

**HMIE**

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

Summarised inspection findings

Sgoil-Àraich Mhalaig - Mallaig Primary School Nursery Class

The Highland Council

12 May 2026

HM Inspectors gathered evidence to enable us to evaluate the sgoil-àraich and nursery's work using three quality indicators from the Quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors. This document provides our summarised findings.

Key contextual information

Sgoil-Àraich Mhalaig - Mallaig Nursery is part of Mallaig Primary School in The Highland Council. It includes an English Medium and a Gàidhlig - Gaelic Medium playroom. Both are managed by the headteacher of the local 3-18 cluster, who has been in post since 2024. Prior to this, they held the post on an interim capacity. The post of headteacher is for the cluster of Mallaig High and Primary Schools, as well as other primary schools in the area. The headteacher is supported by a deputy headteacher, whose remit is also for the cluster of primary schools and nurseries. The deputy headteacher is registered as the Nursery Manager with the Care Inspectorate. They have responsibility for the sgoil-àraich - nursery class, in English and Gàidhlig.

Both English and Gàidhlig Medium have their own playrooms and adjacent outdoor areas. Children from both playrooms use a play area adjacent to the English medium playroom. Staff swap playrooms annually.

The nursery is registered for a total of 30 children aged between three years to those not yet attending primary school. There are currently 19 children attending, 11 in English Medium and eight in Gàidhlig Medium. Children access their 1140 hours by attending from 8.30 am to 3 pm from Monday to Thursday and from 8.30 am to 12.30 pm on a Friday during term time. Five early years practitioners work across both playrooms.

Curriculum	very good
This quality indicator highlights the importance of placing the needs, interests, rights and progress of children at the centre of curriculum design and implementation. <u>Curriculum</u> is defined as the totality of all that is planned for children from ELC, through school and beyond. It emphasises that children are entitled to a curriculum underpinned by the <u>principles of curriculum design</u> and enriched through meaningful learning experiences indoors, outdoors and within the community. It recognises the need for all children to experience opportunities to develop the interests, knowledge, skills, and attributes they will need to adapt, thrive and achieve in today's world. This quality indicator also recognises the importance of the curriculum supporting progress in children's learning as they enter the setting and at key points of transition. The themes are: • curriculum rationale and design • continuity and progression in the curriculum • partnerships • skills for life and learning	

- In English Medium Education, the curriculum is firmly based on play. It is underpinned by respectful, nurturing relationships and promotes children's voice. The curriculum appropriately reflects Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), national practice guidance and Highland Council literacy and numeracy expectations. Staff talk confidently about their curriculum. They should build on this to develop a written rationale to show how the curriculum takes account of their unique context. Key contextual features, such as the rural coastal setting and the multi-school cluster arrangement, should be more explicitly reflected in a written curriculum rationale.

- Curriculum planning is flexible and highly responsive to children's interests. This approach enables staff to provide enjoyable and relevant learning experiences. Staff track the breadth of children's experience by ensuring that playroom observations and monitoring include all eight curriculum areas. This supports staff well to identify and address any gaps through intentional playroom planning. Staff should continue to develop rich learning experiences to ensure depth and challenge in learning across all curricular areas.
- Staff understand the community context well. They take effective account of the social and cultural backgrounds of families. Staff's curriculum planning builds well on what children know and can do. This helps to support continuity and progression in children's learning. Staff provide opportunities for parental engagement and family learning through regular stay and play sessions. Staff are keen to support parents to understand the significant role they play. Staff's progress in empowering parents to contribute to the curriculum could include them sharing their skills, knowledge and talents with the children.
- Children and families experience well-planned transitions into the nursery and onwards into P1. Staff consult effectively with parents, helping them understand children's needs and preferences as they come to the nursery for the first time. Staff offer flexible attendance patterns as children settle. Children who need enhanced transitions into school are provided with detailed plans and ongoing support from the visiting specialist teacher of additional support needs. Nursery staff meet with teachers of P1 to share relevant information at children's transition. This ensures continuity in strategies to support learning.
- Staff make very good use of the local community to provide additional learning experiences for children. For example, children link with a local ferry company, local shops and the lifeboat station. They learn about sea life, ships, working harbours and take part in beach clean ups to contribute to their local community. Staff ensure that the curriculum has a strong focus on sustainability. As part of their environmental work, children made bird feeders and use compost bins and recycle paper for craftwork. The staff team help children to learn about the importance of looking after the world in which they live.
- Children develop important skills for life. For example, children help to prepare foods for snack. They grow plants and vegetables in the nursery garden. Staff support children to develop skills and confidence that help them to contribute to improvements within the setting. Children's ideas have helped to develop the lunch time experience. They have suggested ideas for improving their playroom and outdoor area. Staff develop children's digital literacy in meaningful ways. This includes opportunities for children to use programmable toys.

This quality indicator focuses on how children benefit from access to high quality spaces and well-established routines that help them feel secure and ready to engage. It explores how children are supported to build positive relationships, regulate their emotions, and purposefully participate in a wide range of motivating learning experiences. It demonstrates the importance of staff having a high level of skill supported by strong pedagogical leadership. This includes a clear understanding of pedagogy, the concept of play, how children learn, children's rights and children's behaviour.

It places value on high quality relationships, consistent expectations, and skilled interactions that enable children to sustain engagement, follow routines, and build independence in their learning. This indicator highlights the importance of observing and interacting sensitively with children to plan and assess their learning. It recognises the value of involving children fully in planning their learning indoors, outdoors and within the local community. This quality indicator emphasises the importance of robust tracking and monitoring of children's progress to ensure practitioners know all children very well as learners.

The themes are:

- children's learning and engagement
- interactions to support learning
- planning and assessment
- tracking and monitoring

- In English Medium Education, staff embed strong, positive relationships with children and their families. They know children very well and are highly attuned to their individual emotional and developmental needs. Transitions into the setting are considered carefully. Children are supported to feel relaxed, confident and secure. Their independence is well established, with routines promoting and enabling them to influence the flow of the day. Children contribute well to the daily life of the setting. They take on responsibilities, work well together and develop a strong sense of belonging to the nursery. When children choose to go outdoors, they have free-flow access between indoor and outdoor spaces. This enhances their opportunities for exploration, investigation and movement.
- Children are highly motivated by the well-resourced learning spaces. These offer a broad range of experiences across the curriculum. A wide variety of open-ended, real-life and natural materials capture children's interest. Children's curiosity and creativity is developed. Staff organise the playroom effectively to ensure children access resources independently. Staff make very effective use of the local community to provide high-quality, real-life learning experiences.
- Staff listen attentively to children, encouraging them to share ideas and follow their own lines of enquiry. They support children's engagement through respectful and responsive interactions. Staff ask high-quality questions and commentary to extend children's thinking and deepen their understanding. Children explore digital technologies, including the interactive board, digital tablet and remote-control toys.

- Staff plan learning using a blend of responsive and intentional planning. They take account of children's interests, seasonal changes and cultural events to plan highly relevant and engaging learning experiences. Most children lead their learning very well. They share ideas and suggestions confidently. Staff respond positively to enable them to extend their play.
- Staff use planning books effectively. All children are actively involved in the planning process. Children's rights are reflected in planning books. They are supported in having a better understanding of their own learning as they ask questions, contribute to planning books and reflect on their experiences.
- Staff gather observations of children to assess their learning and plan experiences across the nursery. Staff track and assess children's progress well. They identify children's next steps in learning. As a result, staff's knowledge of children, and what they can do, is very well assessed. Staff have a comprehensive overview of children's progress across the curriculum. Children's learning journeys document progress effectively. These helpfully include achievements from home to ensure a holistic view of each child's learning.
- Staff have begun to make very effective use of additional resources provided by the local authority to track and monitor children's progress. This helps demonstrate the progress children are making over time. As planned, senior leaders should discuss children's progress with staff. This should aim to ensure that individual children who need support, or challenge in their learning, progress at an appropriate pace.

Wellbeing, inclusion and equality	very good
This quality indicator highlights the importance of positive relationships and children’s wellbeing. It recognises the importance of providing high quality, inclusive, and appropriate rights-based support. These approaches result in improved outcomes for children’s learning, wellbeing and participation. It takes full account of children who may require additional support to access and benefit fully from their entitlement to high quality ELC. This includes identifying and assessing their learning and wellbeing needs in a timely manner and providing personalised and targeted support. This quality indicator recognises that strong, collaborative partnership working between those supporting children is essential. It highlights the importance of meaningful engagement with children and families to inform decisions about how children’s needs should be met. This quality indicator emphasises the important role senior leaders play in ensuring all staff have relevant and worthwhile professional learning to meet the diverse and sometimes complex needs of children. The themes are: • positive relationships and wellbeing • universal support • Identifying and assessing learning needs and targeted support • inclusion and equality	

- In English Medium Education, staff embed positive relationships and caring approaches to support children be happy, safe and secure in the nursery. All staff demonstrate and model respect, kindness and consideration for children and families. They work effectively to ensure that children’s wellbeing is central to daily practice. Staff follow appropriate processes to monitor children’s absence. Children’s attendance is very good overall.
- Staff support all children to manage their emotions through a range of strategies and interventions. They promote wellbeing indicators through displays, daily routines and conversations. Children share confidently how they are feeling and talk about wellbeing in the day-to-day life of the nursery. Children explore how to be safe around medicines and first-aid equipment, and learn how to be a good friend. Children develop intergenerational links by visiting a local care home. They learn about healthy foods, cooking and baking using local and home-grown ingredients. Children consider the needs of others by raising money for local and national charities. They have many opportunities to make decisions about their learning and undertake appropriate leadership roles, such as snack helpers.
- Staff embed inclusive practice across the nursery, making all children feel included within play experiences. Staff effectively support children who may face barriers to access learning that is appropriate for them. They value the contributions of support agencies and the positive impact of collaborative working on children’s experiences. In consultation with partner agencies, staff have developed individual children’s plans with short-term goals. This approach results in high-quality targeted support for all children who may require additional help with aspects of their learning and development. Staff hold regular reviews with families to discuss children’s

progress and next steps. Children achieve positive outcomes as a result of targeted support and strong family partnerships. As a next step, staff should strengthen further their use of purposeful learning conversations to deepen children's understanding of their own progress.

- Children engage well in their play as they explore the range of experiences available indoors and outdoors. They benefit from regular fresh air and outdoor exercise. Children climb, roll, balance, develop a range of ball skills and increase their confidence in using wheeled toys during weekly gym sessions.
- All staff adhere fully to legislative requirements and are fully aware of their responsibilities for keeping children safe. Staff treat children and families with kindness, respect and fairness. This is in line with the nursery's values.
- Staff promote inclusion and continue to develop children's rights in practical, effective ways. They collaborate closely with parents and partners to promote diversity and enrich children's experiences. Staff understand fully the socio-economic, cultural and linguistic context in which the children and families live. They respond sensitively, offering well-informed guidance and helping families to access support agencies.

Safeguarding

- The setting submitted self-evaluation information related to child protection and safeguarding. Inspectors discussed this information with relevant staff and, where appropriate, children. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. Areas for development have been agreed with the setting and the education authority.

Curriculum

- In Gàidhlig Medium Education, children's learning is based on total immersion through play. The curriculum ensures children develop understanding of Gàidhlig. It also promotes children's speaking of the language, initially in routines and in making requests. Staff have a strong understanding of the importance of using Gàidhlig consistently in a range of learning situations. Children's learning through play is based on strong and positive relationships, within settled, calm and secure immersion culture. Staff use local and national policy well to guide their practice. Children are increasing their use of the values to support their learning. As a next step, staff should capture this rationale and design in writing, to promote discussion with parents and children. This helps ensure that the sgoil-àraich's strategic direction of the curriculum remains aspirational.
- Staff design the curriculum effectively to focus on breadth of experience through total immersion in Gàidhlig. Children's day-to-day learning places important emphasis on literacy and Gàidhlig, and activities where adults speak Gàidhlig as they play alongside the children. The curriculum is designed for its effectiveness in staff's modelling of language, such as when children are creative and involved in arts and crafts. At these times, staff provide a commentary on what children are creating. Staff use questions to encourage children to share their ideas and experiences. As a next step, staff should timetable shared areas in which outdoor learning takes place. This protects children's total immersion.
- The curriculum rightly determines what children will learn, balanced with children following their own interests. Staff respond to children's progress and interests to change the focus of learning. They follow local authority guidance on what should be taught and integrated into play. This provides a useful overview of which CfE experiences and outcomes should be taught to ensure coverage of the breadth of curricular areas. Staff use developmental milestones, but these are designed for English Medium settings rather than Gàidhlig. As a next step, staff should adopt Gàidhlig-specific progression guidance to strengthen shared expectations and ensure appropriate challenge for all children.
- The curriculum provides strong opportunities for children to learn in the community and with partners. Children benefit from playing in the school grounds, as well as in the community. These meaningful real-life contexts are developing children's confidence, independence and understanding of their local environment. Staff should timetable areas shared with children in English Medium so as to not dilute immersion experiences in Gàidhlig. Partners are carefully selected for their skill in speaking Gàidhlig when conversing with children. Parents are very supportive of children's learning of Gàidhlig, immersion approaches and playing in the outdoors. This enhances continuity of learning between home and the sgoil-àraich.
- Staff ensure transitions are well-planned. Children attend regular joint sessions with the Cròileagan (provision for two to three-year-olds) and then from the sgoil-àraich to the bun-sgoil. Children in the sgoil-àraich join their friends in P1 Gàidhlig Medium on a regular basis for group activities, such as singing. These transition activities encourage uptake of Gàidhlig Medium Education and support children to be confident and well-prepared for the next stage of learning.

- Staff are clear on the aim of developing Gàidhlig as a skill for life and learning. They are at the early stages of embedding digital skills across the curriculum. This emerging work has potential to deepen children's creativity and broaden their connections beyond their immediate environment.

Learning, teaching and assessment

- Staff in the sgoil-àraich foster a warm, welcoming and friendly environment where children enjoy learning, both indoors and outdoors. All children are happy and settled in this total immersion environment. Children engage well in a wide range of motivating learning experiences using a wide range of resources. They play well together in a proportionate balance of adult-led and child-initiated learning experiences. This is while supporting strongly immersion in Gàidhlig. By prioritising immersion and effective tracking of children's fluency and understanding, the sgoil-àraich is making significant progress in implementing the national 'Advice on Gaelic Medium Education.' Almost all children concentrate well for extended periods of time, both in adult-initiated activities and activities they choose. They demonstrate imagination, independence and confidence as they explore and interact with their surroundings, for example in their current learning context of A' Mhuir - The Sea.
- Staff know children very well and understand their needs. They use questions, commentary and repetition to help children sustain their play through Gàidhlig. Staff model very high level of fluency in Gàidhlig during daily routines. These quality immersion experiences provide regular exposure to Gàidhlig phrases to support children's understanding. Staff support children in listening to and absorbing the language. This approach sets sound foundations for the next phase of total immersion, where children as they become more fluent speak the language. Staff use 'Targaidean Cànan - Language Targets' to plan for and track children's progress in their language acquisition. Staff are skilled in reframing children's questions in Gàidhlig without children feeling that they repeat themselves in Gàidhlig. As a next step, staff should ensure fully consistent use of Gàidhlig in the playroom by minimising simultaneous translation for emergencies only.
- Recently, staff reviewed and adapted planning for children's experiences with support from the local authority. As a result, they have developed a more responsive approach to planning for children's learning. Staff should ensure they maintain a balance between intentional and responsive planning. They use observations of children's learning to plan relevant experiences that build on children's learning and development needs. As planned, staff should develop a more consistent approach to identifying and recording appropriate next steps for all children using learning progress meetings. Staff should always ensure that they have regular interactions with all children at all learning activities.
- Staff observe children carefully. They capture their learning and experiences through using the school's digital platform and learning journeys. These demonstrate a breadth of learning and show children's progress. Children's learning is shared with families through the school's digital platform. Staff record children's developmental milestones effectively, using agreed frameworks. They have adopted a range of trackers to monitor children's progress in literacy, numeracy, health, and wellbeing.
- Children have opportunities to use digital technology during play and adult-initiated learning. Staff should continue to embed the use of digital technology and support children to use it to

extend their learning. Children develop independence and empathy through a sgoil-àraich and home-based project, in which they care for a toy and complete a diary entry with their families. Staff should ensure that children have a broad range of opportunities for partnership working within the community. Staff should use their local knowledge to ensure that these partnership opportunities are undertaken through the medium of Gàidhlig as much as possible. This has the potential to demonstrate to children that the language is alive in the community and used widely beyond the sgoil-àraich.

Wellbeing, Inclusion and Equality

- The sgoil-àraich provides an inclusive and nurturing environment where every child is valued, and treated with dignity and respect. Staff have a deep understanding of the national wellbeing indicators. Children's right to play and health is realised through daily and free flow access to the outdoors for fresh air. Furthermore, staff facilitate frequent, high-quality physical education sessions in the gym hall, which successfully challenge children to refine their gross motor skills and physical confidence.
- Almost all children develop their ability to talk about and name their own emotions in Gàidhlig. Staff use sensory and literacy-based resource to ensure children understand their wellbeing in a meaningful way. These resources support all children and are used for targeted support where required.
- Children are sociable and relaxed at snack and lunchtime. Staff skilfully use this time to develop children's use of Gàidhlig in a natural and engaging routine. Children take responsibility for organising and preparing snacks for their peers. They learn about healthy foods and serving routines.
- All children feel included within total immersion and play experiences as a result of staff embedding inclusive practice across the sgoil-àraich. Staff assist very effectively children who require support with their learning and development. They should continue to ensure that targets for children's learning are specific, reviewed regularly and that parents are consulted. Staff work closely with parents and partners to create personal plans that focus effectively on children's wellbeing. Staff monitor closely sgoil-àraich attendance and collaborate well with families to ensure every child gains the full benefits of being in sgoil-àraich every day. This includes for developing children's fluency in Gàidhlig. Staff take additional steps, such as offering shorter periods of attendance to support a smooth transition for children.
- The sgoil-àraich demonstrates a strong commitment to ensuring children's rights, with the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child at the heart of this practice. Children's learning about rights is recorded in planning books and is evident in staff's intentional planning. Staff support children to become independent learners whose rights to speak their Indigenous language, be heard, stay safe and develop their full potential are consistently upheld. The rights respecting culture in the sgoil-àraich significantly enhances children's sense of belonging and agency. Staff understand fully the socio-economic, cultural and linguistic context in which the children and families live. They should encourage more learning of Gàidhlig in the English Medium playroom, so all children feel Gàidhlig belongs to them. Staff promote well approaches based on equalities for Gàidhlig and, as such meet these duties in the 'Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education, 2017'.

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard HMIE 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.

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