

Inspection of the education functions of Argyll & Bute Council

June 2005

How well does the authority perform overall?

Overview

Argyll and Bute Council demonstrated good and improving performance across many different aspects of its work. Elected members and senior managers demonstrated a strong commitment to providing high quality services and promoting a culture of improvement. Recent restructuring, while having created a period of uncertainty, had strengthened the management capacity within the Council and extended opportunities for integrated working to improve services.

The vision, values and aims of the service were clear, but required some adjustment to fully reflect recent improvements in ways of delivering services within the Council. Strong partnerships were being forged across the Council and with partner agencies to provide more integrated services for children, young people and their families.

The Director of Community Services and the Heads of Service with prime responsibility for education provided effective leadership by re-focusing the service, setting clear strategic direction, and prioritising and resourcing key aspects of provision which were identified as in need of improvement. A very strong sense of teamwork operated at all levels. The Heads of Service contributed very effectively to improving important aspects of provision and were highly regarded by school staff. Communication was very good.

The financial management of the Education Service had improved and was sound. There was a need to further develop the process of more closely aligning budget and service planning. Arrangements for the devolution of budget responsibilities to school and pre-school centres were good and high quality support was provided from local and centrally-employed staff. Although plans were being developed to improve the school estate, more required to be done to address issues of increasing over-capacity in primary schools.

Very strong support was provided for pre-school and primary education. A number of steps had been taken to improve the arrangements for supporting and challenging schools. A more proportionate and manageable system had been developed to monitor performance and provide support based on need across the dispersed and diverse communities on the mainland and islands. This system was not yet established for supporting and challenging secondary schools. However, the Education Service was making determined efforts to address weaknesses in the secondary sector. The authority needed to continue to monitor the impact of the teams of QIOs on raising pupils' attainment and achievements, and improving learning and teaching. In primary schools, attainment in mathematics and writing had improved slightly, but had remained steady in reading. At S2 in secondary school, there was evidence of improved attainment levels in mathematics and writing, and particularly in reading. At S4 and S5, attainment in National Qualifications was high, and had remained steady over the last four years. The

Education Service now needed to give priority to further improving existing high levels of attainment, particularly in secondary schools.

The Education Service had strong and well established approaches to the inclusion of children and young people with additional support needs within mainstream schools. It was building on this experience to extend further its partnerships with social work and health staff to provide more integrated services for the children and young people. The all round experiences and achievements of children and young people were being extended by imaginative developments in arts, culture, enterprise and sports.

Overall, from a sound base, the Education Service was strengthening its impact on meeting the Council's key aim of being recognised as Scotland's leading rural area.

Key strengths

- Effective communication in a dispersed authority.
- Many examples of effective partnership working across Community Services.
- The commitment and effectiveness of the Heads of Service with prime responsibility for education.
- Teamwork across centrally-deployed staff.
- Support for pre-school establishments and primary schools.
- The effective inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream education.
- Improvements in budget management.

Main points for action

In addition to addressing the areas for improvement identified in this report, the local authority should act on the following recommendations.

- Establish closer integration between service and budget planning.
- Address the issues of capacity and the physical environment in schools.
- Strengthen procedures for monitoring and evaluating the performance of secondary schools.
- Ensure more effective support for the curriculum and learning and teaching in secondary schools to achieve the Council's aim of raising attainment and achievement further.

Around two years after the publication of this report HM Inspectors will re-visit the authority to assess progress in meeting these 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 main points for action in the report.

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Acting HM Chief Inspector Directorate 5 June 2005
