

National Thematic Inspection: Local authority approaches to supporting school improvement

Summarised Findings

Local Authority	Aberdeen City Council
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In September/ October 2024, a team of inspectors from Education Scotland visited Aberdeen City Council. 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 Aberdeen City Council 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

Aberdeen City is an urban local authority (LA) located on the Northeast coast of Scotland.

Thirty four percent of children and young people in primary and secondary schools live within deciles 1-2 of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).

Approximately 35% of children in primary school and 46% of young people in secondary school have been assessed as requiring additional support with their learning.

The average attendance in 2022/2023 was 91.2%. The national average is 90.2%.

Across the city there are 48 primary schools, 11 secondary schools and one special school.

Since 2024, the Executive Director of Families and Communities oversees education and lifelong learning, children's social work and family support, housing and corporate landlord. She is supported by the Chief Education Officer for education and lifelong learning, as well as by three other Chief Officers for the additional aspects of her remit. The structure is now shaped around the social

determinants of health, with a focus on working across business areas to address emerging issues, such as a preventative approach to obesity and making a difference to those who live within SIMD 1.

Throughout the school session 23/24 there has been a change in leadership in over 20% of schools. Since 2019, there has been a change in leadership in 24 primary schools, eight secondaries and one special school. The percentage of pupils with English as a second language has risen from 14% in 2015/16 to over 20% in 2023/24. There has been a 14% rise in the school population since 2019.

The challenging financial situation has resulted in a lack of investment in the established school estate. The service has also been involved in making plans to address the finding of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) in three school buildings and supporting 500 families who require to be rehomed for their safety due to the finding of RAAC in their homes. Employment in the city is at its lowest level since 2016, with roughly one in four of the working population economically inactive.

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?*

The school Quality Improvement Framework (QIF) provides clear exemplification of expected and appropriate processes and standards of self-evaluation, improvement planning and standards and quality reporting at school and local authority level. It is based on quality indicators (QIs) 1.3, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2. Following a review of lessons learned from school inspections with headteachers, and consultation with professional associations, the QIF was amended in advance of the 2024/25 school session. The intention is to broaden the evidence base gathered during school visits. This includes monitoring the impact of work against the agreed Behaviour Plan, ensuring the removal of single points of failure and introducing more intensive arrangements for those yet to evaluate as 'good' or better.

There are new self-evaluation formats which are different for primary and secondary schools. The effectiveness of these different formats is still to be evaluated and the rationale for the different formats is unclear. The QIF makes clear the aligned responsibilities of stakeholders for Elected Members, the central team, school leaders, middle leaders and class teachers.

The LA sets out clear and helpful expectations of overall standards and how and what to evaluate through its suite of quality improvement documents, including self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. These provide helpful exemplification of statements from 'weak' to 'very good' which support evaluative writing under each QI. There are professional standards for each QI, for example the learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) standard. There is clear and supportive guidance, linked to the standards documents. For example, how to write a standards and quality report with exemplification of evaluative statements provided from 'weak' to 'very good.'

Senior officers in the central team have prioritised building a more positive collaborative culture to utilise all capacity for improvement. Headteachers view themselves as leaders of change across the local authority, as well as in their own school and locality. Since the beginning of session 2024/25, headteachers in both primary and secondary schools no longer work in locality trios, but rather in cross-authority trios and quads. The central team has carefully designed these trios to match schools where practice is strong, (category 1), with schools who are receiving more intensive support, (categories 2/3). This development is at very early stages. Headteachers view this change as both a catalyst for improvement and a means of delivering increasingly consistent approaches to improvement across the LA. The central team report that the new arrangements are allowing them to have better understanding of school needs city wide.

Stronger partnerships across secondary schools have helped deliver ABZ Campus. This provides young people with a greater range of course choice in secondary through a core timetabling offer across Aberdeen City, extending now into Aberdeenshire. There are links with partners and North East College to extend the delivery of a range of courses which meet the needs of a wider group of learners.

Headteachers have indicated that they employ a wide range of strategies to engage children and young people in self-evaluation and school improvement. These are designed to fit the context of their schools and be appropriate to the age and stage of learners.

The Director and Chief Officer work closely with Elected Members, who highlight the importance of the positive, constructive relationships that exist between themselves and the Director and Chief Officer. This transparent approach and the trust this engenders is very beneficial to the management of the school estate in their view. Elected Members speak very highly of the impact of the QIF. They believe the QIF has a central role in addressing inconsistency in the experiences of children and young people across Aberdeen. There is not yet sufficient evidence that the developments in systems, processes and communication are consistently leading to actual improvement in all schools across the city.

Members of the central team provide effective exemplification of high-quality self-evaluation to all schools. Local authority officers quality assure and provide critical feedback on the draft plans of every establishment. They verify that the identified priorities are based on reliable data and correlate with sound evidence, drawing from a range of sources. In addition, they verify that collaboration and

consultation arrangements are in keeping with those outlined in the QIF. This rigorous approach has begun to improve the quality of planning processes across Aberdeen. Central officers protect time over the summer to review and moderate all school improvement plans. This ensures feedback for schools takes place early in the school session and is consistent across the local authority.

The Director and Chief Officer, in conjunction with members of the central team, use the data from the self-evaluation and improvement plans for the following purposes: They identify the priorities for inclusion in the National Improvement Framework Plan, the Children's Services Plan and associated partnership plans including the Locality Improvement Plans. Where appropriate, they shift the priorities in the Council Delivery Plan to help shape the focus of other services (for example the work of the employability team (growth sectors) or Strategic Place Planning (obesity). They identify any necessary changes to the central structure and priorities to help resource any shift in focus. They identify the focus of the professional learning offer and review their quality assurance/improvement arrangements on a yearly basis.

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 central team carries out at least one formal quality assurance visit per year in each primary school and two visits in secondary. These visits are successfully helping to build leadership capacity across the city. They involve both central team staff and senior school leaders who have the opportunity to participate at least on a two-year cycle. This has been successful in developing an increased level of consistency of understanding.

Officers in the central team revised the use of trios/ quads to support collegiality across the city. The purpose was to create a network of support and challenge to improve the quality of learning and teaching. There are set expectations of roles including those of central officers. This development is at early stages, but all participants speak very positively about the impact on greater consistency of approach to school improvement. There is emerging evidence of greater levels of challenge now that trios and quads have been restructured around categories of support. Officers need to continue building on this work to ensure the changes being implemented result in improved outcomes for children and young people.

Trios of headteachers provide support and challenge through regular formal and informal meetings. Members of school senior leadership teams from within the trios participate in quality improvement visits. They leave their partner schools with key action points following the quality improvement visit which are followed up on subsequent visits. Central officers have restructured the quads in secondary to include an associate assessor. Central officers believe this will help build capacity and capability further. Secondary associate assessors participate in quality improvement visits. Central officers believe this is helping improve accuracy of self-evaluation against national standards.

Members of the central team, supported by the trios headteachers carry out regular and routine visits to schools. During these visits they validate school quality improvement activity and discuss attainment data. In all schools, either a quality improvement manager or an associate assessor carries out a series of formal two-day visits across the session focussed on all QIs. There is also a visit focussed on QI 2.3 which involves learning walks. Members of the central team meet fortnightly with headteachers. Headteachers shape aspects of the agenda through ongoing feedback. Central officers use this and a range of other digital teams to share information about local and national developments across schools.

The local authority quality assurance calendar is clearly understood by stakeholders and is designed to be the model for schools. It has the capacity to be a key driver for planned improvement, but the impact is not yet evident.

The local authority promotes the role of data as a key driver in staff understanding both the need for progress and the methods of supporting this. All schools track children and young people's progress using SEEMiS. Members of the central team carry out attainment reviews in all primary schools, uplifting data three times per year. In secondary, there are three attainment reviews per year, two in person. Data is uplifted at key points during the year and fed into PowerBI reports to allow tracking over time and trends to be identified. Education officers then discuss the accuracy of the data with headteachers. This is improving the reliability of attainment data. These processes are well supported by the new digital platforms, as well as multiple channels of virtual communication. The central team and headteachers report teachers have an improving understanding of school data. They are increasingly using data better to plan learning and teaching and track children and young people's progress. There are more bespoke arrangements to support those schools in need of a higher level of support, such as those who are still in further inspection measures.

Local authority data demonstrates increasing alignment between self-evaluation and inspection gradings. Levels of accountability are increasing, but there is a need to continue to build capacity and capability at middle leadership level. Central officers believe that they have had considerable success in utilising quality assurance activity as rich professional learning for headteachers. The next step is to extend this opportunity to faculty heads and primary middle leaders to further improve outcomes for children and young people across Aberdeen City.

The Chief Officer discusses individual schools during professional review and development meetings and service manager meetings to quality assure arrangements and processes in place. In addition, she regularly reviews school engagement trackers as well as participating in a sample of quality improvement visits. Effective practice is shared formally and informally through trio/quad engagement and during service manager and head teacher meetings. Central officers use information gathered during quality improvement visits to match schools with highly effective practice to those with developing practice in the same area. Highly effective practice is beginning to be exemplified on the Northern Alliance learning and teaching toolkit.

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 local authority provides and facilitates a wide range of professional learning opportunities and programmes linked to the National Improvement Framework (NIF) plan. Local authority planning of professional learning is informed and influenced by key themes within school self-evaluation documents and standards and quality reports. The professional learning offer is responsive, varied and agile. As a result, the central team and headteachers report that schools participate in a programme of professional learning which better meets the needs of their context.

The central team has created conditions to ensure a supportive and empowered approach to system-wide collaboration for professional learning. They direct staff at all levels to identified areas of strong practice across schools, resulting in learning from colleagues in a range of ways. Trios and quads of headteachers are involved in formal quality improvement visits alongside the school improvement team. They work collaboratively in areas of school improvement, sharing practice and moderating using the Aberdeen standards. This happens through quality improvement visits, work in trios/quads and online through digital channels where staff share practice and regularly ask for, or offer, support or ideas from colleagues. Where areas of effective practice are identified, the central team ensures that they monitor the impact of any activity with senior leaders in schools.

Headteachers meet in person and virtually to share practice. There are professional learning inputs from the central team and headteachers, for example about the work on improving attendance in schools. Quality improvement managers have established 'Magpie Meets' to allow headteachers to share

practice and resources with each other. This is now led by headteachers as a useful way to support each other and improve practice across schools. Across the city, there are examples of schools working together to improve outcomes on a shared issue identified through self-evaluation. This work is in line with the NIF plan and encouraged and supported by the central team. Headteachers have created a wide range of opportunities for professional development, such as programmes for newly qualified teachers. This has developed a positive culture of collaboration and sharing across schools. There is a need now to ensure this sharing of practice leads to improved performance for all schools.

The LA has a programme of induction and professional learning for headteachers new to post, which includes an allocation of a 'buddy' to support in the new role. Middle leadership development is supported in partnership with Education Scotland colleagues. Headteachers in secondary schools are responsible for delivering the collaborative middle leadership training to develop the cohort of deputy headteachers. Evidence of impact is as yet limited. Central officers believe that the middle leadership programme is beginning to feed the 'pipeline' of future head teachers. However, they recognise this as an area in need of further development.

Identified school staff have responsibility for leading areas of professional learning across the local authority through the Grassroots programme. Experienced teachers lead professional learning events across the city. This is developing the skills and leadership of the staff involved.

The local authority lead teacher delivers professional learning in QI 2.3 for schools or associated school groups to support the embedding of the Aberdeen Standard. The development and use of the Northern Alliance toolkit at regional level is planned as a next step to provide a sustainable approach to improving this area.

The central team works closely with their Attainment Advisor and together they have created an equity network and devised an equity tracker. The network meets four times per year to share practice and support with tracking interventions. An online equity channel allows for further collaboration. There is not yet evidence of impact.

Schools are expected to take forward city-wide priorities such as implementing the CIRCLE framework, the CYPIC writing programme and data analysis. Central officers provide support to all schools through learning sessions, webinars and online activities.

The outreach additional support needs service has developed training at local authority and school level. This provides senior leaders and teachers with support in areas identified through self-evaluation such as self-regulation and the use of assessments to support dyslexia pathways. The educational psychology service contributes to the professional learning calendar. This involves supporting Grassroots work and the central offer along with specific school requests. The service has realigned itself to the three localities and into line with the school

improvement team to allow for more effective liaison and closer partnership working. This is a recent development and there is little evidence yet of impact.

Associate assessors within the local authority work alongside quality improvement officers and headteachers to support school improvement. They participate in visits to schools as part of the QI calendar and support in other areas of improvement planning and preparation for inspection. The number of associate assessors has recently increased. It is planned that the greater number will be able to impact positively on more QI visits and areas of targeted support.

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?*

Central officers use a range of data to allocate all schools to one of three categories which provide varying degrees of support and challenge. They allocate schools after examining attainment data, self-evaluation evidence, and intelligence from quality assurance visits. Universal and targeted supports are allocated as follows.

Category 1: all schools receive a universal offer which consists of a range of supports including written and verbal feedback on their standards and quality report and improvement plan; engagement in a formal attainment review three times each year; quality improvement visits; professional learning offer linked to national and local priorities; best practice shared at headteacher meetings; and a termly review of attendance and exclusion data.

For all schools categorised as category 2, an annual central team-led quality improvement visit provides an aspect of targeted support. Central officers regularly meet with the school's senior leadership team. An associate assessor has a key role in providing support.

Category 3 are schools identified as in need of 'intensive' support to improve outcomes for children and young people. Intensive support includes focused meetings to assess progress against specific targets recorded in an engagement tracker. Category 3 schools benefit from a bespoke offer of professional learning, for example a focus on self-evaluation or learning pathways planning. A peer headteacher provides valuable 'buddy' support. The school's senior leadership team engages in the authority-wide quality improvement visit programme. Members of the central team provide support to develop the curriculum.

This targeted approach to supporting school improvement has successfully resulted in some schools moving from category 2 to category 1. The authority recognises the challenge they face in moving schools with the most significant needs from category 3. Senior leaders in schools consistently value this city-wide framework of support and challenge. There is however insufficient evidence of improved outcomes for learners.

Senior leaders recognise that there are not yet sufficiently strong levels of attainment across the local authority, nor are all inspection outcomes consistently positive. Senior officers are taking immediate steps to strengthen their own quality assurance processes when external evaluations have not aligned with their internal evaluations. These are increasingly in alignment.

In one school, identified as requiring highly intensive bespoke support, there is evidence of significant planning for improvement. Wrap-around support and challenge is provided through a number of workstreams, called 'Tactical Teams,' which are aligned to specific quality indicators. These teams are drawn from across the LA school network and support the strong, cohesive approach to collaborative improvement. Arrangements for universal and targeted support are reviewed regularly in collaboration with central officers and the headteacher and presented to the Education Committee for approval.

Headteachers value this approach of staged support, which is helping to embed a culture of empowerment, while recognising the accompanying need for accountability. The foundation of this successful approach lies in the work undertaken in recent years to grow an ethos of trust and strong connections between central staff and school-based staff. This is a strength of the LA's work. Next steps are to ensure that there is an impact on improved outcomes for children and young people.

5. Any other relevant information

Key successes

A clear QIF has been established and is scrutinised by Committee on a yearly basis. The level of support each school is being afforded is also presented to Committee. Reporting school self-evaluation categories and inspection results to Committee has helped increase accountability, especially now that headteachers attend Committee to respond to inspection reports. Reporting the service's progress in moving forward published service priorities to Committee has increased accountability across the service.

There is a culture of collective responsibility, and this is supporting the drive for greater consistency. Involving secondary associate assessors in quality improvement visits has helped improve the accuracy of self-evaluation against national standards. Training to improve the use of evaluative language is beginning to improve the quality of writing.

Key challenges:

Staffing is generally more consistent now. However, the LA continues to find it hard to recruit high quality school leaders, high quality middle leaders, secondary

specialisms and supply staff. Challenges remain when leadership capacity is a concern.

Other factors cited by the local authority include: the churn in school leadership; upskilling middle leaders; time, conflicting demands and unaligned national policies; a variable national professional learning offer and; the volume of inspections or unanticipated asks that impact on the local authority's capacity to deliver their agreed programme.