

Highland Council

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Definition of terms used in this report

HM Inspectors use published criteria when making judgements about the work of a local authority. These quality indicators relate judgements to four levels of performance. This report uses the following word scale to make clear the judgements made by Inspectors:

very good	major strengths
good	more strengths than weaknesses
fair	some important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses

This report also uses the following words to describe numbers and proportions:

almost all	over 90%
most	75-90%
majority	50-74%
less than half	15-49%
few	up to 15%

Introduction

The education functions of each local authority in Scotland will be inspected between 2000 and 2005. Section 9 of the *Standards in Scotland's Schools Etc. Act 2000* charges HM Inspectors of Schools to provide an external evaluation of the effectiveness of the local authority in its quality assurance of educational provision within the Council and of its support to schools in improving quality. Inspections are conducted within a published framework of quality indicators (Quality Management in Education) which embody the Government's policy on Best Value.

Each inspection is planned and implemented in partnership with Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission for Scotland. The external auditor member of the inspection team carries out a performance management and planning (PMP) audit of the education functions of the authority. The inspection team also includes an Associate Assessor who is a senior member of staff currently serving in another Scottish local authority.

Inspection of the education functions of Highland Council

1. The aims, nature and scope of the inspection

The education functions of Highland Council were inspected during the period August – November 2000.

The inspection team interviewed elected members and officers of the Council. The inspection team also attended meetings, visited schools and other establishments in the authority and met with staff, chairpersons of School Boards and other key stakeholders of the Education Service. A summary of inspection activities is given in Appendix 2.

On behalf of HM Inspectors, an independent company issued and analysed responses to questionnaires to headteachers of all educational establishments within the authority and to the chairpersons of the School Boards/parents' associations.

2. The Education Service: operational context

Social and economic context

The Highland Council Education Service is the largest education authority by area in Scotland, covering some 10,000 square miles. It provides services to the following eight areas - Badenoch and Strathspey, Caithness, Inverness, Lochaber, Nairn, Ross and Cromarty, Skye and Lochalsh, and Sutherland. This represents a Council area of considerable diversity, including urban, scattered island and remote mainland communities. It had an estimated total population of 208,300 in 1999. In

contrast to the densely populated inner Moray Firth area there is an overall sparsity of population. There are significant social, health and economic inequalities throughout the area. These features of size and diversity present particular challenges for the Education Service in providing full and equal access to provision, communicating with customers and meeting their varied needs.

The overall population in Highland is growing steadily at 4% per annum, but population change at area level and within age groups shows considerable differences in growth and decline. The extent of growth in the older working and retired population is greater in Highland than in Scotland as a whole.

Average income in Highland is significantly below that in Scotland. The current employment rate is broadly in line with the Scottish average. The area is, however, extremely vulnerable to circumstances affecting major local employers. A significant feature of Highland unemployment is the extent of seasonal variation, compared with the Scottish pattern. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is well below the national average, but there are some areas of urban and rural deprivation.

Political and organisational context

Since its formation in 1996, Highland Council has been an independent, non-aligned Council, comprising 80 councillors.

The Highland Council has a clear statement of goals and values which provides a context for the work of the Education Service. Within the strategic goals and values there is an explicit intention to:

- achieve for all the people of the Highlands, as far as is practicable, equality in service levels and access to services

- tackle disadvantage wherever and however it arises
- hold excellence, innovation, quality and efficiency as the benchmarks for the provision of services
- constantly review performance and set targets for improvement
- push out managerial and political decision making to the most practicable level nearest to the citizen.

The Council gives very high priority to the role of the school in sustaining and developing local communities, resulting in a policy of not closing schools for financial reasons alone. There is a strong emphasis on decentralisation of political decision making and service delivery. The Council emphasises the importance of working with other agencies, organisations and individuals to form partnerships to achieve its aims and objectives.

The corporate improvement objectives and corporate plan provide a clear framework for the management and development of the Education Service.

Within the Council, education is one of the nine Service and Resource Committees which set strategic policies, allocate resources and monitor performance. The Policy and Resources Committee oversees the development of policy and co-ordinates issues that cut across services. As part of its commitment to devolve political decision making, the Council has eight area committees which oversee the majority of the day-to-day operations across all services. In seven of the eight areas, education is part of the overall business of the Area Committee. In Inverness, there is an Area Education Committee. Elected members have special responsibility for specific services at area level. Some also contribute to developing Council-wide policies and strategies for that service.

The Senior Education Directorate Team comprises the Director and three Heads of Service. One additional Head of Service is provided through a joint post with Health and Social Work Services. The Senior Education Directorate Team, which is responsible for strategic management, is supported by a number of Education Managers representing specific aspects of the service, including finance, community education, psychological services and advisory and quality development teams. Education is managed and delivered at a local level through six area offices. Each area office is managed by an Area Education Manager and those managing the two larger areas are supported by an Assistant Area Education Manager. Area Education Managers are largely responsible for operational management and service area committees.

Educational provision and performance

The Council is responsible for 34,500 pupils in 189 primary schools, 28 secondary schools, three special schools and a number of special units. Pre-school education is provided in 134 local authority centres and 88 partner centres, with 3,322 children receiving pre-school education now compared to 1,770 in 1998. Community education provides life-long learning opportunities in 23 centres. There is a very high proportion of small primary schools, with almost half of all primaries staffed by two teachers or less. One hundred and twenty-nine primary schools and three secondary schools have less than 100 pupils. Fourteen per cent of primary schools have occupancy levels of less than 40%, and only 22% of more than 80%.

Over the last few years, there has been a decline in the pupil population. This trend is projected to continue and will impact on planning for school provision. The rapid expansion of pre-school education also provides particular challenges for the Council.

There is a strong Gaelic culture and tradition in certain areas in Highland. Around 718 primary pupils in 18 schools and 238 secondary pupils in 11 schools are educated through the medium of Gaelic. Provision is made for over 200 pre-school children to receive Gaelic-medium education.

In the financial year 1999/2000, the gross revenue budget for Education Services was over £120 million. The Highland Council budget for education was £3 million above central government Grant-Aided Expenditure assessment (GAE) for education. In 2000/2001, the gross revenue budget was over £123 million and £1.5 million above GAE. This represents the high priority the Council gives to education and to the maintenance of schools as central to the development of their local communities. The capital budget for the service in 1999/2000 was over £8 million. The cost of education per pupil in Highland is well above the national average. In 1999/2000, the cost for a primary pupil was the fifth highest in Scotland and for a secondary pupil the fourth highest. Although there have been real increases in the revenue budget for education in the last few years, there is a backlog of expenditure of £84 million on maintenance and capital projects.

The following commentary draws on key performance information about the schools in the Council provided in Appendix 1.

Staying on rate and school leaver destinations

- The percentage of school pupils staying on to S5 (post Christmas) since 1997 has been consistently well above the national average and grew slightly between 1997 and 1999. It was above the average for similar councils.
- The percentage of school leavers entering Higher Education in 1997/98 and 1998/99 has been above the national average figures and since 1996/97 has risen

by more than three times the national rate of growth. Between 1996/97 and 1998/99, the percentage of school leavers entering Further Education fell to below the national average. Over the same period, the percentage of school leavers entering employment remained steady, but was well above national figures and the average for similar councils.

5-14 performance

- Between 1998 and 2000, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of primary school pupils attaining or exceeding expected levels of attainment for their stage in reading and writing. In mathematics, during the same period, attainment has stayed steady. In reading, writing and mathematics, performance was consistently above the national average, but the extent to which Highland schools performed above the national average has reduced. If the Council achieved its targets set as part of the Government's *Raising Standards - Setting Targets* initiative, the extent to which it performed above the national average would be reduced.
- National test results, between 1998 and 2000, for S2 pupils indicate an increase in attainment in reading and writing and a reduction in performance in mathematics. Overall attainment has been consistently above national averages. If the Council achieved its targets set as a result of the Government's *Raising Standards - Setting Targets* initiative, the extent to which it performed above the national average would be reduced.

SQA examination performance

- Results in Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) national qualifications at Standard Grade from 1997 to 1999 have generally been well above national averages and above the averages for similar councils. In these three years, the rate of increase in the percentage of pupils gaining five or more Standard Grade awards at Credit level was in line with the national rate of increase. The Council's targets for Standard Grade performance in 1999/2000 would maintain its position relative to the national average.
- At Higher Grade from 1997 to 1999, the percentage of S4 pupils gaining 3+ awards at A-C in S5 was above national average and in line with that for similar councils. It has increased while the national figure has stayed steady. The number of pupils gaining 5+ awards at A-C was in line with the national figure and that for the average of similar councils.
- The proportion of S6 pupils gaining one or more Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS) award at A-C between 1997 and 1999 was broadly in line with the national averages, but increased to above the national figure in 1999.
- Between 1997 and 1999, the percentage of S5/S6 roll gaining 3+ National Certificate Modules fell, but was consistently above the national average.

Attendance and absence

- Over the last 3 years, the percentage attendance figures in primary and secondary schools in Highland have been consistently above the national average.

- The Council's 2000/01 target for improving attendance in primary schools was two half days below the 1997/98 starting level and the national target. The current absence rate indicates that the Council has exceeded its target.
- The Council's 2000/01 target for improving attendance in secondary schools was eight half days below the 1997/98 starting level and nine half days below the national target. The Council still has considerable progress to make before it achieves its target.

3. Strategic management of the service

Vision, values and aims

The Education Service provided a clear and comprehensive statement of its vision, values and goals which reflected national and local priorities. Almost all headteachers and most School Board chairpersons were confident that a clear overall vision had been set for the Education Service.

Good attention was given to national priorities, including the improvement of provision through a consultative and inclusive approach to lifelong learning. There was a clear intention to enable those who received services from the authority to achieve their full potential, and that standards of educational achievement were raised continually. Self- evaluation and quality assurance were effectively highlighted as key processes in the drive towards continuous improvement.

Local priorities, such as fostering the social and cultural values of the Highlands, and promoting the Gaelic language, were well represented in the service goals. The impact of these goals had resulted in the steady growth of pre-school and primary units where children received

their education through the medium of Gaelic. Many schools took part in the national and local Mods, and in a variety of other Gaelic festivals.

The Education Service goals had been effectively communicated to schools and to parents. Members of the Education Management Team, and personnel in schools, showed good awareness and understanding of these goals. However, the means of fully achieving the goals were not always clear to staff in schools. Staff in pre-school partner centres had little awareness of the service's goals.

The Education Service goals linked very well with those of the Council. An effective start had been made to joint working through a Head of Service post jointly managed by Education, Health and Social Work Services, meetings of service directors and a Children and Young Persons' Committee.

A good start had been made to evaluating progress towards the Education Service goals. There had been a comprehensive programme of quality assurance visits to schools and the publication of a report on standards and quality in schools. Too little use was made of evidence from quality assurance to enable the service to fully monitor the extent to which it met its goals.

Leadership and management

Overall, the effectiveness of leadership and management in the Education Service was good. During his two years in post, the Director had shown very good leadership in introducing a quality culture in schools and in promoting continuous improvement in provision. He had given a very effective lead in consulting on, and defining, a clear vision of what the service was aiming to achieve, and in communicating this vision to the directorate team, schools and parents. The Director had a very good understanding of the local and national political contexts and worked effectively within them. Very good

relationships were maintained with elected members. He was committed to corporate working with other Council services and had established several important working links with these services. The Director gave a very effective lead in the following key initiatives:

- introduction of mechanisms for gathering and responding to the views of pupils, parents and teachers
- preparation of an Education Service Plan
- restructuring of the Education Management Team at central and area levels to provide a stronger focus on quality assurance
- development of a quality assurance framework and publication of a report on the standards and quality of education in Highland.

The Director was supported well by three Heads of Service, who gave a good lead in their respective areas of responsibility. They had a high awareness of the Director's vision for the service and had started working effectively to achieve it. Almost all headteachers agreed that Senior Managers showed a high level of commitment to promoting quality. However, there was scope for closer links in planning between those with remits for budgeting and resourcing, and those who managed the use of those resources in order to maximise improvement in learning, teaching and attainment.

Individual Heads of Service were committed and hard working. They worked well as a team. This helped create a good working ethos across the service. Schools felt that they were generally consulted effectively and they in turn had responded well to the service's quality initiative. Many pre-school partner centres felt that they would benefit from greater communication and support from the Education Service.

Developments in the curriculum and quality assurance were effectively managed at a strategic level. A Community Education Manager oversaw the development and implementation of a well-judged Community Learning Strategy. A range of jointly-funded posts and projects with the Social Work Service indicated a strong commitment to joint working. Their impact, at a strategic level, had been successful, but more needed to be done to establish joint operational structures at a local area level to maximise impact on schools.

Staff in schools felt that senior management gave a clear lead in improving educational achievement through the establishment of a quality culture. The introduction of quality assurance procedures was seen as valuable in identifying strengths and areas in need of development in individual schools.

Senior staff with line management responsibility had made a good start to reviewing the work of the education management team. Annual reviews were based on targets in personal development plans and on each member's progress with implementing appropriate parts of the Service Plan. There would be value in further developing these reviews to focus more directly on the impact of work on improving pupils' achievement.

Policy development

The Education Service had, in consultation with schools and parents, prepared a range of appropriate policy statements. A good start had been made to implementing them. The policies clearly reflected national and local priorities and focused well on quality improvement. Examples included well-structured guidance on quality assurance, school development planning, staff development and review, early intervention and the integration of pupils with special educational needs into mainstream education. A policy on Information and Communications Technology (ICT) gave clear

information on resourcing, but was less clear on how ICT should be used within learning and teaching.

The well-designed policy on quality assurance provided a clear operating framework which was generally well-understood by schools. There was a need to complement the policy with an indication of how the overall findings from quality assurance would be used to effect school improvement and to determine priorities for staff development.

Policy on early intervention in primary schools had been effectively implemented in many schools. Not enough guidance had been given on how these early gains could be sustained at the middle and later stages.

A good start had been made to developing and implementing policies for co-operative working with other Council and external services to deliver key Council goals. Good examples of corporate activity included the development of two new Community Schools projects, the introduction of integrated children's services and the provision of community facilities for sport and distance learning in secondary schools.

Overall, there had been good progress in developing and reviewing a range of policies in several key areas. However, there was insufficient advice on how to implement these policies. Many headteachers wished clearer advice on how to put policies into action.

4. Consultation and communication

Consultation and communication were good. A goal of the Education Service was to work in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure quality educational provision for all. The Director of Education, senior staff and elected members had identified the need for effective systems of communication and consultation in order to develop and maintain such partnerships. They had

identified the individuals and groups involved and put in place a good range of strategies which were proving to be successful. The majority of headteachers felt that senior education managers consulted effectively with them. Many felt that more effective consultation was needed with other stakeholders such as School Boards, parents and pupil groups. A majority of School Board chairpersons believed that consultation processes did not allow them to influence the aims and plans for education in their area.

Notable features of approaches to consultation and communication included the following.

- The Director of Education and senior staff met with all secondary headteachers and a primary headteachers' representative group four times each year. These meetings were a positive and useful means of consulting and communicating directly with heads of schools. Regular meetings were also held with headteachers of small secondary schools and probationer teachers, who felt that the authority responded effectively to their views.
- The increased use of e-mail and the development of an Education Services web site helped to establish direct communication with schools.
- Area Education Forum meetings provided valuable opportunities for all headteachers to be informed and consulted on issues relating to the authority's Service Plan and national developments. Useful workshops enabled senior staff to gather the views of headteachers on matters such as quality assurance, support for learning, devolved school management and communications. More needed to be done to provide better feedback to staff following consultation, and to explain why decisions had been made.

- The Area Education Forum meetings for chairpersons of School Boards provided good opportunities for the Director and Area Managers to brief them on national and local issues. Specially-designed workshops provided for consultation on matters such as communications, training needs, childcare and transport. Elected members also made good use of these forums to communicate and consult with parents. Although attendance at these meetings was variable, School Boards' chairpersons saw them as worthwhile and commented positively on the openness of the authority in both gathering their views and providing information. A majority of School Boards wished additional training.
- The Education Service Plan and Area Education Plans were communicated to customers and stakeholders through meetings, forums and publications. Helpful leaflets were provided to staff and parents summarising the Education Service Plan. Pre-school partner centres should be given access to these plans.
- Four focus groups, drawn from headteachers, advisers and teacher union representatives, chaired by Heads of Service, provided them with advice on strategic matters related to the Education Service Plan. These groups provided further opportunities for headteachers and teacher unions to be consulted on new policies and procedures.
- The Joint Consultative Group provided an effective mechanism for consultation with teacher unions.
- The Education Service had made a good start to gathering pupils' views at a leavers' conference in autumn 2000 and through discussions at a Youth Parliament as part of Highland's Youth Strategy. Plans were in hand for a more general survey of pupils' views through the use of nationally-produced questionnaires. Some schools had already consulted

with pupils as part of their school development planning process.

- Good communication had been developed between the Education Service and a range of local and national agencies, including the Careers Service, University of Highland and Islands, Highland and Islands Enterprise, the Health Board and Health Trust and the Northern Constabulary. At senior management level, the Education Service had established good links with representatives of the pre-school sector. Pre-school education in partner centres was provided through service level agreements with Highland Pre-school Services and Comhairle Nan Sgoiltean Àraich (CNSA). The Highland Child Care Partnership was effective in planning for future developments in pre-school education and childcare. Consultation and communication with individual pre-school partner centres were fair. They were unaware of Council priorities and received little information. The Education Service had, however, begun the process of establishing Area Partnership Groups to improve communications in this sector of education. However, the Service Level Agreements for provision of pre-school education should be reviewed to improve communication and support for partner centres.

Highland Council had conducted a survey of employees' views on their job, management and communications in May 2000. This included specific questions for teachers. The Director had responded positively by establishing a representative working group to address the issues raised in the report.

In 1998/99, the authority published a Standards and Quality Report on Highland Schools. The report contained statistical data on school provision and performance and some evaluative comment on the curriculum, attainment and learning and teaching. The Highland Council Best Value Public Performance Report,

1999, contained an education section which provided data on educational provision. More evaluative comment was required in these reports. Regular reports to the Council Education Committee and Area Committees provided some information on attainment in the authority's schools and progress made in achieving targets set as part of the Government's *Raising Standards - Setting Targets* initiative. School Board chairpersons were aware of how their school was performing, but some had concerns about their ability to access good information on the quality of primary education across the Council. The Education Service did not provide a sufficiently detailed or evaluative analysis of data for elected members, parents and other stakeholders to enable them to fully assess how well the service was performing.

The Director had established a clear system to record and respond to complaints received in his office. As part of the Council's corporate improvement strategy, and in response to concerns regarding delays in responses by some staff, action had been taken to ensure that all Area Managers adopted a similar system. The Director should monitor the response times of Area Managers to enquiries and complaints.

5. Operational management

Service Planning

Service Planning was good and had been firmly established as the vehicle for bringing about systematic improvement. This had given good cohesion, impetus and direction to the service as a whole. The goals and priorities of the service linked clearly to the corporate goals of the Council. The objectives in the Education Service Plan focused on both local and national priorities and placed a notable emphasis on raising standards and assuring quality. Almost all headteachers in primary and secondary schools felt that the Education Service Plan made clear the Council's aims and priorities for

education. A minority of leaders in pre-school partner centres shared this view. It was made clear to schools which priorities in the Service Plan should be considered for inclusion in their development plans. However, there was not enough advice on how to phase the implementation of these priorities into their planning.

Area Education Managers oversaw a plan for each of their localities. These plans were closely linked to the main Service Plan and identified major developments of provision at an area level. Area Plans were approved by Area Committees. They were a useful means of communication and accountability to stakeholders at a local level, but required to be more closely linked into the planning cycle and used to effectively manage the service.

Within the Education Service Plan, targets had been set to establish joint plans with the Social Work Service and the Health Service. These were in the process of being drawn up for childcare, young people at risk of exclusion and the health of looked after children. The Community Learning Plan was very good and clearly indicated specific roles for joint working among service providers.

The Service Planning cycle linked well with the schools' work cycle. The Area Education Plans, individual project plans and the process of staff development and review needed to be incorporated into the cycle to ensure that they fully informed schools' planning processes. Consideration should be given to providing all establishments with a planning framework which identified how the various aspects of planning integrated in a single planning and budgeting cycle.

Despite the many good features of planning, there were aspects which needed to be improved. The quality assurance reviews of schools and Best Value Reviews were not used effectively to guide Service Planning and delivery. The targets and success criteria in the plan required to be more specific and measurable, and to

identify the intended impact on school improvement. The plan also needed to make reference to staff development requirements, and to provide more detailed timelines for implementation, consolidation and evaluation of each priority.

Focus groups, drawn from Heads of Service, headteachers, teacher unions and advisers monitored sections of the Service Plan. Staff responsible for leading particular initiatives met with Heads of Service three times per year to report on progress made. Progress on meeting targets was reviewed twice each year at Area Education Forums and the findings reported to the full Education Committee. The service should now build on this very good monitoring model by evaluating the impact of the initiatives on school improvement.

The Advisory Service provided a good programme of staff development courses, related to the priorities in the Service Plan. However, training for leadership in schools should be increased and accessibility to the courses improved. Not enough use was made of national reports, and school and staff review, to identify staff development needs.

Good account had been taken of other delivery options in planning for pre-school education. A Service Level Agreement with Highland Pre-School Services gave them responsibility for supporting and assuring a quality pre-school service in partner centres in Highland. A Children's Services Committee co-ordinated the delivery of services to children in an integrated way.

Deployment and effectiveness of centrally-employed staff

The deployment of central staff was good and clearly aligned to support quality and the improvement priorities of the service. Deployment took good account of individual strengths and experience and was clearly communicated to individual schools. An extended

Highland Educational Management Team met monthly to link strategic and operational management and assist communication.

The Senior Adviser's main responsibilities were to manage the advisers, Curriculum Development Officers, the Staff Development Unit and some of the initiatives for raising standards. Integrating all of these aspects of the service significantly increased the capacity to effect improvement in partnership with schools. The Senior Adviser had made a very significant contribution to developing, promoting and implementing quality assurance procedures.

A Head of Service for Children, Young People and Families, jointly funded and managed by the Education, Health and Social Work Services, had been appointed recently. This post provided further opportunity to develop joint working to improve levels of service. A Finance Manager provided good support to the Head of Planning and Resources.

Each of the five Area Education Managers had a clear remit for quality development and support for schools in their area. They gave a good lead in local implementation of the Service Plan and were increasingly involved with aspects of quality assurance. However, a significant amount of their time was taken up with administrative and routine matters. Their role in quality assurance should be extended. The Education Service needed to satisfy itself that current administrative arrangements at area level provided consistent and effective practice across each area and ensured Best Value.

Area Education Managers were ably assisted by locally-based primary and centrally-based secondary advisers, who worked well as a team. In addition to their responsibilities for several curricular areas, each adviser had responsibility for quality assurance. Advisers were supported by seconded Curriculum Development

Officers. There was a need to review the balance of time spent by advisers on quality assurance and curriculum support. The Education Service needed to consider how best to support single teacher secondary departments and small primary schools.

Some initiatives for raising standards were effectively delivered by Seconded Development Officers, using the financial support available from the Government's Excellence Fund. Greater use needed to be made of information from school self-evaluation, school reviews and HMI inspection reports to target these resources on areas of greatest need.

6. Resource and financial management

Resource management

Overall, management of resources was good, although there was a need for a more determined and comprehensive implementation of Best Value principles. Since its inception, the Council had spent above the Grant Aided Expenditure assessment to support education. It had a good rationale for the allocation of resources which closely matched national guidance and took account of local priorities and the availability of specific grants such as the Excellence Fund.

Elected members were made fully aware of the financial and other resources available to the Council and the financial implications of budget-setting proposals through reports discussed at service committees and the Budget Working Group.

A good range of measures had been taken to ensure the economic, efficient and effective use of resources in the delivery of education within Highland Council. These included the following:

- the development of a corporate property strategy and an energy management policy
- a clear Capital Plan
- ‘spend to save’ opportunities taken on energy consumption
- competitive tendering used for electricity, heating oil, gas and LPG to obtain the best unit rate for energy
- improved usage of school buildings through community use and the introduction of pre-school education.

The Council was in the final stages of negotiating a Private Public Partnership contract for the building of four new schools.

Three reviews had taken place to measure and monitor aspects of provision to deliver Best Value. They were on home-to-school transport services, catering in schools in Lochaber and management arrangements for the Education Service Information Communications Technology System. In carrying out future reviews, more use should be made of challenging the need for the service and using benchmarks to compare performance. The Education Service did not have a comprehensive programme of Best Value reviews for major aspects of provision or a clear rationale for such reviews. Important aspects of provision, including schools with significant surplus capacity and the area administrative structure, needed to be included in a Best Value review programme. Results of the reviews undertaken were not yet at a stage to enable the authority to demonstrate improvements to service delivery or reductions in cost.

Communication between the Property and Architectural Services and the Education Service on the level of maintenance expenditure and priorities for expenditure on school buildings was fair. There was a lack of clarity in

the respective responsibilities of each service for the maintenance of buildings and in systems for establishing priorities for maintenance expenditure. Arrangements for property maintenance and asset management should be improved.

Financial management

Overall, financial management was good. There was a good relationship between the Education and Finance Services. Elected members were informed and involved in the budget setting and budgetary control processes through service committees and the Budget Working Group. There was wide consultation on all budget proposals through forum groups, headteachers and School Boards, before they were submitted to the appropriate committees.

Good financial information was available for budgetary control at service level. The senior management team and individual budget holders regularly received and discussed budgetary control reports. Variances were investigated and corrective action taken where necessary. Progress had been made towards multi-year budgeting with budgets produced for 2000/01 and 2001/02.

The Council had a comprehensive, devolved school management scheme, which detailed the responsibilities of the education authority, Director of Education, headteachers and School Boards. It was clearly linked to the Council's financial and contractual regulations. Headteachers were generally satisfied with the scheme and the financial information provided for them. Although budget holders received regular budget monitoring reports, some commented on their poor quality. Many headteachers commented on administrative difficulties and insufficient training associated with the devolved school management scheme. It was currently being reviewed to ensure greater

administrative efficiency and budgetary control by headteachers.

Although the Service Plan had some references to budgets, it needed to be costed more rigorously. Clearer links needed to be established between the planning process and the budgetary preparation process.

Good support for the delivery of financial systems was provided through clear operational manuals, documents and staff training.

7. Performance monitoring and continuous improvement

Measuring, monitoring and evaluating performance

Overall, the Education Service had a good range of systems in place to monitor performance across the authority. There was a clear quality assurance framework and a high level of commitment to regular evaluation and the development of an ethos of improvement. Good progress had been made towards achieving the goal of promoting self-evaluation and quality assurance as a cornerstone of the service.

Quality assurance handbooks for primary and secondary schools clearly set out principles and processes for assuring quality in the Education Service. All schools had a development plan, based on explicit guidelines. Plans were reviewed by a quality assurance team and a written report provided to the headteacher. Partner centres providing pre-school education were required to produce an annual development plan by June 2001.

The main way in which the Education Service reviewed the quality of education provided by its primary and secondary schools was through a programme of quality assurance visits. This provided a good mechanism for the Education Service to gain a full knowledge of

performance in its schools. Quality assurance teams of advisers, seconded officers and Area Education Managers visited each school annually. A more targetted approach to quality assurance, based on need, would provide time for them to implement, more fully, their support role. More rigour and consistency of evidence gathering was needed. The Education Service's evaluation of the initial round of visits indicated that most staff found them useful in informing school planning, but in some instances lacking in rigour. Similar arrangements were in place for quality assurance in an annual sample of pre-school centres attached to primary schools, and will be extended to partner centres.

The use of national performance indicators in *How good is our school?*¹ and *The Child at the Centre*² to monitor quality and plan for development was actively promoted and was becoming more established across all levels in the Education Service. As yet, however, the use of performance indicators for self-evaluation in schools was variable across the authority.

Guidance on staff development and review was issued to all schools in 1999. Progress with implementation in relation to national expectations had been unsatisfactory, particularly in primary schools. A target had been set in the Service Plan to accelerate the introduction of staff development and review to include all teachers by June 2001. The Senior Directorate should ensure that procedures are in place to meet the target and that all staff benefit from a meaningful process of review. There was no clear system for processing the results of staff review to identify and meet staff development needs.

A pilot scheme was in operation to assist schools in producing individual Standards and Quality reports covering all key areas of their work over a three-year cycle. A target had been set in the Service Plan to ensure

¹ *How good is our school? - Self-evaluation using performance indicators* (Audit Unit – HM Inspectors of Schools, SOEID, 1996)

² *The Child at the Centre - Self-evaluation in the Early Years* (SEED, 2000)

that all secondary schools and 20% of primary schools published such reports by June 2002. More use could be made of information gained from these reports to inform the Service Standards and Quality report.

The Education Service had commissioned a pilot project to track pupils' attainment initially from P7, and then P4, into secondary school. No system was yet in place to establish baseline information on pupil attainment at the early stages to assist schools in measuring pupils' subsequent progress.

Plans to introduce a Performance Management Unit had not yet been implemented fully. Information on 5-14 levels of attainment being achieved in schools was collated. Data provided nationally on performance in Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) examinations were provided to schools and information processed to enable them to compare performance with other schools in Highland. Pupils' attainment was a focus for discussion in the annual quality assurance visits.

There were effective procedures for responding to inspections by HM Inspectors of Schools. Good support had been given to schools in the production and implementation of action plans to address points for action in inspection reports. In follow-up visits to inspections, most schools satisfactorily met almost all recommendations.

Through these and other methods of gathering information on schools, Senior Managers and, in particular, Area Education Managers were successfully building up a good knowledge of the effectiveness of the schools. Most headteachers were confident that the authority had an accurate knowledge of the performance of their schools and had encouraged them to develop a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating their work. However, there was a need for the more systematic collection, analysis and reporting of a wide

range of statistical data on performance, at school and service levels, to support and demonstrate improvement.

Continuous improvement in performance

The Education Service had a clear goal to continue to raise the generally high standards of educational achievement in Highland. To do so it had implemented a wide range of approaches to improve schools' performance and raise standards. These were focused clearly on national and local priorities. Good use had been made of the Government's Excellence Fund to support improvement programmes.

As part of the Early Intervention initiative, schools in areas of deprivation had been included in the initial stage of the programme. Intensive training in early literacy and numeracy, the appointment of classroom assistants, increased support for learning, home-school activity learning packs and a variety of staff development activities had a positive impact on improving provision. Class sizes had been reduced at the early stages in all Highland primary schools, with no class having more than 30 pupils. More needed to be done to monitor and evaluate the full impact of this initiative on pupils' quality of experience and attainment.

Overall, progress in implementing 5-14 curriculum guidelines and effective National Testing had been fair. Support had been provided for teaching in a range of curricular areas, including mathematics, English, science and health education. Staff training had been provided to promote progress in implementing guidance in expressive arts, religious and moral education and mental mathematics. Curriculum support materials had been provided in art, music and physical education. Projects had been introduced to support science from P6 to S2 and improve links between primary and secondary schools in modern languages. Apart from mathematics in primary schools, good progress had been made towards achieving targets set as a result of the Government's *Raising*

Standards – Setting Targets initiative. However, targets set at the 5-14 stages were insufficiently challenging (see Appendix 1). The Education Service should continue to monitor progress in raising pupils' attainment, and provide practical guidance on aspects of the 5-14 curriculum which were identified as needing improvement. School clusters could play a more effective role in developing such support, particularly for very small schools.

Secondary schools had made good progress in introducing new courses to provide pupils with opportunities to gain National Qualifications. Good arrangements were in place to provide staff development to assist staff deliver these courses. Support officers provided advice on management, timetabling and guidance matters. However, in two of the last three years, pupils gaining SQA Higher awards attained significantly lower grades than would be expected from their Standard Grade results. More required to be done to further increase the number of pupils attaining 5+ Higher Grade awards (see Appendix 1).

All secondary schools had received funding to extend their study support programmes. A very successful Easter study support programme had been provided for all S5 and S6 pupils across Highland. Study support activities were being extended to primary and special schools.

Good progress had been made in developing an ICT infrastructure across Highland. A target to provide one computer for every five pupils in secondary schools had been met and good progress made towards providing one for every 7.5 children in primary schools. However, there was no overall strategy to ensure best use of ICT for school improvement or for effective monitoring of its impact on attainment.

Progress towards achieving the Education Service's aim to support and extend Gaelic language and culture was

good. Effective arrangements were made for a wide range of Gaelic-medium provision. The Service planned well to provide progression and continuity from primary to secondary classes. Very good use had been made of specific grants from central government to provide training, develop teaching materials, establish new teaching posts and extend provision. The Service had responded well to parents' requests for additional classes, but was constrained by a national shortage of Gaelic-medium teachers. There were good plans to extend provision for Gaelic learners in primary schools. Good relationships were maintained with external organisations and parents' groups, whose aim was to support and promote Gaelic. The Education Service should continue to work with such groups and share good practice. There was a need for more formal liaison and increased joint working with other Council services which had an interest in promoting Gaelic. A good emphasis was placed on improving attainment. A number of helpful guidelines had been issued to staff. Very good use had been made of broad-based, in-service training to support Gaelic-medium teachers. There was a need now to provide more closely-focused and advanced staff development. In a number of schools, national initiatives such as Early Intervention and the provision of classroom assistants had been skilfully adapted to blend with Gaelic immersion programmes in P1 to P3. The good start to using development groups to improve aspects of provision should be consolidated and extended.

To achieve its goal to promote education as lifelong learning for individuals and as a focus for community development, the Education Service had made a good start to developing New Community Schools (NCS). The initiative had been planned well. Day-to-day work in each of the two groups of schools was carried out by a core team of multidisciplinary staff, led by an integration manager working in partnership with local headteachers. Both initiatives had had a positive impact on developing joint working in improving services for their local communities.

To ensure that particular talents of young people were developed fully, the Education Service had set up a National Centre of Excellence for Traditional Scottish Music. Greater use could be made of distance learning to meet individual needs and provide opportunities for all pupils to achieve their fullest potential and develop their talents.

A Pupil Support Service had been set up as part of an Alternatives to Exclusions initiative. Revised guidelines on exclusion were being developed for implementation in 2001. There had been a reduction in the number of pupils excluded from school since 1998/99, particularly those who were removed from the school roll (see Appendix 1). Continued training for staff on behaviour support strategies would enable the full impact of this initiative to be realised.

The Education Service deployed a range of mechanisms to disseminate good practice, including:

- the Education Service web site
- a booklet on good practice in primary schools
- education forums and other staff meetings
- presentations at the Council's Education Service Committee
- noting of successes at Council and Area Education Committee meetings
- a Standards and Quality Report and Public Performance Report
- press reports on school and pupil successes.

There was a need to build further on these practices to disseminate good practice and acknowledge achievement further.

8. How well does the authority perform overall?

Overview

Highland Council had given a high priority to supporting and developing its Education Service and had succeeded in adding value to the work of its schools. In particular, over the last two years, the Education Service had benefited from strong leadership and the introduction of a clear vision and agreed goals. A culture of planning and quality assurance, focusing on improvement, had been introduced. A range of partnerships had been established with other Council services and other stakeholders to enhance service provision in an integrated way.

Effective means of communication and consultation had been established with most main partners. Good relationships had been maintained with schools.

Schools and pupils performed well. Pupils' attainment, at almost all levels, was consistently above the national average. The service required to ensure that sufficiently-challenging targets were set to secure continuing improvement.

A quality assurance framework had been introduced successfully. Education staff now needed to further improve this framework, as outlined in the report, to closely monitor the success of the range of initiatives introduced to bring about improvement and secure Best Value.

Key strengths

- The high priority Highland Council gives to supporting and developing its Education Service.
- The clarity of the vision and goals which direct the structures and work of the Education Service.
- The strong leadership of the Director of Education in introducing a culture of planning, quality assurance and continuous improvement.
- The wide range of effective mechanisms for consultation with staff.
- The development of a comprehensive quality assurance framework.
- A commitment to promoting Gaelic language and culture.
- Targeted support to improve the already good standards of attainment in most schools.

9. Main points for action

Around two years after the publication of this report, HM Inspectors will re-visit the authority to assess progress in meeting this report's recommendations. The local authority has been asked to prepare and make public an action plan, within eight weeks of the publication of this report, indicating how it will address the following main points for action in the report.

- Further improve approaches to performance monitoring and measurement by increasing the rigour of school reviews, targeting scarce resources where needs are greatest, evaluating the impact of initiatives

on improving pupils' attainment and indicating how overall findings would be used to effect improvement.

- Develop a system for the more systematic collection, analysis and reporting of management data on improvement. Improve reporting on performance to elected members, parents and other stakeholders.
- Review administrative provision at area level to provide consistency of effective practice and ensure Best Value.
- Prepare and implement a comprehensive programme of Best Value reviews covering major aspects of provision.
- Ensure all teaching and centrally-deployed staff benefit from a programme of staff development and review.
- Develop a more comprehensive and integrated planning and budget cycle.
- Improve arrangements for property maintenance and asset management.
- Review the Service Level Agreements for provision of pre-school education to improve communication and support for partner centres.

Bill Clark
HM Chief Inspector of Schools
Quality, Standards and Audit Division
February 2001

Appendix 1

Performance information

Statistical indicators

- Absence

In relation to the *Raising Standards – Setting Targets* initiative, Highland Council set itself the following target to minimise the average number of half-days absence per pupil in primary and secondary schools by 2000/01.

		Starting Level (1997/1998)	Current Level (1999/2000)	Target Level (2000/2001)
Primary	Highland	18	15	16
	National	21	19	18
Secondary	Highland	35	33	27
	National	43	41	36

- Exclusion from schools in Highland

	1998/1999	1999/2000
Total exclusions	566	507
Removal from roll	42	10

- % of school pupils staying on to S5 (post Christmas)

	1997	1998	1999
Highland	71	72	73
National	64	64	65
Av. similar councils ¹	67	68	70

¹ Av. similar councils refers to the group of education authorities which are most similar to each other in terms of various socio-economic and demographic factors.

- Pupil destinations

% Entering Full-Time Higher Education		1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
	Highland	29	31	36
	National	29	30	31
	Av. similar councils	30	32	34
% Entering Full-Time Further Education		19	17	17
	Highland	18	19	19
	National	18	18	17
	Av. similar councils	18	18	17
% Entering Employment		35	35	34
	Highland	25	26	26
	National	26	28	28
	Av. similar councils	26	28	28

- As part of the *Raising Standards – Setting Targets* initiative, Highland Council set itself the following targets in reading, writing and mathematics in primary schools to be achieved by 2001, and has made the following progress in achieving them. The figures represent the percentage of pupils attaining and expected to attain appropriate 5-14 levels by P7¹.

Target		Starting Level June 1998	Current Level June 2000	Target Level June 2001
Reading	Highland	74	75	79
	National	70	73	77
Writing	Highland	63	65	71
	National	56	61	67
Maths	Highland	78	78	82
	National	73	77	81

- As part of the *Raising Standards – Setting Targets* initiative, Highland Council set itself the following targets in reading, writing and mathematics in secondary schools to be achieved by 2001, and has made the following progress in achieving them. The figures represent the percentage of pupils attaining and expected to attain appropriate 5-14 levels by S2².

¹ Level A by end of P3. Level B by end of P4. Level C by end of P6. Level D by end of P7.

² Level E by end of S2.

Target		Starting Level June 1998	Current Level June 2000	Target Level June 2001
Reading	Highland	53	56	59
	National	41	46	54
Writing	Highland	49	50	55
	National	36	40	48
Maths	Highland	52	47	60
	National	42	43	55

- As part of the *Raising Standards – Setting Targets* initiative, Highland Council set itself the following SQA Standard Grade and Higher Grade targets for session 2000-2001, and has made the following progress in achieving them. The figures represent the percentage of pupils achieving particular targets.

		Starting Level (1995/97)	Current Level (1997/1999)	Target Level (1999/2001)
SG English 1-6	Highland	95	96	95
	National	92	93	94
SG Maths 1-6	Highland	95	96	95
	National	92	93	94
5+SG 1-6	Highland	94	95	96
	National	90	91	93
5+SG 1-4	Highland	79	83	84
	National	72	74	77
5+G 1-2	Highland	31	36	37
	National	28	31	34
HG, 3+ (A-C)	Highland	22	24	25
	National	20	20	23
HG, 5+ (A-C)	Highland	5	6	7
	National	6	6	8

- Results in Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) National Qualifications.

% S4 Roll gaining:		1997	1998	1999
5+ S Grades at 1-6	Highland	95	95	95
	National	90	90	91
	Av. similar councils	93	93	94
5+ S Grades at 1-4	Highland	82	82	84
	National	73	74	75
	Av. similar councils	79	80	81
5+ S Grades at 1-2	Highland	35	36	37
	National	29	31	31
	Av. similar councils	34	36	35
3+ H Grades at A-C in S5	Highland	22	25	24
	National	20	20	20
	Av. similar councils	22	23	23
5+ H Grades at A-C in S5	Highland	5	7	7
	National	6	6	7
	Av. similar councils	6	7	7
% S4 roll gaining 1+ CSYS at A-C in S6	Highland	10	9	12
	National	10	9	10
	Av. similar councils	11	10	11
% S5/S6 roll gaining 3+ NC modules	Highland	46	45	41
	National	41	42	39
	Av. similar councils	42	43	41

- Value Added from S Grade to H Grade
(- represents a performance lower than would be expected and * indicates a performance significantly below expectations)

	1997	1998	1999
Highland	-4.5*	-1.6	-3.0*

Appendix 2

Inspection coverage

Establishments visited:

Alness Academy
Dornoch Academy
Gairloch High School
Kingussie High School
Lochaber High School
Plockton High School
Portree High School

Balloch Primary School
Bishop Eden Primary School
Bonar Bridge Primary School
Central Primary School
Fort William RC Primary School
Kingussie Primary School
Lochcarron Primary School
Lochyside RC Primary School
Plockton Primary School
Pulteneytown Academy Primary School
St Joseph's RC Primary School
Staffin Primary School
St Clement's Special School

Central Nursery
Fliperz Playgroup
Halkirk Playgroup
Inverlochry Playgroup
Junior World Playgroup
Kingussie Playgroup
Lairg Playgroup
Lochcarron Playgroup
Portree Nursery Ltd
Stepping Stones Nursery

Meetings attended:

Highland Education Management Team
Quality Assurance Focus Group
Directorate Policy Group
Highland Childcare Partnership

Interviews or meetings with Council Members and Officers:

Chair and Vice-Chair of the Education Committee
Chief Executive of the Council
Convenor of the Council
Director of Finance
Director of Property and Architectural Services
Director of Social Work
Education Committee
Area Education Portfolio Holders Committee
Area Education Forum
Inverness Area (Ross and Cromarty) Education Committee
Head of Property, Principal Maintenance Officer and Head of Energy and Engineering; Property and Architectural Services
Gaelic Development Officer; Chief Executive's Department

Interviews or meetings with other Stakeholder Groups:

Area Education Forum (School Board Chairs)
Comunn An Gàidhlig (CNAG)
Comhairle Nan Sgoiltean Àraich (CNSA)
Comann Nan Pàrant

Interviews with Education Service Staff

Appendix 3

Quality indicators

We judged the following to be *very good*

- no aspects were found to be in this category.

We judged the following to be *good*

- Vision, values and aims
- Effectiveness of leadership and management
- Policy development
- Mechanisms for consultation
- Mechanisms for communication
- Service Planning
- Deployment and effectiveness of centrally-employed staff
- Resource management
- Financial management
- Measuring, monitoring and evaluating performance
- Continuous improvement in performance.

We judged the following to be *fair*

- no aspects were found to be in this category.

We judged the following to be *unsatisfactory*

- no aspects were found to be in this category.

How can you contact us?

Copies of this report have been sent to the Chief Executive of the local authority, the Head of the Education Service, other local authority officers, Members of the Scottish Parliament, Audit Scotland, heads of the local authority educational establishments, chairpersons of the local authority School Boards/parents' associations and to other relevant individuals and agencies. Subject to availability, further copies may be obtained free of charge from the office at the address below or by telephoning 0131 244 0746.

Copies are also available on our web site:

www.scotland.gov.uk/hmis

Should you wish to comment on, or make a complaint about, any aspect of the inspection or this report, you should write in the first instance to Bill Clark, HMCI whose address is given below. If you are unhappy with the response, you will be told in writing what further steps you may take.

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