

Summarised inspection findings

Hillside School

East Ayrshire Council

22 September 2026

Key contextual information

Hillside School is a local authority all-through special school located in the Barony Campus, East Ayrshire. It is exclusively a school for children and young people with additional support needs. Children and young people are placed at the school by the local authority, based upon assessment of their needs.

In addition to Hillside School, the campus hosts Robert Burns Academy, Lochnorris Primary School, Lochnorris Supported Language Unit (SLU), and Cherry Trees Early Childhood Centre. The school has a shared headteacher with Lochnorris SLU. The leadership team is made up of a headteacher, a deputy headteacher and a principal teacher. The headteacher was recently appointed in November 2025.

At the time of inspection, the school had 67 pupils across 10 classes. 52% of children and young people live within Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) deciles 1 and 2. 40% of children are registered for free school meals.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment

satisfactory

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

- At Hillside School, most staff develop positive relationships with children and young people. Across the school, staff have established positive routines which allow children and young people to follow a predictable flow to their school day. Staff support children and young people to participate in their learning and settle into tasks quickly. Senior leaders and staff have developed a positive ethos and culture across the school. Their relational approach underpins the school's vision, values and aims resulting in most children and young people having their rights respected. Staff ensure children and young people experience classrooms that are welcoming and engaging. Children and young people interact positively and respectfully with one another and with staff. Most children and young people are motivated to learn.
- Overall, most children and young people present with behaviours that are safe. In instances where children or young people present as dysregulated, this is almost always as a result of their additional support needs. The local authority and senior leaders have provided all staff with training in de-escalation and disengagement. This is helping staff to support children and young people regulate their behaviours. The local authority and senior leaders have identified appropriately staff who require enhanced training to support children and young people that can present as significantly distressed. For a few children and young people, their dysregulated behaviours have had a significant impact on their time spent in school. Senior leaders, supported by the local authority, now need to ensure that these children and young people have comprehensive plans in place to support them to increase their time spent in school.
- Most teachers provide lessons which engage children and young people and match their needs appropriately. As a result, most teachers provide the right support to children and young people, which helps them to remain engaged in learning. Senior leaders should continue to work with teachers to develop consistency in meeting children and young people's needs across all classes. This should help staff to continue to improve recent successes in children and young people's engagement levels.
- Senior leaders and teachers have begun to improve communication and collaboration with support staff. This has helped teachers to improve how well they utilise the skills of support staff in most classes. However, support staff would benefit from more consistent information sharing from teachers. This will help support staff to continue to promote children and young people's participation in learning. Senior leaders should continue to seek opportunities for support staff to participate in professional learning. This will help develop support staff's confidence in meeting the range and complexity of children and young people's additional support needs.

- Senior leaders have supported well the development of a staff member as a communication champion within the school. The communication champion is making very positive steps in supporting staff to improve their skills and utilisation of communication resources. The majority of staff are beginning to use a wider range of communication approaches with children and young people with increasing effectiveness. As a result, children and young people are experiencing a more consistent approach to communication that links better to their communication preferences. For example, staff use symbols, signing and communication boards to support the majority of children and young people better. Staff should continue to embed communication approaches further. This should support more children and young people to increase their independence and participation in learning.
- Teachers employ an effective range of differentiated approaches to meet the needs of the majority of children and young people. This helps the majority of children and young people to experience learning at an appropriate level. Teachers must now develop further their use of differentiation, particularly for more able learners. This will ensure that children and young people have sufficiently challenging learning activities aligned more closely to their needs.
- Most teachers utilise spaces, such as classrooms, library zones, life skills areas, a rebound room, soft play and sensory rooms well. They use these spaces effectively to provide appropriate learning activities for most children and young people. Overall, children and young people respond well to using these spaces, which increase their opportunities for play and improve their cooperation skills. They are building well their social skills, as a result. As planned, staff should continue their development of outdoor spaces for children and young people. This will help staff to provide children and young people with increasingly high-quality educational experiences beyond the classroom.
- The majority of teachers are using formative assessment strategies effectively to check on children and young people's progress with their learning. This helps the majority of teachers to plan activities that build on children and young people's prior learning. Senior leaders should continue to work with teachers to plan and develop more consistently applied approaches to assessment across the school. This will help more teachers to measure children and young people's progress accurately across all curricular areas.
- Teachers ensure that all children and young people have an individualised learning plan (ILP). Teachers gather relevant assessment information within the ILP which helps them to consider ways to meet children and young people's learning needs. However, teachers write ILPs using literacy, numeracy and wellbeing targets which predominantly reflect the curriculum children and young people will experience. ILPs are not yet focused closely enough on where children and young people require help to reduce barriers to their learning. Teachers need to ensure that children and young people are working on individualised programmes linked better to their needs. They should ensure that all ILPs demonstrate better targets beyond the taught areas of literacy, numeracy and wellbeing. This includes teachers ensuring that ILPs have outcome focused targets that help them to measure, track and monitor the progress children and young people make.
- In the senior phase, teachers plan and deliver coursework appropriately to young people, predominately at Qualifications Scotland National 1 and 2 levels. Senior leaders and teachers are establishing effective procedures for Qualifications Scotland verification procedures. Teachers should now continue with plans to capture skills that young people demonstrate

against a wider range of achievement awards, as appropriate. Senior leaders should plan to track young people's progress more systematically.

- Teachers are at the early stages of establishing moderation activities across the school. Senior leaders should now support teachers to engage consistently in moderation activities planned across the school year. In doing so, senior leaders should seek opportunities for teachers to engage with colleagues from other schools. This will support teachers to develop their skills and confidence in making professional judgments.
- Senior leaders have correctly identified the need to improve approaches to tracking and monitoring children and young people's progress. They also recognise the need to make these approaches more manageable and accessible for staff. Senior leaders have recently implemented an online approach to recording the progress of children and young people. They should continue with plans to embed this approach and ensure teachers consistently enter accurate and robust data and information. This will support senior leaders to have an accurate understanding of how well children and young people are making progress in their learning. Senior leaders should now improve how they systematically review and evaluate approaches to tracking and monitoring. They should also improve how they monitor the quality of teachers' recording and tracking, providing support and challenge to them as necessary.

2.1 Safeguarding

- Following the inspection the education authority, working with the school, have taken forward areas for improvement in safeguarding which required urgent action. HM Inspectors have reviewed information relating to these areas for improvement. HM Inspectors are satisfied with the response taken by the education authority and do not require any further information.

3.2 Raising attainment and achievement

satisfactory

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

- Most children and young people in primary and the broad general education (BGE) phase of secondary make satisfactory progress in literacy and numeracy, with a few making good progress. However, a minority of children and young people could be progressing further, particularly within numeracy.
- In the senior phase, a majority of young people are working towards literacy and numeracy at Qualifications Scotland National 1 level. A minority of young people are working towards National 2 level.

Attainment in literacy and English

- In the BGE, a majority of children and young people work at Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) foundation milestones or early level. A few children and young people work at pre-early level and a few at first level. Overall, children and young people's attainment is stronger in reading and listening and talking than it is in writing.

Listening and talking

- Across the school, children and young people develop their listening, communication and talking skills well. Children and young people use AAC, for example switches and eye-gaze technology, effectively to communicate their needs, opinions and feelings. At foundation milestones and pre-early CfE levels, children and young people respond well to predictable routines and adult-led interactions. They show interest in exploring photographs of staff and peers alongside an adult. At first level, children and young people explore the purpose of key words and apply this correctly in context, for example when working on food and nutrition tasks.

Reading

- Children and young people read using a variety of texts, presentations and symbolised systems across the school. Children and young people working at early level regularly read parts of stories aloud with confidence and expression. They engage positively with stories and recognise and select related symbols correctly. Children and young people working at first level identify accurately facts and key details from texts during real-life contexts. For example, children and young people read information when visiting a local café or when exploring the nutritional contents of different foods. They can correctly answer comprehension questions based on short pieces of non-fiction text, for example a news bulletin. Staff should ensure that

there are plentiful and motivating reading materials available in all classes for children and young people to access.

Writing

- At the foundation milestones and pre-early levels, children and young people develop their fine motor skills and accuracy of mark-making appropriately. They copy shapes and letter forms well. Children and young people working at early level overwrite to write their first names and short sentences. They rearrange words into full sentences, using correctly a capital letter and full stop. Children and young people now require further opportunities to write for a range of purposes, which will support them to apply their skills with increasing confidence and independence.

Numeracy and mathematics

- At the BGE, a majority of children and young people are either working at CfE foundation milestones or early level. A few children and young people are working either at pre-early level or first level.
- Children and young people working at the foundation milestones level are developing their numerical and mathematical understanding well through sensory activities, play and life skills lessons, such as cookery.

Number, money and measure

- Children and young people working at pre-early level match numbers 0-5 confidently during play-based learning activities. A majority of children and young people sequence correctly numbers from 0-10. A few children have extended this to 0-30. At early level, children and young people explore time and identify time facts correctly. For example, they identify that that there are 60 minutes in one hour. They can tell the time on the hour using an analogue clock. A few children and young people working at early level predict numbers that are 'before', 'in between' and 'after' the numbers 1-20. A few children and young people working at first level add and subtract numbers up to 20 correctly. A few children add two- and three-digit numbers successfully with regrouping.

Shape, position and movement

- Children and young people working at early level investigate two-dimensional shapes and sort them accordingly. They trace accurately two-dimensional shapes, identify them and make models. At this level, children and young people are supported to use two-dimensional shapes to create pieces of artwork. At first level, a few children identify symmetry in patterns, pictures and two-dimensional shapes. They use directional language during science, technology, engineering and mathematics lessons well. Children and young people require further opportunities to extend their learning in shape, position and movement across the curriculum.

Information handling

- Children and young people, appropriate to their levels, select and organise symbols and materials purposefully, particularly during morning routines. They interpret symbols, signs and visuals effectively to transition between tasks well, for example returning to their classrooms after being outside. At first level, a few children and young people create tables and graphs to display information on what they have observed or collected, for example animal facts. Children and young people would benefit from more planned activities that allows them to build upon the practical application of mathematics.

Attainment over time

- Senior leaders are not yet able to provide valid and reliable data evidencing how well children and young people at the BGE attain at the school over time. There is now a need for senior leaders to work with teachers to ensure that children and young people's progress is recorded accurately. In doing so, senior leaders should ensure that teachers provide robust, valid and reliable data and information for all curriculum areas.
- At the time of inspection, the average attendance was 89%. Most children and young people attend school regularly. Where there are instances of low attendance, senior leaders work in partnership with families and partner agencies to plan to improve attendance. For a few children and young people, these partnerships help them return to improved patterns of attendance. Senior leaders, supported by the local authority, need to ensure that children and young people who are on a part-time timetable access their entitlement to a full-time education promptly. Children and young people at the school who do not receive a full time and quality education are at raised risk of not achieving or attaining as well as they could.
- Most children and young people are progressing incrementally with their individualised literacy, numeracy and wellbeing targets. Staff are beginning to capture information about each individual learner's progress in these curriculum areas using an online platform. However, they do not yet consider the quality of progress that children and young people make. Senior leaders should continue to support teachers to develop consistency across the school when using the newly established online system to record attainment data and information.
- In the senior phase, all young people choose three subjects each year in addition to English and mathematics-based courses. They attain a range of relevant National Qualifications at Qualifications Scotland National 1 or National 2 level. For example, they attain science in the environment, independent living skills and physical education qualifications. Young people build progressively on their prior attainment within their senior phase. They do so by working towards full courses in subject areas. Senior leaders and staff should continue to ensure that young people have the opportunity to build their skills and attain as many qualifications as possible.

Overall quality of learners' achievement

- Children and young people within all classes build useful presentation skills through leading weekly assemblies throughout the school year. Young people in the senior phase take on meaningful leadership roles. They develop their confidence and sense of responsibility through participating in the pupil council, prom activities and the Clean Green Space Award. Young people are developing well their awareness of opportunities provided at further education through attendance at Ayrshire College. This is helping them make choices about their pathways as they near the completion of their senior phase. Senior leaders and staff should consider approaches to supporting children and young people at the BGE phase to take on more leadership opportunities within the life and work of the school.
- Young people in S6 successfully work with Cumnock Tryst, Drake Music and the Riverside Centre in a transition project. Young people build independent life skills through creative workshops, which are preparing them for life after school. Young people benefit from the school's strong college and enterprise link. This has helped support all young people in the last two academic sessions to move onto positive destinations successfully when leaving school.

- Children and young people are building confidence and teamwork using their communication skills effectively in a range of contexts. They are deepening their understanding of the local community through visits to shops and services. Children and young people's activities support them to develop their skills and confidence in accessing community spaces. Senior leaders and staff should continue to consider ways to provide an increasing range of activities for all children and young people to practise their skills or gain accreditation. Staff should track the impact of activities to ensure the skills children and young people develop are progressive.

Equity for all learners

- Senior leaders use Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) to employ staff to improve communication approaches across the school and reduce children and young people's barriers to learning. Over recent years, senior leaders used PEF to build a total communication environment across the school. However, in session 2024-2025, the impact of PEF was limited significantly due to staff absence and resource implications. This session, senior leaders used PEF to refocus the support of a member of staff to develop the communication champion role. The communication champion is beginning to have an impact on developing shared communication approaches for children and young people across home and school. Staff's delivery of communication approaches in most classrooms are increasing children and young people's participation in learning. Staff should continue to build upon this positive start and develop further the consistency of their use of AAC, sign and gesture.
- Children and young people are accessing useful opportunities to develop further their health and wellbeing both within and outwith the school. For example, the headteacher is working well with staff from Ayrshire 360 to provide activities for children, young people and families after school and over holiday periods. These include sport-related activity sessions for children, young people and their families, such as swimming. This approach is having a positive impact on parents' confidence to try new activities that they would not otherwise consider doing with their child. These interventions support families and are helping children and young people to participate in enjoyable activities whilst building their relationships, confidence and skills.
- A few children and young people are not consistently able to access the agreed and planned school-based activities required to support their wellbeing. This is due to availability of staffing resources. Senior leaders should now prioritise ensuring that these children and young people can access their agreed activities. For example, senior leaders should ensure that staff are available to support children and young people with their planned sessions in the hydrotherapy pool located within the school.

Other relevant evidence

- Children and young people are not being considered for a coordinated support plan (CSP) in line with national expectations. Senior leaders should work with partners, parents and, where appropriate, children and young people to consider whether they meet the criteria for a CSP.
- Senior leaders should ensure that the length of the school week for all children and young people is appropriate for their age and stage. This will enable them to meet children and young people's full entitlements to education and help children and young people improve or accelerate their attainment.
- The school submitted information relating to compliance with the Nutritional Regulations 2020 and key duties as required by The Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007. The Health and Nutrition Inspector (HNI) discussed this information with relevant staff, children and young people. In addition, the HNI examined documentation relating to the effectiveness of whole school approaches to improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people through food in school. Minor areas for improvement have been agreed with the school and the school meals provider. Aspects of good practice were identified in relation to food and health promotion in the school.

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 the Office of His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland