

Summary of visit to Berwickshire High School

About this summary document

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) have prepared this document following a recent visit to Berwickshire High School that they carried out along with officers from Scottish Borders Council. It contains more detail than the letter we sent to parents/carers. We hope that schools will find this document helpful to continue to support recovery, renewal and improvement work.

About our visit

We made the commitment some time ago to revisit Berwickshire High School following a previous inspection, and our recent visit was arranged to fit in with the school's individual circumstances.

All of the activities undertaken by HM Inspectors during the visit were discussed in advance with the headteacher and with local authority officers. Taking into account the COVID-19 pandemic, some activities have been carried out remotely.

The visit included discussions to consider the progress made by the school since the original inspection. HM Inspectors also explored the impact of the pandemic on the school as well as the actions being taken to support recovery. HM Inspectors recognise that some priorities may have been paused or overtaken as the school responded to the pandemic.

Current context of the school – impact of COVID-19

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred at a time of complex challenge for the school. This challenge included the school preparing to undergo a further inspection, with an acting headteacher in post, and only one deputy headteacher (DHT). The senior leadership team (SLT) was reduced greatly due to a vacancy and staff absence. A permanent headteacher was appointed in August 2020.

Pastoral and administration staff maintained a high level of contact with vulnerable young people throughout periods of school closure. The school's enhanced provision unit remained open during the period of school closures, as did the school, which acted as a 'hub' for key workers' children and young people. Administrative staff monitored carefully children and young people's attendance and worked closely with pastoral staff to ensure children and young people were supported well. As part of the Inspire programme, the school was issued with iPads for learners. However, senior leaders were not able to arrange learning in their use for staff or young people prior to the first period of school closure. Leaders described the experience of using the iPads as a 'baptism of fire', but noted that young people and staff developed their digital skills rapidly.

Staff quickly realised that sustaining a 'normal' curriculum remotely was unrealistic during the first period of school closure. They adopted a new task-based, flexible approach to delivering the curriculum, which supported young people to work at times that suited their home circumstances. No clubs or additional experiences were possible at this time due to COVID-19 restrictions. As COVID-19 case numbers rose in November 2020, the business manager worked with local authority planners to develop a tracking protocol. Staff were able to monitor young people's engagement and progress more effectively as a result. Following the initial period of

school closure, staff worked to address issues relating to digital technologies, low levels of learner engagement and revised SQA procedures.

The newly appointed headteacher and senior leadership team (SLT) undertook significant planning prior to the return of staff and young people in August 2020. They developed a comprehensive health and safety plan, which clearly identified COVID-19 mitigations.

The SLT and staff planned well for the return of young people after the second period of school closure, building on their earlier experiences. Staff highlighted the challenge of numerous organisational demands, although they recognised a clearer sense of purpose in the school. The staff valued support from both the local authority and the headteacher in relation to the evolving Alternative Curriculum Model (ACM). Most young people were pleased to return to school after the second period of school closure.

At the time of our visit to the school, the headteacher reported there had been a few cases of COVID-19 amongst young people in recent weeks. Staff absence was also affecting the school.

Steps the establishment is taking in relation to COVID-19 recovery

The school improvement plan identifies clearly the actions staff are taking to support recovery. The plan demonstrates clear strategic thinking from the headteacher, school leaders and other staff members. Each action point within the school improvement plan includes features that are specific to closing identified gaps in learning, rebuilding young people's resilience and restoring progress in learning.

Staff continue to implement strategies to encourage all young people to re-engage fully with their learning, for example, providing phased-return programmes for young people whose anxiety continues to be a barrier to their return to school.

Senior leaders continue to ensure they focus on supporting staff's wellbeing. They recognise and take account appropriately of the family commitments and personal challenges facing staff.

The headteacher has undertaken one-to-one meetings with all staff over the last year. This has helped to boost staff morale, whilst helping him to develop a better understanding of the views and needs of staff. Senior leaders have also met with middle leaders and staff more generally for the same purpose. These meetings are helping to build a more cohesive school community, which the headteacher recognises to be important at this time.

Safeguarding

Senior leaders and staff have taken appropriate action to address all areas of improvement highlighted in the previous inspection report.

There is an urgent need to improve leadership at all levels across the school. This includes engaging all young people, parents and staff in reviewing the vision, values and aims with a view of developing a strong identity, with clear attention given to the direction and expectations for Berwickshire High School.

Working together, local authority officers, senior leaders and HM Inspectors identified strengths, progress and areas for further consideration during the visit.

The school has made considerable progress in this area for improvement. Young people and staff have been enabled well by all senior leaders to engage in leadership roles and activities across the whole school and within faculties. This includes a 'head team' of young people, prefects, and house captains who are working enthusiastically and responsibly with senior leaders to improve the school. It also includes a student council that is working continuously to encourage and act on young people's views. Senior leaders have strengthened a staff 'extended leadership team', and increased the roles for middle leaders across the school to impact positively on change. Teachers are also demonstrating leadership behaviours more consistently. For example, most teachers now have a more visible presence. They communicate more effectively with young people and their parents, and are more willing to engage in professional learning to develop their classroom practice.

Almost all stakeholders spoken to during the visit identified the very positive impact of the headteacher's leadership, and the new, clearer sense of direction and purpose in the school. They value the clarity of this direction and purpose, saying it has helped to build a cohesive learning community that strives continuously to be the best it can be. The refreshed vision, values and aims of the school, developed in partnership with stakeholders, have helped the school to begin to develop its identity. The vision, values, and aims are displayed throughout the school, and teachers, and increasingly young people, use the language of these regularly. A few young people feel the school's revised vision could focus more on how the school plans to meet the needs of all young people. A few parents appreciate how the school emphasises and nurtures a different school value each week. Work on enacting the vision, values and aims is having a very positive, motivating effect on work across the school. However, further work will be required to ensure the vision, values, and aims influence more consistently all aspects of school life, including the school's drive to raise attainment.

Senior leaders should ensure that, as a key priority, there is a whole school focus on creating a calm, safe and purposeful learning environment which is conducive to high quality learning. This strong focus should include fostering positive relationships across the school and ensuring that there is much greater consistency in the promotion of high expectations at all times with clear boundaries set.

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The school environment now offers a calm and orderly context for young people's learning. Staff are highly visible and approachable, and almost all young people demonstrate maturity, respect and courtesy in classes, social areas, and outside the school. Staff and young people report that the school is a more pleasant and rewarding place to learn and that they feel safer. Overall, relationships between young people and staff are positive.

With strong and supportive leadership from the headteacher, all senior leaders are working effectively with young people and staff to set clear expectations for learning and behaviour. These actions are having a positive effect on the ethos of the school. Staff are promoting positive behaviour more effectively, using praise regularly in classes and recognising young people's successes and contributions to the life of the school. Awards celebrating young people's success are displayed attractively in social areas. Senior leaders, teachers and support staff report a significant reduction in the number of incidents requiring intervention by senior leaders.

The curriculum is now providing a wider range of experiences and pathways for young people. This is helping to increase their motivation to learn by being more responsive to their needs. In the small sample of lessons observed, young people's learning experiences were well-structured and purposeful. Teachers should continue to develop strategies to engage actively all learners, for example, through improved questioning techniques. Within the school's broad strategies to develop high-quality learning and teaching, teachers should ensure that they provide work at suitable levels of challenge to meet the needs of all young people.

All staff should develop an agreed shared understanding of what high quality learning, teaching and assessment looks like and ensure they apply these standards consistently across the school at all times. Further development of approaches to tracking and monitoring young people's progress, especially in the broad general education, are needed. This will enable staff to put in place clearer next steps in learning for young people to enable them develop the skills and attributes needed for life and work.

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The quality and consistency of learning, teaching and assessment has improved considerably across the school, with teachers demonstrating increased confidence in classrooms. Teachers now have a much improved shared understanding of what high quality learning and teaching looks like. They also demonstrate deeper understanding of how they can enhance their teaching, for example, using a daily review, sharing the aim of the lesson, and sharing how young people can be successful in their learning. Senior leaders and staff have clear plans to continue to improve learning, teaching and assessment, to meet the needs of all young people and to continue to raise attainment.

All teachers have been supported well to improve their pedagogy. They have been able to engage in high-quality professional learning, including ongoing work with national partners and the principal teacher of pedagogy. All teachers benefit from regular self-evaluation, frequent lesson visits and observations, ongoing dialogue with peers, detailed lesson-observation feedback, and the use of a well-defined lesson evaluation toolkit. Teachers are increasingly taking part in the school's professional reading group. These initiatives are helping teachers to become more enthusiastic about learning and teaching, and are improving teachers' confidence in classrooms.

Senior leaders and staff have made improvements to tracking and monitoring in the broad general education (BGE), although they plan continued work in this area. Teachers spoke positively of the use of tracking spreadsheets during the second period of school closure. Using the spreadsheets helped them to maintain an overview of young people's progress across all

subjects. Teachers also value the use of learning logs as part of the school's ongoing monitoring processes. Moving forwards, it would be beneficial to streamline the format of these learning logs to help all young people and their parents be clear about the expectations of different faculties.

Increased dialogue between senior leaders, middle leaders, staff, young people and parents is used well to help young people reflect on their learning, and develop a better understanding of their progress and learning targets. This dialogue is leading to suitably targeted interventions. Improved regular written communication with parents is making them aware of important information, such as assessment dates, and helping them to be more proactive in supporting young people.

Staff should develop curriculum pathways, as already agreed, at all stages, including with partners, to promote challenge, provide more flexibility for learners and meet their needs and aspirations. The addition of well-considered vocational pathways is key to enable some young people to succeed. This will take account of national priorities and learner entitlements.

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Staff across the school have engaged effectively in reviewing the curriculum. A 'knowledge curriculum' has been agreed to help staff, learners, parents and partners know what young people are expected to learn in each subject area by the end of the BGE. Teachers take account of a wide range of information from learners to inform the curriculum offer. They also use their knowledge of young people, achievement surveys and 16+ data hub information. A dedicated principal teacher post has been created to lead and co-ordinate partnership work linked to the curriculum.

Staff are having supportive learning conversations with young people, to increase understanding of the skills they are developing and potential career opportunities.

Work with partners is leading to the development of more flexible pathways to meet the needs of all young people. Partners demonstrate a very good understanding of the needs of particular groups and individuals that they work with. Partners talk positively about the effectiveness of partnership working and note that staff are keen to engage in developing a greater range of opportunities for young people.

Staff should proceed with their plans to review course choice in the senior phase, to ensure that curriculum areas provide appropriate pathways for young people to meet their needs and aspirations sufficiently. Senior and middle leaders should continue to develop a robust evidence base with which to evaluate the success of curriculum provision in meeting the needs and aspirations of all young people. In doing this they should ensure that all stakeholders, including young people, can contribute effectively.

The wellbeing indicators, such as being safe, nurtured, achieving, respected and responsible need to be embedded in the everyday work of the school. Young people need to understand their relevance, and to use them well to enable learners to take responsibility for their own wellbeing.

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Staff have taken a number of important steps to equip young people with the skills to understand and take action on their wellbeing. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff have revised the school's formal wellbeing programme. A few young people spoken to during the visit drew on the structure and vocabulary of the national wellbeing indicators to articulate issues associated with their mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing. External partners confirmed that young people could describe how features of wellbeing, such as mutual respect and a sense of individual responsibility, were becoming increasingly embedded in their daily experiences.

Pastoral staff meet young people on a one-to-one basis twice yearly, providing space for open discussions centred on wellbeing. Staff use the wellbeing web for these discussions, reinforcing young people's awareness of the indicators. The indicators also feature across the work of the health and wellbeing faculty. Staff have invested considerable time in professional learning to enhance their skills relating to young people's wellbeing. This professional learning includes collaboration with national partners.

Staff have made progress in identifying how the concept and practice of nurture could have a positive influence on young people's learning and achievement. This indicator has been a clear focus of the local authority's work. The nurture base provides an important resource for young people. Staff's professional learning has also explored the role of nurture across the school's work. In time, this professional learning is likely to have a positive impact on practice.

All staff should continue their work to raise standards of attainment and provide wider opportunities for achievement to improve outcomes for young people. This includes identifying those young people who may miss out, through taking part in few or no wider achievement activities.

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Senior leaders and staff have taken a strategic and well-considered approach to planning for improvements in attainment and achievement. The headteacher acknowledges that it might take time to demonstrate measurable impact on improved outcomes for all learners, particularly due to the current pandemic. Significant improvements have been made to teachers' professional learning in relation to learning, teaching and assessment. Improvements have also been made to tracking and monitoring young people's progress in learning, developing flexible curriculum pathways, and providing increased options for wider achievement and leadership. All these improvements continue to support a culture of raising attainment while closing the poverty-related gap. Senior leaders and staff are identifying, tracking and monitoring young people's achievements robustly. Staff are increasingly developing ways to recognise and celebrate the achievements of all young people. Further consideration needs to be given to ensuring parity of esteem across the wide variety of achievement.

Staff are implementing increasingly the Career Education Standard (CES), and focusing more effectively on young people's employability skills. Staff are also using social media and digital communications to ensure that young people and families are kept informed about career opportunities. Information from tracking and monitoring ensures that there is effective alignment between the needs and aspirations of young people, their skills profile, and available career opportunities.

The school has an agreed approach to standardised testing with one of its associated primary schools. This approach is being extended across the cluster to support a clearer understanding of young people's needs and progress and to address any gaps in learning effectively.

Senior leaders should continue with their plans to further develop the data analysis skills of all teachers to help them monitor and evaluate the impact of improvement activities.

What happens next?

Understandably, the school has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These have had a significant impact on the work of the school. Staff are implementing plans to support recovery. Staff have also been making progress in taking forward the areas for improvement from the original inspection. We recognise that the school needs time to implement fully its priorities for improvement. We have asked Scottish Borders Council to provide us with further information about the school's progress within one year of the publication of the letter. We will work together with local authority officers to agree what will happen next. Should we require another visit to the school, we will inform parents. Otherwise, Scottish Borders Council will continue to inform parents about the school's progress as part of its usual arrangements for reporting on the quality of its education service.