

19 May 2026

Dear Parent/Carer

In May 2024, HM Inspectors published a letter on Portlethen Academy. The letter set out a number of areas for improvement which we agreed with the school and Aberdeenshire Council. We subsequently returned to the school to look at how it had continued to improve its work, and published another letter in February 2025. Recently, as you may know, we visited the school again. During our visit, we talked to young people and worked closely with the headteacher and staff. We heard from the headteacher and other staff about the steps the school has taken to improve. We looked at particular areas that had been identified in the original inspection. As a result, we were able to find out about the progress the school has made and how well this is supporting young people's learning and achievements. This letter sets out what we found.

Senior and middle leaders need to provide clear leadership and direction to support all staff in driving improvements in attainment.

Overall, school staff have worked very hard and made important and successful improvements with regard to clear leadership and direction across the school to drive improvement. Senior and middle leaders should continue with this clearer, more directed and more robust approach to leading school improvements.

However, more time is required to see greater evidence of positive attainment, as a result of these changes. As a priority, staff should ensure that they work to ensure that improvements in attainment in S1-S3 continue into S4-S6. Staff should also continue to work at pace to maximise attainment for existing S4-S6 learners.

Since the previous inspection, the headteacher has continued to ensure that staff are focused on driving improvements across the school, including a clear aim to raise attainment. As a result, this is supporting improvements in culture and staff collaboration to support wider school improvement. Senior and middle leaders have worked to clarify processes and actions with regard to attainment and improvement. An increasing proportion of teachers are engaging in leadership responsibilities associated with aiming to improve attainment. For example, membership of working groups such as the self-evaluation group. All staff should continue to consider further how their professional actions and responsibilities can contribute to improved outcomes for young people.

There is improvement in attainment in a few areas since the original inspection. However, there is still an inconsistent pattern across a range of attainment measures. There is some early evidence that recent moves to tighten processes and improve approaches is beginning to have an early impact on a few elements of attainment and staff should continue with these.



Attainment in literacy and numeracy in S1-S3 has broadly improved in 2024/25. Staff should focus on ensuring areas of improved attainment in these year groups continues into improved attainment in S4-S6 from 2025/26 onwards. Attainment for young people in S4-S6 includes a few areas of improvement. For example, attainment in numeracy at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 6 for young people who leave school has been improving. There has also been an increase in 2024/25 in the proportion of young people achieving SCQF level 6 courses by S5, although teachers should also continue to focus on improving the quality of these passes when compared with young people of similar backgrounds across Scotland. Staff need to ensure that they maintain as a crucial focus that their changes to learning, teaching and assessment aim to improve attainment for young people. Staff still require more time to demonstrate this impact across a range of attainment measures.

All staff need to work closely together to develop a shared understanding of what high-quality learning looks like. This includes creating a culture of high expectations so that young people achieve more.

Staff are engaging with and have made very significant progress in this area for improvement. Staff should continue to develop their understanding and application of high-quality learning and teaching. This should help to support further the development of a culture of high expectations. This should help to contribute to young people achieving more.

Senior leaders have ensured teachers have a clear focus on this area for improvement. As a result, teachers have continued to work very hard to develop approaches to learning and teaching. School staff have been supported well by support and input from Aberdeenshire Council.

Since the last inspection visit, teachers have continued to undertake professional learning linked to the school's learning and teaching framework, 'Six Aspects of High-Quality Learning, Teaching and Assessment'. As a result, there is now greater consistency in practice, with elements evident in most lessons. Improvement in quality, especially around challenge, will be vital in developing a culture of high expectations so that young people can achieve more. School staff are well placed to continue with this work.

Staff have engaged positively in professional learning focused on pace and challenge in lessons. Most teachers share a clear understanding that differentiation to meet the learning needs of young people in their classes is important and have been working hard on this issue. Teachers should develop further their skills in designing learning activities which are at the right level of challenge for each individual.

Staff have worked very hard and very successfully on relationships to support calm climates for learning. Relationships between teachers and young people in almost all lessons are positive and respectful. Staff have implemented a new relationships policy, which is supporting calm and respectful classroom environments.

All teachers need to use information more effectively about how well young people are making progress in their learning to plan for groups and individuals. This should lead to learning that is set at the right level of challenge, so that more young people achieve the success of which they are capable.

School staff have made positive progress in establishing processes and a culture of gathering information around young people's learning. Staff would benefit from more time to use this in planning learning to increase challenge for young people.

Teachers are becoming more confident in using the whole-school systems for tracking and monitoring young people's progress. In S4-S6, this includes establishing current working levels and target grades. This is supporting staff to develop a greater awareness of young people who may not be reaching their full potential. This process also supports most young people in the senior phase to be clear about their progress and next steps in learning. There is still work to be done to support young people's understanding of their next steps to progress successfully in S1-S3.

Teachers should consider how this information about young people's progress within lessons can be used alongside tracking and conversation information to plan more effective learning experiences at the right level of challenge.

Staff use information more effectively to support young people in discussions about the most appropriate course choice and potential learning pathways. This, along with a strengthened presentation policy in the senior phase, may help to support more positive attainment for young people.

Senior and middle leaders, working closely with teaching staff, need to develop more consistent approaches to the ways they monitor and record how well young people are making progress, based on sound approaches to assessment. This will provide the basis of support that will enable all young people to achieve to their full potential.

Senior leaders have made positive progress in almost all elements of this area for improvement. As planned, they should continue to work with staff to continue with their successful work in this area. The school would benefit from more time to demonstrate that these approaches are having a greater impact on improving outcomes for young people, especially in the senior phase.

Senior and middle leaders' use of the new tracking and monitoring systems is beginning to increase the number of young people being presented for appropriate and aspirational levels in S4-S6 courses and awards. At present, there are inconsistencies in how thoroughly and robustly different faculties are using this information to support improvements for young people. All teachers should continue to engage with these important tracking tools and senior leaders should continue to review their effectiveness and efficiency.

Staff have continued to successfully use the now-embedded 'Steps to Success' policy in S1-S3. This shared language of attainment is understood well by staff and learners. Teachers have



continued to implement this language in their planning of courses and lessons. As a result, staff are able to understand better learners' attainment across and through their time in S1-S3. There is evidence that this is supporting improved attainment in S1-S3.

Senior leaders have worked well with middle leaders to ensure that faculties continue to consider approaches to assessment. For example, through the development of a whole-school 'Sound Approaches to Assessment' overview. There is evidence of developing strengths in assessment practice across faculties. Senior and middle leaders should work on further collaboration between faculties on approaches to assessment, which should help improve quality and consistency of practice across faculties.

Senior leaders have worked well with teachers to emphasise the importance of using their own and national data to evaluate young people's attainment in the senior phase. For example, they have ensured that teachers in all faculties have engaged with nationally-available data and developed staff understanding of this information. It will be important to further develop this understanding more consistently across middle leaders and teaching staff. This should help staff to continue to improve their understanding of the performance of young people in their own subject areas and the school relative to other learners and help to inform planning and improvements.

What happens next?

The school has made progress since the original inspection. We will ask for a report from Aberdeenshire Council on the progress the school has made within 18 months of the inspection. This report will inform any decision made by HMIE regarding further engagement. This may include another inspection visit. When such a decision is made, we will write to you again detailing the improvements the school has made and outlining any further action, agreed with Aberdeenshire Council, that we intend to take.

Graeme M Brown
HM Inspector

On behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland.