

Summarised inspection findings

Choices School

West Dunbartonshire Council

1 April 2025

Key contextual information

School Name: Choices School
Council: West Dunbartonshire Council
SEED number: 8301042
Roll: 19

Choices School is situated in Jamestown, Alexandria in West Dunbartonshire. The school works with 19 young people across three classes from S3 onwards. All young people require extensive additional support with their learning. Most young people attending Choices School have been unable to attend mainstream education for significant periods and have resulting gaps in learning. Young people are referred to the school from across West Dunbartonshire Council. The leader of the school has been in place for two years. Since then, the demographic of young people attending has changed, with the centre working increasingly and now primarily with young people with high anxiety and Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The leader of the school has operational responsibility for Choices School and for the Interrupted Learning Service across West Dunbartonshire. He is supported by a principal teacher in the management of the school. There are three class teachers, two education instructors and one full-time equivalent family support worker. Attendance is generally in line with the national average. There have been no exclusions in the school since August 2023. All young people receive free school meals.

1.3 Leadership of change

good

This indicator focuses on collaborative leadership at all levels to develop a shared vision for change and improvement which is meaningful and relevant to the context of the school within its community. Planning for continuous improvement should be evidence-based and linked to effective self-evaluation. School leaders should ensure the need for change is well understood and that the pace of change is appropriate to ensure the desired positive impact for learners. The themes are:

- developing a shared vision, values and aims relevant to the school and its community
- strategic planning for continuous improvement
- implementing improvement and change

- The leader of the school and principal teacher have created a caring and nurturing environment for all young people at Choices School. They lead the staff team in creating a welcoming, sociable atmosphere where young people feel safe, are gaining confidence and feel included. As a result, young people are improving their attendance and are experiencing increased success in learning.
- The leader of the school worked with staff, young people and their families to review and develop the school's vision, values and aims. School leaders consulted the school community successfully through discussion and using surveys. They gained a high level of support for the shared vision of 'building skills through nurturing potential' and the values of trust, honesty, respect and confidence. Staff model these values well in their interactions with young people and refer regularly to the skills that young people are building. Interactions between young people are trusting and respectful. Staff across the school are supporting young people successfully to build and sustain friendships and positive relationships with staff through their promotion of the school values. Young people are confident that staff are committed to helping them achieve their potential.
- School leaders coordinate a daily meeting to share relevant information, enabling all staff to be responsive to young people's needs. This systematic way of communicating important messages helps all staff to be well informed and to predict and consider how to prevent any dysregulated behaviour. This is valuable time for staff to discuss events, reflect on practice and suggest improvements. Staff maintain a focus on increasing attendance and attainment at the daily meetings. They share and suggest strategies that support staff to help young people engage well with their learning. School leaders should consider taking a brief minute of these meetings to record significant actions and plans. This will help staff evaluate the impact of their proactive approach and will enable staff who chair the meeting to identify patterns and trends.
- School leaders have established clear lines of communication between staff, young people and their families. This helps families to be involved in their child's education and allows staff to understand any issues that young people are experiencing. Staff promptly identify issues that may prevent young people from engaging in their learning. They share information with appropriate professionals and seek support from agencies such as counsellors, social workers and careers advisors. School leaders empower staff to support young people well to overcome problems and barriers to learning.
- Staff use their time well to develop their professional learning in important areas relevant to the school's context. For example, staff recently worked in teams to study aspects of a new local authority resource focusing on wellbeing, equality and inclusion. Each team shared their learning at a staff meeting, thereby increasing staff awareness in all aspects of the resource.

Teachers engage in professional dialogue with school leaders and the staff team to ensure that their professional learning aligns with school priorities. For example, teachers with a specialist subject are beginning to work with national agencies such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority to gain approval to offer courses in other curricular areas. This is increasing the range of subjects and qualifications which young people can access. School leaders should continue to prioritise finding ways to add further depth and quality to the senior phase. All staff are developing well their professionalism and are enthusiastically applying new skills to improve young people's engagement and access to learning.

- Young people have increasing opportunities for leadership as they move through the school. School leaders consider carefully how best to increase young people's confidence and design paths through which young people can demonstrate responsibility and participate in decision-making. Through the King's Trust award, a few young people work with local primary school children on a forest schools project. A few young people represent their peers in roles such as inclusion ambassadors. Others take a lead role in school events such as helping to co-ordinate the Christmas lunch for the school community or hosting the summer barbeque for staff and families. School leaders should now widen the range of representation and leadership experiences available for all young people. They should enact their plans for a pupil council. This will provide all young people with a clear route to representation on all areas of school improvement, including for example, on how to use Pupil Equity Funding (PEF).
- All staff have a clear understanding of the changing context of the school, including the demographic of the school roll. This provides a clear rationale for all staff to discuss and decide on areas for change. School leaders consulted with parents and staff to gather their views on school improvement. As a result, the whole school community has had a clear and successful focus on increasing wellbeing and inclusion and on improving attendance. The principal teacher and staff team have supported the leader of the school well in making significant and important improvements in these areas. There is clear evidence of continuous improvement undertaken at an appropriate pace. School leaders also identified through self-evaluation, the need to develop the curriculum to support increased attainment in literacy and numeracy. They should now revise the school improvement plan to emphasise the most important priorities. These should include providing clearer routes for young people to gain more advanced National Qualifications and a renewed focus on quality assurance of learning and teaching.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment

good

This indicator focuses on ensuring high-quality learning experiences for all children and young people. It highlights the importance of highly-skilled staff who work with children, young people and others to ensure learning is motivating and meaningful. Effective use of assessment by staff and learners ensures children and young people maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- learning and engagement
- quality of teaching
- effective use of assessment
- planning, tracking and monitoring

- All staff have a shared appreciation of the importance of building skills through nurturing young people's potential. They have a strong focus on getting them ready socially and emotionally for the world beyond Choices School. This is evident in the welcoming, trusting and patient interactions between staff and young people. Staff support successfully young people who have previously disengaged from mainstream education. The school environment is attractive and well resourced. Young people take very good care of these facilities and are proud of their school. Staff display visual timetables and signage around the school. Young people use these well to prepare them for the day ahead. This is helping to support independent learning.
- A key aim of the school is to promote, make and maintain friendships. The central hub in the school is a spacious and attractive dining area. It provides a meeting space for young people to develop social and communication skills by having breaks and lunches together as a whole school community. This leads to a supportive climate across the school where young people feel safe, included and valued. Almost all learners are re-engaging successfully in their education, which is reflected in improved attendance and positive engagement with learning.
- Staff are skilled in supporting young people using a relational approach. There is a calm and purposeful environment for learning at the school and learners are very well behaved. Young people are particularly motivated by practical activities and tasks that are related to their interests and aspirations. All teachers use personalised strategies to support young people to engage purposefully in learning. Staff know young people well and have very positive relationships between them. This is supporting most young people to engage well in organised, structured activities and work conscientiously through set tasks.
- Staff create well-organised classrooms and learning spaces which have a broad and effective range of learning resources to meet the wide range of needs of learners. Teachers use creative and imaginative approaches to engage young people in learning. In almost all lessons, teachers motivate young people well to learn and enjoy success. Teachers ensure that young people have opportunities to enhance their learning using digital technology such as laptops and interactive whiteboards. Staff should continue to increase further the use of digital learning across all areas of the curriculum.
- Most learners work well both independently and collaboratively with their peers. In the majority of lessons, teachers make effective use of questioning to encourage young people to think and build upon prior learning. In a minority of lessons, teachers do not give learners sufficient thinking time and offer prompts too quickly. The pace of learning is too slow in a minority of lessons, and staff do not always have sufficiently high expectations of what young people can learn and achieve. Teachers, supported by school leaders, now need to ensure that all lessons are sufficiently challenging and delivered at a brisk pace.

- Staff plan well to provide high quality outdoor education tasks and wider-achievement activities. Young people learn new experiences such as rock climbing, fishing, cycling, foraging and camping when participating in the school's regular excursions. Learners are developing new skills from these activities. They are also increasing their confidence when faced with new and unexpected challenges within many different contexts. Staff make very effective use of the surroundings of the school and the local community. This is building young people's confidence in navigating their local area and is supporting them to appreciate the ecological diversity of the region. Staff and young people develop the school's outdoor space by planning and undertaking construction projects such as building a polytunnel and improving horticulture areas. These tasks develop young people's design skills and support them to experience the satisfaction of planning, creating, then using the product of their labour.
- Learners feel that they are listened to and that their suggestions are acted upon through informal discussions. School leaders should now formalise opportunities for young people to offer views that directly influence whole school improvement and curriculum development.
- Transition into the school is planned carefully to ensure that staff support all young people to resume their education fully and successfully. Young people stay on the roll of their mainstream school during the transition, which staff take forward at an appropriate pace. School leaders ensure that the transition into the school takes good account of young people's individual level of need and readiness to learn. School staff understand the importance of accelerating young people's path into the school during the transition process to ensure young people resume a full-time education provision as soon as possible.
- Teachers across the curriculum are flexible and adapt to the requirements of the curriculum. School leaders are supporting staff to gain approval to offer a more diverse range of qualifications. They should continue to closely monitor the quality of learning and teaching in these areas during scheduled quality assurance visits.
- Teachers are developing their confidence in using a range of assessment approaches to identify how well learners are progressing in their learning. The school has taken positive steps to participate in moderation activities both within the school and with neighbouring mainstream schools. As a result, teachers are gaining confidence in their professional judgments of young people's attainment.
- School leaders have introduced an online monitoring and tracking system within the school. This supports staff to track the progress of every learner and identify areas of support. This is in the early stages of development and implementation. Analysis from this data should now be used to ensure that teachers incorporate assessments into their planning systematically.
- School leaders and staff meet once a month to evaluate the progress of all learners and monitor engagement levels. This provides valuable support to teachers and helps them to devise and plan effective individualised learning programmes for young people. All young people have termly single agency plans (SAPs) where staff record individual targets across all subject areas. School leaders should begin to explore ways in which they can develop effective baseline assessments. This will help inform staff of where targeted support is needed. It should also support staff to demonstrate better young people's progress since attending Choices School.

2.2 Curriculum: Learning pathways

- Choices School has a clear curriculum rationale, reflecting well the school's aim to provide pathways to skills for learning, enhance skills for life and develop skills for work. Curricular transition data is often incomplete or outdated, as most young people join Choices School after prolonged periods of absence. Staff use the transition period to gain knowledge around the curricular levels which young people are working at and their personal interests, which they use to personalise learning. Learners benefit from the well-planned transition programme. Young people and their families have highlighted positively the support and care they receive as they join the school.
- School leaders highlight that the priority in delivering the curriculum centres around improving young people's skills in literacy, numeracy and wellbeing. The cohort of learners at the time of the inspection was between S3 and S6. School leaders and teachers support young people to gain qualifications and accreditation for the progress they are making in literacy and numeracy. Young people gain Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) accreditation between level 2 and level 5. Teachers plan well opportunities for young people to develop their wellbeing, social skills and confidence in different contexts. Young people benefit by gaining accreditation in a range of different activities including bouldering, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the King's Trust Award. School leaders have identified correctly the need to broaden the range of curricular options for young people at the broad general education (BGE) and senior phases. This should lead to an improved curricular model and provide learners with more qualifications at a higher level in a broader range of subjects.
- School leaders and teachers link very well with community partners to provide curricular opportunities for young people to gain skills for life, learning and work. As a result, learners gain confidence by developing their communication skills in unfamiliar contexts. Examples are participating in equine therapy and work placements including in a local garage. Young people can also participate in vocational-based learning with a local charity which provides support with creating a curriculum vitae (CV) and offers work-based learning. These opportunities provide young people with meaningful opportunities to engage in planned, personalised learning programmes to prepare for post-school transitions.
- The school is not currently meeting the minimum national recommendation in relation to planned, progressive physical education (PE). Young people, at present, access many additional opportunities to improve their fitness through an extensive programme of outdoor activities. Staff should now work to provide the Scottish Government commitment of at least two 50-minute periods of PE for all pupils between first year secondary and fourth year secondary.
- Young people do not have a continuing element of religious and moral education (RME). School leaders should ensure that all young people experience learning in RME that is meaningful and progressive.
- The school should provide opportunities for young people to access modern languages during the BGE in line with the Scottish Government's 1+2 approach to improve language learning.

2.7 Partnerships: Impact on learners – parental engagement

- Staff are aware of the importance of strong parental engagement and link very well with parents through regular meetings and community events. School leaders meet parents twice per year to review and agree targets in young people's SAPs. Parents report that they are fully involved in decision making for their young person and find staff approachable and welcoming. Staff organise school celebrations, such as the recent family barbecue and Christmas celebrations, to strengthen relationships further and increase the sense of community.
- Parents speak very positively about the support given to young people and their families during the transition process. Parents hold school leaders and staff in high regard and appreciate the positive impact that the school has had in re-engaging young people in education. The school is improving learners' wellbeing and supporting young people to gain qualifications.
- School leaders have recently engaged with parents and aim to establish a Parent Council. This should provide parents with more opportunities to support the work of the school and become increasingly involved in decision-making processes.

2.1 Safeguarding

- The school submitted self-evaluation information related to child protection and safeguarding. Inspectors discussed this information with relevant staff and, where appropriate, young people. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. At the time of the inspection, there were no identified areas for development.

3.1 Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion

very good

This indicator focuses on the impact of the school's approach to wellbeing which underpins children and young people's ability to achieve success. It highlights the need for policies and practices to be well grounded in current legislation and a shared understanding of the value of every individual. A clear focus on ensuring wellbeing entitlements and protected characteristics supports all learners to maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- wellbeing
- fulfilment of statutory duties
- inclusion and equality

- Young people attending the school experience considerable benefit from the approach to wellbeing adopted by all the staff. Almost all young people have had long periods of non-attendance at previous school placements. Almost all young people have experienced significant difficulty participating in educational, social and health promoting activities. The nurturing and caring ethos at the school is supporting young people to cope successfully with the challenges of returning to school. Young people, from the first days of their transition into the school, establish and maintain positive relationships with adults and peers. Almost all children know who to talk to if they have a problem. They are building the confidence and skills needed to resume successful participation in social activities and full-time education. This is helping all young people to feel safe in school, address gaps in their learning and find achievement and success.
- All staff have a clear understanding of the importance of promoting wellbeing, and of tracking young people's progress against targets. These are set in conjunction with young people, their families and other agencies such as social work. School leaders record targets for young people in SAPs at regular review meetings. Young people and their families attend these and contribute to plans.
- Parents and young people appreciate the personalised nature of the support they receive from the school. They benefit from high quality pastoral support from teachers and dedicated family support workers to meet targets. Almost all parents participating in the inspection, credit the school highly with their child's successful return to education and the reduction in school-related anxiety. Staff and young people know, understand and use the wellbeing indicators to describe the progress young people make at school. School leaders should now embed the language of the wellbeing indicators in plans and in target setting. They should begin to chart progress against these indicators to measure more easily and describe the considerable positive impact of the personalised support.
- Personalised support for young people includes regular contact and home visits from family support workers, who support improvements in school attendance successfully. School staff develop supportive and trusting relationships with families. As a result, families feel able to accept or request the school's guidance and signposting to other services. For example, school staff have close partnerships with social work, police, local housing support and financial advice services. Young people can access regular counselling, and families benefit from valuable advocacy and support from school staff and their partners. This helps young people to feel safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, respected, responsible and included.

- All staff treat young people with a high degree of dignity and respect. They have high expectations about young people's behaviour and communicate this well to young people through their interactions. For example, all young people and staff spend breaks and lunch times together in the welcoming and nurturing environment of the lunch hall. Young people receive valuable training in food hygiene and take their responsibilities seriously. They are gaining valuable skills in socialising, healthy food preparation, using their initiative and where appropriate, taking direction. Young people enjoy working in rotation with school staff to prepare and serve nutritious and high-quality food for staff and peers. They dispose of their dishes, recycle waste and clean and sanitise the area. They are learning to cope with being in a larger group and to be resilient to sensory stimuli such as coping with loud noises, smells and new tastes. Young people respond to staff's high expectations by treating others in the school community with respect and kindness. They are also developing an appreciation of other people's diverse needs which may be associated with high anxiety or ASD.
- Young people enjoy being outside and active with the support of school staff. Outdoor education activities include forest-based activities, trips to local beaches and lochs and participating in personalised activities. Young people access free healthy food at school and almost all young people increase their levels of physical activity and time outdoors. This is leading to an appreciation of nature, improved fitness and is developing healthy habits in young people.
- School leaders are helping all staff to develop a clear understanding of their statutory duties. All young people have significant additional support for learning requirements. School leaders work with young people and their families to review their needs regularly. Young people, as a result, are well-supported to improve their attainment and achieve success. Staff have a clear focus on promoting young people's rights and respect and celebrate diversity. Young people learn about issues pertinent to their wellbeing and about equality and inclusion. This work is undertaken across the curriculum. School leaders should work now with staff and young people to develop a personal and social education (PSE) programme which builds on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This should reflect the unique and diverse needs of the young people and should ensure progression through the PSE experiences and outcomes in CfE. School leaders should also develop a framework for religious observance which celebrates Christianity and other world religions. Almost all young people attend education on a full-time basis. In the very few instances where this is not the case, there is a clear package of support and aspirations to increase to full time education.
- All young people are included, engaged and involved in the life of the school. This is a clear strength in the school's work. Young people receive extensive support to improve their capacity for social communication and to better engage in learning.
- School leaders have developed successful approaches to promoting positive relationships. Young people attending the school experience periods of emotional dysregulation, often manifesting in a preference to remain at home. School staff reassure young people, helping them to feel safe in school. This supports and reinforces young people's sense of belonging. In the past 18 months, there have been few instances of persistent disruptive behaviour and no serious incidents. Staff are proactive in identifying triggers for young people and are skilled at de-escalation. Young people are comfortable and safe and are more ready to learn as a result.

3.2 Raising attainment and achievement

Good

This indicator focuses on the school's success in achieving the best possible outcomes for all learners. Success is measured in attainment across all areas of the curriculum and through the school's ability to demonstrate learners' achievements in relation to skills and attributes. Continuous improvement or sustained high standards over time is a key feature of this indicator. The themes are:

- attainment in literacy and numeracy
- attainment over time
- overall quality of learners' achievement
- equity for all learners

Attainment in literacy and numeracy

- Overall, attainment in literacy and numeracy is good. Most young people are making appropriate progress considering prior levels of attainment and gaps in education. An increase in the level of challenge across all subjects would further accelerate young people's progress and attainment.

Attainment in literacy and English

BGE

- Most young people contribute ideas and participate actively in discussions about subjects they are interested in. A few young people experience anxiety when expressing their opinion and verbalising their thoughts. Most young people use listening skills well. For example, they follow complex instructions when preparing food.
- Most young people read unfamiliar texts well and read for enjoyment. They access a diverse range of fiction and non-fiction texts regularly in libraries throughout the school. This is increasing young people's interest in areas such as cookery and in learning about diverse cultures. A few young people apply their knowledge of language well in writing, using appropriate punctuation, grammar, and layout. Most young people use accurate spelling, grammar, and sentence structure. Staff should continue to ensure that all young people have a chance to practice writing a variety of different genres.

Senior Phase

- Most young people at senior phase achieve a range of units and full course awards at SCQF level 2 to level 4. There are appropriate arrangements for all young people currently attending the school. A few young people are making very good progress but continue to have gaps in their learning. Staff should consider carefully how young people can access planned pathways which will lead them to further depth of study in literacy, for example by sourcing post school courses at SCQF level 5.

Numeracy and mathematics

BGE

- Most young people organise and display data in a variety of formats including bar graphs and frequency tables. Young people are developing their confidence and knowledge of handling money at an appropriate level, including identifying coins and notes and exploring different ways to make the same total. A few young people compare costs and affordability within a budget and convert foreign currencies. Learners are not yet confident using algebraic equations.

- Across subject areas, all young people develop important life skills involving numeracy, for example weighing and measuring while cooking. Staff are not yet fully capturing young people's progress in these areas. Staff should continue to develop the use of the new tracking system to gain a clearer understanding of what learners can do and what they need to learn next. They should begin to use this data to further develop learner's numeracy targets. This will consolidate learning in different contexts and accelerate progress.

Senior Phase

- Most young people are making good progress on their prior learning in the senior phase. Young people are currently working on mathematics qualifications at SCQF level 2 to level 4. Young people's successes are accredited through National Qualifications and the King's Trust 'managing money' award at appropriate levels. Staff acknowledge that the level of pace and challenge should increase for a few learners.

Attainment over time

- All young people in the BGE and senior phase have attended Choices School for a relatively short period of time. When young people arrive at Choices School, the information available from previous schools is often outdated or incomplete due to prolonged periods of absence. A majority of young people are increasing their attainment levels with staff support, as they reengage with the BGE and senior phase curriculum.
- In the senior phase, all young people are gaining qualifications at SCQF level 2 to level 5, including in English, applications of maths, music and practical cookery. Staff support almost all young people effectively to gain qualifications at pace following their transition into the school. School leaders and teachers recognise that a minority of young people could be attaining at a higher level and are reviewing the setting of course levels. School leaders should now consider ways to add breadth to the curriculum. They should expand the range of learning pathways for young people to reflect the aspirations of learners better.
- Almost all young people demonstrate significantly improved attendance from previous levels. A few young people's attendance reflects part-time status. School leaders review this regularly as part of the transition process. They have had significant success in supporting young people to resume full-time education. Attendance in 2023/24 was 82 percent. In 2024/25, attendance is 88 percent. School leaders monitor attendance closely and plan effective interventions to support individual young people as required. Family support workers provide very strong support to young people and their families to overcome barriers to attendance.

Overall quality of learners' achievement

- Staff across the school recognise the importance of promoting out of class activities and wider achievements. This leads to young people being able to demonstrate skills, knowledge, resilience and confidence. Learners engage in a variety of activities as part of the curriculum the school offers. All staff contribute effectively to the achievement programme. Working with community partners, they enable young people to build confidence, dexterity and practical craft skills through activities including rock music, boatbuilding and construction. Learners gain navigation and outdoor skills when participating in bouldering, foraging and equine therapy.
- The school has established very strong partnerships in the local community which are benefiting young people. The principal teacher engages very well with external organisations to enable learners to access college courses, work experience placements and vocational learning opportunities. For example, young people work with a local charity to improve their job-seeking skills and to gain first aid and food-handling certification. These opportunities enable young people to increase their skills for learning, life and work in different contexts

and with unfamiliar adults. The school should consider how to track the skills gained by young people more effectively by creating a skills framework to plan and record achievement. The staff can have a clearer focus on the skills that they want young people to develop through charting skills-development more effectively.

Equity for all learners

- Young people, supported by staff, overcome barriers to attainment and achievement well. School leaders recognise that improving attendance is the most important factor in building success for young people. They monitor attendance daily and intervene quickly with family support workers to tackle absence. As a result, there are notable improvements. The school should build on this important strength, by considering how to accelerate the number and level of qualifications available to learners.
- Young people benefit greatly from the activities and out-of-school learning opportunities that take place. They are proud of their school and speak positively of impact it has had on their wellbeing and learning. The school has committed a significant amount of Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) into purchasing a minibus to increase the learning opportunities available to young people. The use of the minibus allows learners to participate more fully in the school's achievement programme and this has a positive impact on the number of wider accreditation awards which young people are gaining.
- All young people in recent years have moved into a positive destination. The school has established strong partnerships with Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and community partners, and this enables learners to access the supports needed to move them into a positive post-school destination.

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.