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

Secondary school inspection findings for the academic year 2024/25

A summary of findings

Introduction

Number and type of inspections carried out

His Majesty's Inspectors carried out 35 inspections in 2024/25, of which:

- 16 were full model inspections
- 19 were short model inspections
- 12 of the 35 schools required a further inspection.

HMI carried out 14 further inspections, from which only 2 schools required no further engagement.

This executive summary presents key findings from inspections of secondary schools[1] carried out by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) in academic year 2024/25. HM Inspectors carried out 35 inspections[2] in secondary schools across Scotland using quality indicators (QIs) from How good is our school? 4th Edition and associated inspection guidance. It draws on evidence from inspection visits, professional dialogue and pre-inspection questionnaires. This represents an approximate 10% sample of all secondary schools.

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

There is emerging evidence of strengthening leadership, improving learning experiences, and increasingly positive cultures that support young people's wellbeing and achievement across many schools. High-quality relationships between staff, learners and families underpin effective practice. Many schools are continuing to raise attainment by: strengthening monitoring; tracking young people's progress; moderation and use of data; and ensuring that all learners access sufficiently challenging learning pathways in the senior phase that meet

[1] This report does not include evidence from all through schools.

[2] Secondary school inspections | School and ELC | Inspection guidance | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland

their needs and aspirations. Schools are also developing achievement tracking systems that capture both participation and skills progression continues to be an area for improvement. Enhanced support for learners at risk of not entering and sustaining a positive destination when they leave school is evident across our schools.

While many aspects of provision are improving, variability remains across schools. A minority of schools were found to have provision that was weak or unsatisfactory. In these schools, senior leaders and staff need to act urgently to raise attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy, by ensuring that young people's progress meets or exceeds national expectations and addressing socio-economic gaps. This requires a shared, consistent understanding of high-quality learning, teaching and assessment alongside stronger monitoring and self-evaluation to drive improvement at pace.

Leadership of change

Many schools demonstrated strong leadership that engages staff, learners and partners in shaping a shared direction. School vision, values and aims are well understood by staff and learners. In the strongest practice, highly effective senior leaders ensure that their schools' vision, values and aims are deeply embedded in all aspects of school life and inform strategic planning.

However, the quality of improvement planning is still too variable. In a majority of schools, self-evaluation lacks rigour, is not sufficiently linked to measurable outcomes, and uses too narrow a range of evidence. Some leaders need to develop clearer priorities that are underpinned by stronger use of evidence to drive sustained improvement.
An increasing minority of middle leaders play a pivotal role in leading change in their schools. Senior leaders are increasingly building capacity in middle leaders through targeted professional learning. This focuses mainly on supporting middle leaders to use data more effectively to support learners to progress well in their learning.
In most secondary schools, teachers are increasingly leading change. They contribute well to whole-school developments through leadership roles. Most staff feel encouraged to learn and share practice with others. However, teachers in most schools need to develop greater rigour in how they evidence improvements in outcomes for learners that result from changes to professional practice.

Secondary schools are continuing to develop approaches to empower young people to lead change in aspects of school improvement. Although this is improving, it is not consistently impactful across all schools.

Learning, teaching and assessment

Relationships and classroom ethos are a significant strength across most schools. Young people in most schools behave well. They feel valued and participate positively in their learning. Many schools have implemented clear frameworks to strengthen learning, teaching and assessment. This results in more consistent routines and a clear structure to lessons, such as starter activities and plenaries. However, teachers in most schools could improve how well tasks and activities meet the needs of all young people. Too many lessons lack pace, challenge and depth of learning. Despite teachers knowing young people well, their approaches to meeting their learning needs in lessons is inconsistent. They need to plan learning, teaching and assessment more effectively for all young people, including providing greater challenge for some learners.

Assessment practices are improving across both the broad general education (BGE) and senior phases. Teachers use a range of strategies to check young people's understanding. However, teachers are not using formative assessment well enough to inform their planning or adapt their teaching. Moderation, while strong in some schools, requires strengthening across the BGE to improve the validity and reliability of professional judgements.

Learning pathways

Pastoral transitions from primary to secondary are generally a positive experience for young people. Curriculum continuity into S1, particularly beyond literacy and numeracy, requires improvement to better support young people's progression in learning. Too many schools are at the early stages of implementing literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing as a responsibility of all.

Most schools provide coherent progression pathways across the BGE. However, S3 pathways are variable in quality. This results in some young people not receiving their full entitlement in the BGE in areas such as language learning, including 1+2 policy.

While many senior phase pathways for young people are appropriate and reflect local contexts and learner needs, this practice is inconsistent across schools. Many schools work well with external partners to provide a range of vocational pathways. This enables young people to engage in learning pathways that match their aspirations and needs. Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) provision continues to strengthen, but many schools are still in the early stages of planning their curriculums strategically for the embedding of skills development.

Parental engagement

Relationships between staff and parents and families are strong, with parents reporting high levels of satisfaction. Communication is effective, with schools using a range of methods to keep families informed. Parent Councils have a positive role in supporting improvement in many schools.

However, leaders in some schools need to strengthen the influence and engagement of Parent Councils. Parental engagement in self-evaluation and improvement planning is increasing but requires further embedding to ensure that parents' voices influence school priorities more systematically.

Improving wellbeing, equality and inclusion

Young people in most schools experience positive and trusting relationships and a sense of belonging to the school community. They understand the wellbeing indicators and benefit from support when they require it. Practice in the strongest schools is informed by wellbeing data and young people reflecting on their wellbeing.

In almost all schools, staff have responded effectively to the increase in mental health concerns among young people using a range of well-considered strategies. However, many schools need to significantly improve personal and social education (PSE) programmes to ensure greater progression and relevance to young people.

Staff generally understand their statutory responsibilities around additional support needs. Staged-intervention arrangements are well-established in most schools. However, the quality of individualised planning is too variable. Too many plans lack clarity, measurable targets or an evaluation of these targets to demonstrate impact. Further work is required by senior leaders and staff to improve processes to review the effectiveness of plans.

In most schools, young people feel that their school helps them to understand and respect themselves and others. In many schools, approaches to equality and diversity are improving. In these schools, young people play an important role in leading equalities work and initiatives. Some schools have a strategic approach to developing young people's knowledge of equality and diversity. However, many require more progressive, planned learning in equalities and protected characteristics.

Raising attainment and achievement

There is considerable variation in the ways schools track and support young people's progress. While some schools use robust systems that provide reliable data that informs timely interventions, in other schools, approaches are underdeveloped, limiting improvement.

Senior leaders and staff in many schools need to better understand young people's progress in the BGE. In too many schools, senior leaders and staff do not have a strategic overview of young people's attainment beyond literacy and numeracy.

Approaches to moderation are variable. In the strongest practice, regular moderation within and beyond school leads to more reliable professional judgements. However, in many schools, moderation remains an area for development.
In S3, reliance on National Qualification standards is affecting the validity of BGE judgements. To address this, teachers need to use Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) national Benchmarks more effectively so that young people experience their entitlement to breadth and depth of learning in S3.

In most schools, young people benefit from developing skills for life, learning and work. They are able to participate in a wide range of activities in the school and in the community. In some schools, however, these activities can be overly concentrated in the senior phase. This is particularly true of leadership roles. School leaders need to ensure that the systems they use for recording, monitoring and tracking achievements capture both participation and skills effectively.

Many schools develop partnerships that enhance the breadth and range of activities for young people. In many cases, young people gain formal

accreditation. However, schools need to explore further opportunities for accreditation across all stages.

Staff understand young people's social and economic contexts and use this understanding to guide support, but evaluation of targeted interventions and use of pupil equity funding (PEF) is inconsistent.
Almost all young people progress to a positive destination on leaving school. However, some schools need stronger tracking to ensure that they are supporting those young people at greatest risk.

Further inspections

The percentage of secondary schools requiring a further inspection is rising, with 34% of schools requiring a further inspection in 2024/25, compared with 22% in 2023/24. All schools requiring a further inspection were graded as weak or unsatisfactory for QI 1.3: Leadership of change or QI 3.2: Raising attainment and achievement.

Across these schools, senior leaders and staff need to take urgent and sustained action to raise attainment for all young people, ensuring that progress meets or exceeds national expectations. This requires a strong focus on improving outcomes in key areas such as English and literacy and mathematics and numeracy, while addressing gaps caused by socio-economic disadvantage. To support this, senior leaders and staff need to improve the quality and consistency of learning, teaching and assessment so that all young people experience motivating, engaging and appropriately challenging learning. This should be underpinned by national standards and expectations and strengthened approaches to monitoring and evaluating the work of the school to drive improvement as a faster pace.

Evaluations for 2024/25

Quality indicator	Unsatisfactory	Weak	Satisfactory	Good	Very good	Excellent
1.3 – Leadership of change	0%	25%	19%	44%	12%	0%
2.3 – Learning, teaching and assessment	0%	12%	31%	40%	14%	3%
3.1 – Wellbeing, inclusion and equality	6%	6%	25%	50%	13%	0%

3.2 – Raising attainment and achievement	3%	26%	17%	37%	11%	6%

Main messages

Leadership is strengthening, but improvement is variable

Across many of the secondary schools, there is emerging evidence of increasingly effective leadership and positive relationships that underpin wellbeing and achievement. Vision and values are generally well understood, with the leadership capacity of teachers improving. However, the impact of leadership that improves outcomes for young people is inconsistent, with variability in improvement planning, rigour of self-evaluation processes and the effectiveness of learner leadership across schools. Sustained improvement is not yet embedded in all schools.

Learning environments are positive but learning and teaching lack sufficient challenge

Relationships and the climate for learning in classrooms are a notable strength, with most young people feeling valued and participating well in their learning. Although many schools have implemented learning, teaching and assessment frameworks that improve consistency and set out expectations of high-quality practice, too many lessons lack pace and challenge. The use of formative assessment is improving but this is not yet used systematically to inform subsequent planning of learning.

Curriculum pathways show coherence, but entitlement and progression gaps remain

Most schools provide coherent progression pathways across the broad general education (BGE), particularly in S1 and S2. Progression pathways in S3 are less consistently coherent and some learners do not experience their entitlement to a full BGE. Entitlements such as language learning (including 1+2), literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing are not yet fully embedded as responsibilities of all. The provision of skills development and DYW is increasing but is often not underpinned by strategic planning and consistent approaches to implementation.

Wellbeing support is strong, but quality and consistency of planning vary

Young people's wellbeing is well supported in many schools through nurturing approaches and positive relationships, with growing use of wellbeing data to improve outcomes for young people in stronger practice. Support for young people's mental health is developing, but personal and social education (PSE) programmes often lack progression and relevance. While staff generally understand statutory responsibilities for additional support needs, the quality of individualised planning is too variable, with weaknesses in clarity, measurable targets and review processes.

Tracking, moderation and use of data remain key barriers to raising attainment

There is significant variation in how schools track and support learners' progress, particularly in the BGE. In too many schools, leaders lack a strategic overview of attainment beyond literacy and numeracy in the BGE, and moderation is inconsistent. Where tracking and moderation approaches are insufficient, timely interventions, valid judgements and improvement are impacted. Strengthening data-informed practice is critical, particularly for supporting learners at risk of not attaining, achieving or sustaining a positive destination.

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard HMIE terms of quantity are used in this report in reference to the schools inspected in 2024/25:

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.