HMIE | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland
Luchd-sgrùdaidh an Rìgh airson Foghlam ann an Alba

Additional support needs inspection findings for the academic year 2024/25

A summary of findings

Introduction

Number and type of inspections carried out

His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) carried out 246 inspections in 2024/25, of which:

- 197 were primary school inspections
- 35 were secondary school inspections
- 3 were all through inspections
- 11 were special school inspections
- 35 were special units in mainstream schools

HMI carried out 246 inspections in schools across Scotland using quality indicators (QIs) from How good is our school? 4th Edition and associated inspection guidance. The report draws on evidence from inspection visits, professional dialogue and pre-inspection questionnaires.

HMIE has a statutory duty to inspect and report on the quality of education and outcomes for learners in Scotland under the Education (Scotland) Act 2025. This sector level summary is intended to provide an accessible overview of strengths, areas for improvement and key patterns identified through inspection activity during the year.

Inspection findings

Primary schools

Across the primary sector, most children with additional support needs (ASN) are making good progress in literacy and numeracy, with many benefiting from targeted interventions and tracking arrangements that help staff plan next steps. However, not all schools have high enough expectations for all learners with ASN. A minority of primary schools do not monitor children's progress well enough, particularly across the wider curriculum. The quality of setting and reviewing targets in individualised education plans (IEPs) is inconsistent. Targets can be overly generic and not specific, measurable or achievable enough to offer children suitable levels of challenge.

In the majority of primary schools, teachers plan learning activities for children with ASN that are appropriately challenging. They use resources and spaces, including assistive and digital technologies, well to enhance children's learning

experiences. Best practice features clear identification of needs, timely adjustments and targeted supports that increase children's engagement in learning.

In a minority of schools, teachers do not use differentiation and digital technology well enough to support children's participation in learning. Teachers and support staff do not always have access to sufficient professional learning opportunities in areas such as neurodiversity, de-escalation strategies and inclusive pedagogy. In these schools, senior leaders do not ensure sufficient access to support from specialist partners to help strengthen staff's understanding of children and young people's learning needs and improve their practice.

In most primary schools, positive relationships and nurturing approaches are a strong feature and support children's sense of belonging. Children with ASN feel respected, included and able to contribute through pupil groups, leadership roles and whole school activities. A minority of primary schools do not yet ensure that all children with ASN learn regularly alongside their peers.

Across most primary schools, senior leaders and staff meet the wellbeing needs of children with ASN through clear planning, targeted interventions and regular reviews. Staff engage in useful professional learning in areas such as nurturing principles and trauma-informed practice. Most children experience success through good behaviour, increased engagement in learning and, in some cases, improved school attendance. In a minority of schools, staff do not sufficiently help children with ASN to understand their wellbeing needs.

In the majority of primary schools, high-quality planning is in place to meet the needs of children with ASN. Staff work collaboratively with partners and use Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes and progression frameworks well to plan learning, particularly in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. School systems for monitoring progress in literacy and numeracy are effective overall. Senior leaders hold regular support and challenge meetings with teachers to scrutinise data and adjust interventions for children with ASN. In a minority of primary schools, the alignment between planning, tracking, monitoring and assessment is not strong enough. Senior leaders and staff do not always evidence the impact of targeted interventions clearly enough to focus on children's attainment and achievement.

Secondary schools

In the majority of secondary schools, young people with ASN are making good progress in literacy and numeracy from their prior levels of attainment. The progress tracking for young people with ASN is variable at both the broad general education (BGE) and senior phase. Systematic tracking of young people's progress over time is not sufficiently rigorous in many schools, particularly at the BGE. Where practice is stronger, staff's effective use of targeted interventions is supporting young people to gain more qualifications and improve their attendance.

The quality of universal and targeted support for young people with ASN is variable in secondary schools. In only a minority of schools do staff consistently plan learning that provides appropriate challenge for young people with ASN. Teachers do not always make sufficient use of resources and spaces to support young people more effectively. Digital technologies are not used consistently to enhance the learning experience. In most schools, teachers and support staff do not have access to sufficient professional learning, including input from specialist partners, to equip them to meet the increasingly diverse needs of young people with ASN.

Most secondary schools ensure that young people with ASN are able to participate meaningfully across school life. Many schools successfully track participation in personal achievement to ensure that young people at risk of missing out are supported well and are able to engage in personal achievement activities. However, the quality of inclusion in secondary schools is variable. Many schools do not have strong enough approaches in place to help ensure that all young people with ASN participate fully in class-based learning, extra-curricular activities and leadership opportunities. Just under half of secondary settings apply interventions that improve the attendance of young people with ASN and broaden their qualification pathways. In a few secondary schools, part-time timetables limit the access of young people with ASN to a full curriculum and wider learning experiences.

In most secondary schools, staff have up-to-date information about young people's individual wellbeing needs and use national guidance well to plan appropriate interventions, often in partnership with families and external agencies. This is helping staff to meet the wellbeing needs of young people with ASN. A minority of schools do not gather sufficiently accurate information or apply national guidance effectively. Young people are not always given an

adequate voice in helping measure success and determine next steps. Across secondary schools, attendance is generally well monitored, although consistency of approaches and timely interventions remain variable.

Helping young people with ASN to move on successfully into training, employment or further education is a strong feature in secondary schools. Young people are supported well through enhanced transition arrangements including bespoke work placements and visits to colleges and other training providers.

In secondary schools, the robustness of tracking young people with ASN's progress and attainment is variable. A minority of schools track and monitor progress effectively in the BGE and senior phase and use this information well to target support where it is needed. Overall, tracking progress requires development particularly at the BGE. Further work is needed to strengthen how schools track and analyse progress, to ensure that patterns, gaps and the impact of interventions are clearly understood and acted on. Most secondary schools still need to implement systemic, school-wide evaluation of the impact of targeted interventions for young people with ASN

Special schools and special units within mainstream schools

In special schools and units, the majority of children and young people are making good progress in literacy/communication and numeracy from their prior levels of attainment. In the senior phase, most young people attain an appropriate range of qualifications, and almost all develop a broad set of skills for learning, life and work. A few learners are not challenged sufficiently to attain more. A minority of schools do not track skills or consider wider accreditation routes to recognise achievement.

In almost all special schools and units, staff develop strong, nurturing relationships with children and young people that underpin high levels of engagement with learning. The majority of schools offer choice and opportunities for learners to lead aspects of their learning, often supported by sensory environments, outdoor learning and digital tools. In most schools, pace and challenge in lessons is not sufficient to build learners' independence, often due to an over-reliance on adult prompting. Staff are not always able to access the professional learning they need in order to help meet the increasingly varied and complex needs of children and young people in special settings.

Special schools and units typically demonstrate strong inclusive cultures, providing rich learning experiences within the school and local community. In

most settings, children and young people benefit from high-quality life skills development, outdoor learning and engagement in community activities. For learners in units, purposeful inclusion in mainstream classes and participation in assemblies, performances, clubs and pupil leadership groups are often strong features. A few settings, across both special and unit provision, do not offer sufficiently broad out-of-school opportunities. This means that not all children and young people, particularly those on part-time timetables, receive their full educational entitlement. Approaches to tracking inclusion-related outcomes and the impact of pupil equity funding initiatives also remain variable.

In special schools and units, staff have a strong understanding of individual wellbeing needs. They use bespoke plans and targeted interventions to help children feel safe, respected and cared for, with positive effects on confidence and attendance. Most settings adhere well to statutory duties and risk assessment processes, including emergency evacuation planning. They work effectively with partners to achieve this. A few schools have not yet updated statutory policies in line with national guidance or strengthened staff understanding of duties. A minority of schools and units do not collate and share information on children and young people's progress with parents and carers, including the review of personal targets.

Special schools and units generally demonstrate strong planning, tracking and monitoring, with staff adapting plans based on progress data and IEPs. Many have introduced clear tracking systems for literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing, complemented by regular review meetings. However, the depth of analysis and the consistency of approaches is variable. A minority of settings have overly complex processes and do not use data well or align with improvement priorities. Moderation across curriculum areas beyond literacy and numeracy requires further development to secure an understanding of shared standards among staff.

Five essential points

Inclusive practice is strengthening across most schools through nurturing relationships, supportive environments and effective personalised planning frameworks.

Children and young people with ASN generally make good progress, particularly in primary schools and special schools, supported by targeted interventions, wellbeing provision and growing use of assessment data.

System pressures persist, rising numbers and complexity of need of children and young people with ASN, staffing challenges and inconsistent access to specialist services continue to impact experiences and outcomes.

Children and young people's voices need strengthening, with individualised targets often too generic and insufficient influence from learners on decisions that affect them.

Universal classroom practice to meet the needs of children and young people with ASN needs to be better, through setting high expectations, clearer differentiation, stronger challenge and enhanced professional learning around neurodiversity, behaviour support and inclusive pedagogy.

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