. e-Sgoil delivers study support for national qualifications and support for interrupted learners - *i-Sgoil*. This local digital approach is enriching and increasing equity in the curriculum experience of all learners.

The central education team plans to rebuild assisted validated self-evaluation visits. This would assist in generating data of which sgoiltean need more targeted support. The central education team could ensure that the underpinning strategies for validated self-evaluation connect with their own quality assurance activities. This would help build staff capacity in self-evaluation. The central education team have not had staffing capacity to provide assisted validated self-evaluation for a while.

The central education team is planning mandatory professional learning on quality indicators as part of universal support. This begins with a focus on leadership of change, including a focus on strategic planning for improving Gàidhlig. The central education team could set specific targets for themselves and sgoiltean for Gàidhlig Medium and Gaelic (Learners) to increase outcomes. The central education team acknowledges that, as the proportion of children and young people learning through Gàidhlig increases, they need to strategically improve the secondary curriculum offer for Gàidhlig Medium.

The comhairle has worked with two other island councils, Education Scotland and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland to evaluate three areas of practice. These areas are related to the curriculum and meeting the additional support for learning needs for children and young people. The latter is recognised as presenting challenges in resourcing, which the comhairle will review next session.

The comhairle's inspection data shows capacity for improving performance. The central education team provides targeted support to sgoiltean to prepare them for His Majesty's Inspections and with any monitoring activities from inspection. Headteachers and teachers report positively on this support. They feel that the education authority's intensive focus for improvement contributes to bring inspections a positive experience.

The comhairle recognises that it has a few sgoiltean that require further challenge from inspections for continuing to improve from the evidenced standard. To assist with this, the comhairle will focus on learning and teaching, particularly on pace and challenge. They should ensure that all resources embed the distinctive approaches to Gàidhlig Medium Education at the planning stage. The comhairle

use experienced headteachers to build capacity in sgoiltean where performance is below expected standards. The comhairle should consider conducting robust audits across their sgoiltean on recurring themes identified through inspections or quality assurance to support school improvement.

5. Any other relevant information

The comhairle has identified barriers to supporting school improvement from reductions in budgets, recruiting and retaining staff. Staff vacancies are being filled with short- and part-time contracts. There is increased demand on additional support need resources from the rising number of children and young people identified as having additional support need.

Senior leaders in bun-sgoiltean who are delivering the free 1140 hours of early learning and childcare report ongoing issues with shortages of staffing and access to professional learning for practitioners.

6. Effective practice worth sharing

The digital platform, e-sgoil has been an important service in promoting equity in sgoiltean. Their services support the short- and long-term curriculum of a full range of learners. e-Sgoil is proactive in filling gaps, such as supply teaching staff, planned inputs such as art lessons and targeted support to meet additional needs of learners. e-Sgoil supports children and young people whose learning has been interrupted.