



NATIONAL THEMATIC INSPECTION OF EDUCATION AUTHORITIES

Report by Chief Officer for Education and Children's Services

PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to appraise the Comhairle of the outcome of both local and national reporting on a National Thematic Inspection of Scottish education authorities conducted by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education on the theme of 'Local Authority Approaches to School Improvement.'

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 In August 2024, it was announced by His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education that the inspectorate had been tasked to undertake a national thematic inspection of education authorities across Scotland. The theme of the inspection was to be 'Local Authority Approaches to School Improvement' and would involve inspection visits to all thirty-two local authorities between September and December 2024. The Comhairle was inspected in the first week of the inspection process on 10-13 September 2024.
- 2.2 Within the theme of approaches to school improvement, the inspection considered four specific areas covering improvement planning, self-evaluation, professional learning and structured systems of support. Evidence was to be gathered from a review of documentation, officer presentations and focus groups with officers, HTs, teachers, parents, elected members and trade union representatives.
- 2.3 The inspection involved a four-day engagement model. Two days focused on a visit to the central local authority office by a team of three inspectors. A third day was then taken off-site to review data and documentation and to synthesise findings. Initial oral feedback was then provided to the Local Authority officers on the fourth day. The inspection model and level of engagement was the same regardless of authority size.
- 2.4 A written 'Summarised Findings' report was provided to each authority providing specific Local Authority feedback in March 2025 after all thirty-two authorities had been inspected and findings verified. The report for Comhairle nan Eilean Siar identified strengths and good practice across the four scrutiny areas and, whilst it does not make specifically identified recommendations, a number of areas were noted where further improvement should be focused.
- 2.5 Findings from the thirty-two inspections were collated into a national report that was published on 12 March 2025. The report has provided an overview of the current aggregated position across the nation in relation to each of the four scrutiny areas and makes seven recommendations that encompass the work of Scottish Government, local authorities and schools.
- 2.6 The senior staff of the Central Education Team are currently undertaking the development of an action plan to address areas of development within our local report and the recommendations within the national report that are pertinent to local authorities and our schools.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle note the Report and support the Central Education Team in the development of the action plan to address development areas, particularly where they relate to strategic governance and elected member engagement.**

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Appendix: 1- National Thematic Inspection of Education Authorities – LA Report (CNES)
2- National Thematic Inspection of Education Authorities – National Report
Background Papers: None



IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	None
Legal	None
Staffing	None
Assets and Property	None
Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	Strategic Risk Register: None
Equalities/Child Rights	UNCRC: Article 28 – Right to Education Article 29 – Goals of Education
Corporate Strategy	Support Children, Families and Young People: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Raise ambition, skills and attainment, in particular to address inequalities.- Ensure schools and life-long learning are at the heart of our communities, with particular emphasis on Gàidhlig, digital skills and new technologies.
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	None



BACKGROUND

- 5.1 Over the last five years, the Scottish Government has been undertaking a programme of education reform that has considered significant changes to systems of governance and operation. An element of that reform has been a move to reinstate an independent education inspectorate separate to the function that currently sits inside Education Scotland.
- 5.2 As development of the inspectorate is progressing, the Scottish Government is considering methodologies and approaches to inspection that include scrutiny of local authorities, particularly in respect of their statutory functions for education and school improvement.
- 5.3 In light of such developments, The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) is developing a voluntary participatory model of local authority self-evaluation and quality assurance that commenced in late 2024. This approach includes a quality indicator framework and a methodology for groups of four local authorities to be working together on self-evaluation and improvement. This work continues in 2025 and the Comhairle is participating fully in it.
- 5.4 In the context of these developments, HMIE was tasked by the Scottish Government in August 2024 to undertake a thematic inspection of all thirty-two education authorities with a focus on 'Local Authority Approaches to School Improvement.'

DETAIL

- 6.1 The National Thematic Inspections of local authorities commenced on 9 September 2024 and continued through to December 2024. The Comhairle was inspected in the first tranche of visits on the week of 9 September. Each inspection process lasted for four days and involved a team of three inspectors. The first two days were spent at the local authority central office, a third day focused on off-site review of documents and evidence and collation of findings. Initial oral feedback was provided to authority officers on the fourth day.
- 6.2 The inspection gathered evidence through officer presentations, review of documentation and data and the conducting of multiple stakeholder focus groups that encompassed:
 - Education senior officers (Central Education Team)
 - Headteachers
 - Elected members
 - Teachers
 - Parents/Parent Councils
 - Trade union representatives

Inspectors didn't visit schools or speak directly with children and young people as part of the inspection process.

- 6.3 The overall theme of 'Local Authority Approaches to School Improvement' was subdivided into four areas for scrutiny and evaluation. Feedback at both local and national level was framed around the four areas. They were:



- How do local authorities support schools to improve the quality of education through implementing improvement planning and standards and quality reporting?
- How do local authorities support schools to improve the quality of education through self-evaluation and quality assurance?
- How do local authorities support schools to improve the quality of education through professional learning?
- 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?

6.4 All authorities received a dedicated local 'Summarised Findings' report with specific feedback and comments on 11 March 2025 and a collated national report was published by Education Scotland on 12 March 2005. Local reports primarily provided summary of findings against the four reporting areas and made suggestions for improvement within the narrative. The national report offered similar summary evaluation of the four areas and also made seven recommendations for authorities and Scottish Government.

6.5 A selection of strengths and areas for development for Comhairle na Eilean Siar is provided below from the evaluative narrative. A full copy of the Summarised Findings report is provided in appendix one.

Strengths:

- Senior officers provide clear strategic direction to support schools to improve. They identify strategic priorities and other senior and school staff understand these priorities.
- There are clear arrangements for school improvement in Gàidhlig and English. And the team provide schools with a variety of data to support school improvement and to measure progress.
- Senior officers set successful conditions for supporting schools to improve. They have a high profile within the school sector and stakeholders highlighted their availability, respect and supportive approach.
- Elected members have a strong awareness of national and local educational priorities.
- The Comhairle has a good range of professional learning opportunities in place and there are robust procedures for Professional Review and Development (PRD), particularly considering challenges of island geography and budgets.
- Comhairle staff support and guide senior leaders towards targeted programmes or professional learning opportunities. This includes leadership programmes with Education Scotland.
- The Comhairle has engaged with a national programme for improving writing. This has enhanced the use of data, learner participation and assessment. It has raised attainment.
- E-Sgoil is a successful Comhairle initiative from which schools receive much universal and targeted support.



Areas for Development:

- Further the plans to improve the quality of School Improvement Plans for secondary schools.
- The service needs to consider how it will lead specifically on a relevant aspect of the Comhairle's Gaelic Language Plan.
- More work must be undertaken to gather and use parent, learners and partner views as this is not yet consistent.
- Elected members would appreciate more seminars to support their scrutiny role for such areas as raising attainment.
- Increase access to dedicated secondary subject-specific professional learning for teachers.
- Systems and opportunity should be created to allow teachers to share good practice across the authority.
- Officers should continue to challenge schools to improve and consider conducting robust audits across schools on recurring themes identified through inspections and quality assurance.

6.6 The national report on the thematic inspection collated and homogenised the findings from across the thirty-two authorities and provided a review of findings for the four scrutiny areas and included a number of effective practice exemplars. Importantly, the report recognised on multiple occasions the challenges and difficulties faced by remote and rural authorities in the delivery of equitable services and the difficulty in having access to national support. A full copy of the national report is included as appendix two to this report.

6.7 In addition to the national findings of the inspection, the Chief Inspector of Education made seven recommendations in the report.

- Ensure that all schools receive high-quality, consistent support through robust universal provision. This should reduce variability within and across local authorities and secure equitable outcomes for learners.
- For schools requiring targeted support, implement robust action planning, monitoring and accountability. This is essential to ensure that necessary improvements for learners are secured at pace.
- Prioritise leadership development for middle leaders, particularly in secondary schools, where improvement outcomes are less consistent, with a focus on the principles of self-evaluation for self-improvement.
- Establish a national professional learning programme for local authority central officers. This will help to build capacity and professional knowledge in school improvement and effective support and challenge practices.
- Develop flexible models of support that address the specific needs of rural, remote, and island schools.



- Embed local authority collaborative approaches to foster collective accountability for school improvement, ensuring these are consistently grounded in robust self-evaluation, and lead to accurate understanding of individual and collective improvement priorities.
- Improve the strategic use of data at both local authority and school levels. This includes developing staff capacity to interpret data effectively and use data-driven insights to inform self-evaluation, improvement planning, and resource allocation.

6.8 The Comhairle's Central Education Team are currently analysing the findings of both the local and national reports and are formulating an action plan to take forward the improvements and recommendations made in the reports.

CONCLUSION

7.1 The Comhairle received a positive report overall from the National Thematic Inspection and areas for future development will be captured in an action plan for the Central Education team to take forward. Any future development of local authority inspection will be reported to the committee when the information becomes available.

