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Luchd-sgrùdaidh an Rìgh airson Foghlam ann an Alba

# Summarised inspection findings

## Fair Isle Primary School

## Shetland Islands Council

## 3 November 2026

## Key contextual information

Fair Isle Primary School and Pre-School serves the island of Fair Isle, the most southerly of the Shetland Islands. It is the most remote inhabited island in the United Kingdom. At the time of the inspection, five children attend the school, taught together in a single multi-stage class. The school building has a large classroom and a range of spaces used for learning and play, including use of a community hall. There are outdoor spaces for play, physical education and gardening. The shared headteacher has been in post since November 2025. They have overall responsibility for Fair Isle Primary and an all-through school on Mainland, Shetland. They visit and work with the school regularly. A principal teacher works at the school full-time and works closely with the shared headteacher. School staffing comprises of a small team of teachers, practitioners, support staff and instructors.

Prior to the shared headship model, there had been several changes in leadership at the school.

| **2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment** | **very good** |
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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

- The highly positive and respectful relationships between staff and children are a major strength of the school. Senior leaders foster and build very well upon a strong foundation of shared school values and children's rights. Children thrive within strong, nurturing and trusting relationships with staff, one another and the wider island community. They demonstrate very high standards of behaviour and respect at all times. Children work well independently and collaborate very effectively when in pairs and groups. They respond with empathy and encouraging support when their peers need help with their learning.

- Senior leaders are proactive in planning and providing high-quality activities for children to engage with and speak to different groups of people. They embed well-considered approaches to address and overcome the potential social isolation of the school's remote, rural context. As a result of these experiences, children are confident, curious and articulate when speaking with a wide range of people of any age. For example, during the summer months children interact very well with international visitors from cruise ships who visit the island. This is part of an ongoing enterprise project that children lead.

- Children are highly engaged and very keen to learn. They are motivated by meaningful, active learning experiences planned by staff. These include visits to Mainland Shetland, joining class lessons with peers in the shared headship school and taking part in activities across the island. Staff and partners provide stimulating challenges within purposeful contexts for learning, which children enjoy and that capture their interest. Children are often inspired and motivated


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by exciting openings to classroom lessons. For example, a recent lesson started with the crew of the Good Shepherd island boat sharing a problem and asking children to help solve this using their science, technology, engineering and mathematics knowledge.

- Staff know and understand each child very well as a learner. They recognise and build on children's strengths, interests, and provide the right level of support for their next steps sensitively and skilfully. Staff apply professional learning very well to plan tasks and activities which offer the most appropriate challenge for each individual. Children have ownership of meaningful aspects of their learning such as selecting particular areas of personal interest for deeper study. Staff provide a helpful structure that ensures children benefit from highly effective, personalised approaches within a broad and balanced curriculum.

- Community partnership working is a foundational principle of senior leaders' approach to learning and teaching. Children learn from and engage with instructors and community members, as well as specialists and artists visiting the island. They greatly benefit from rich, varied, shared experiences that enhance their learning across the curriculum. For example, children are proud of new creative skills developed during a recent photography project. They also participate in an annual project with partners to practise skills in art, crafts, creative writing, science and music composition. Senior leaders ensure ongoing meaningful engagement with environmental organisations who work on the island. These partners support children to engage in very high-quality outdoor learning. Children develop and apply detailed, scientific knowledge during activities with the Fair Isle Marine Research Organisation and the Fair Isle Bird Observatory. Children also deepen their sense of place and their understanding of the unique island environment they live in through these important partnerships.

- Senior leaders and staff discuss and agree high expectations and features of high-quality learning and teaching. These are embedded across all lessons. Staff instructions and explanations are clear and children understand the purpose of their learning. Children find inclusive strategies, such as 'the order of the day display', very helpful. Older children use these to take the lead in their learning activities and to support younger children. Staff use plenaries very well to summarise learning and to help children reflect on their experiences. Children are confident discussing steps for success during lessons. They use these well to help check their understanding and progress.

- Children identify, discuss and apply important transferable knowledge and skills within real-life contexts, such as the airfield or coastal rockpools. Staff support children well to record their skills development and share these regularly with families. Most children discuss and evaluate their skills very well. Staff should now support a few younger children to talk about the widening range of skills that they are developing.

- Staff and children make very effective use of digital technologies and software to enhance and support learning and teaching. Staff display instructions and tasks on interactive boards which helps children at different stages to work independently. Video conferencing supports children to engage regularly with other schools and partners. Digital resources, games and applications are employed thoughtfully by staff to consolidate or extend children's learning. For example, children analyse spreadsheet data about the island's wildlife to draw well-informed conclusions.


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- Staff use questioning well throughout lessons to recap prior learning and build on children's knowledge. Increasingly, they pose open-ended or evaluative questions. These are extending children's thinking and encouraging critical thinking skills. Staff should continue to build on this positive practice appropriate to children's age and stage.

- Staff provide high-quality oral and written feedback for each child across the curriculum. This supports children very well to understand what is working well and what they need to do next. Children are involved in regular self- and peer-assessment in a range of meaningful ways. They find this feedback helps them to improve their work further.

- Throughout lessons, staff use an effective range of strategies to check children's understanding and adapt their teaching in response. They use information gained from assessments well to inform their planning. Through the shared headship model, staff now benefit from analysing assessment data with a group of colleagues. This is supporting a shared understanding of common strengths and barriers in literacy and numeracy. Senior leaders have a clear strategic plan to increase the range of assessment used. This should help to provide staff with more detailed diagnostic information. As part of this work, staff should explore ways to assess key learning and skills together across several curricular areas to help reduce workload.

- Senior leaders have developed well-considered approaches to discuss and share national standards and expectations. They make very effective use of the shared headship model and also provide further opportunities for staff to work closely with colleagues in several schools in Shetland. As a result, staff are confident, accurate and robust in their professional judgements of children's progress and attainment.

- Staff make highly effective use of progression pathways and Curriculum for Excellence guidance to inform their planning. They prepare well-balanced yearly overviews and termly plans that are shared with parents. Staff plan assessment alongside learning and teaching. This is highly personalised for each child and the level that they are working within. Staff use training from a Regional Improvement Collaborative project to plan learning linked across curricular subjects very well. Children contribute to this by sharing what they know and what they would like to learn. This approach is supporting children very effectively to learn in different ways and apply their skills.

- Senior leaders have developed clear, effective processes for tracking and monitoring children's progress. Both the headteacher and principal teacher have a deep professional understanding of children's progress and attainment. Through the shared headship model, pupil progress conversations provide staff with helpful support, challenge and accountability. This approach complements and strengthens the work of the school.


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## 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, children. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. At the time of the inspection, there were no identified areas for development.


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| 3.1 Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion | excellent |
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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

- Senior leaders' approaches to wellbeing, inclusion and equality are innovative and outstanding. They ensure they provide all children with a high-quality, holistic education that is not limited by the school's highly remote location and small pupil roll. As a result, children's outcomes and achievements are of an exceptional quality. The school's highly effective practice is recognised and shared with other schools and settings across the local authority. Practitioners from further afield in Scotland and other countries learn from and engage with the school's work. For example, through video content staff have shared their unique pedagogy. They outlined how they use the local environment and community partnership working to support children's learning and wellbeing.

- Senior leaders have developed and deliver a highly personalised progressive programme covering the key themes of health and wellbeing. This is deeply embedded and interconnected across partnership working, learning for sustainability and the school's community and unique context. Children have an extremely well-formed understanding of the different aspects of wellbeing for their stage of development. They identify and link indicators of wellbeing to school experiences, their life at home and to the island context.

- Children work collaboratively to identify and mitigate risks in their outdoor learning experiences. They demonstrate a deep shared knowledge of the rural and coastal landscape and the dangers these can pose. Older children take the lead in reminding peers of key safety information and precautions. They are highly versed in dynamic risk assessment. For example, they notice and take account of changes in weather or tide. All children understand and can apply the concept of safety to other areas such as environmental biosecurity. They work closely with staff from the observatory regularly to carry out activities that protect rare species of bird on the island.

- Children know and can explain a wide range of different ways to keep their mind and bodies healthy. They identify and discuss their emotions in creative ways with staff. Children know that understanding mental and physical wellbeing is particularly important for where and how they live. They understand ways to cope during times of the year with less daylight and increased social isolation due to limited travel on and off of the island. They demonstrate resilience, independence and empathy for others. All children participate in regular high-quality physical education and are very active. They benefit from regular yoga sessions and biking experiences. They plan, lead and participate in sporting events which involve the


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whole community. For example, older children organised an island cricket match and all children took part in their own way in the Fair Isle 10-kilometre run.

- Children are agents of change and have ownership of decisions that affect them. They asked for opportunities to be involved in sports and other activities not available on the island to broaden their experiences. In response, senior leaders designed and now provide regular residential enrichment excursions for children at all stages. These include activities such as swimming in a pool, using a climbing wall, watching theatre productions and participating in the shared headship school sports day. Children demonstrate confidence and courage during these personalised, high-quality experiences. They feel that they are more independent as they manage well with residential stays and air travel. Overall, the school's approaches underpin highly positive outcomes for children across physical and emotional wellbeing.

- All children have an exceptional sense of responsibility and respect. They demonstrate the attributes and qualities of responsible citizens and effective contributors. Children embrace the role and duties of ambassadors for Fair Isle. They have an exceptionally strong sense of identity, place and culture. They share their knowledge, heritage and experiences of school and island life with the community and with an international subscription audience through a weekly newsletter. Children plan and organise creative ways to support local and national charities. They are committed to active global citizenship. For example, when learning about water and health, they paired up and supported a school in Sudan through a charity providing international aid. Children also strongly advocate for and participate in Shetland initiatives such as Da Voar Redd Up, an annual community litter picking event.

- Senior leaders have a deep professional knowledge of rights-based learning and have engaged in work at national level. This has helped to embed children's rights learning across the curriculum and school life. Children hold very well-informed views for their age and stage. They understand the role of duty bearers and also the responsibilities and interdependence of people and services within their island community. All children can talk about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and older children can outline the key characteristics of inalienable rights. Staff have established highly effective approaches to engage children as decision-makers, such as the Friday 'FIVE' project. Children are now evaluating school and learning experiences, providing feedback and initiating positive changes. They feel empowered as they make decisions about spending funding and enrichment activities.

- Senior leaders and staff understand how to apply the school's procedures in relation to safeguarding and child protection. They engage in a range of professional learning to ensure a robust knowledge and understanding of statutory duties. This is complemented very well by training and professional discussions with staff in the shared headship school. Staff skilfully implement knowledge gained to ensure all children are cared for and safe. Senior leaders use information from reviews, audits and evaluations very well to identify future training and to address any gaps in experience due to the small school context. The headteacher supports this very effectively, through mentoring and joint senior leadership meetings across the shared headship schools. These approaches ensure children and families are included, safe and well-supported.

- Staff can evidence that when children face barriers to learning, they receive highly effective support in their targeted areas of learning and development. This leads to strong, positive outcomes. When required, pastoral, wellbeing or learning support for each child is highly


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personalised. Staff embed very well-designed, inclusive approaches across the curriculum and all contexts. This ensures all children participate fully in learning and experiences within their multi-stage classroom with peers of different ages.

- The school has exceptional approaches to supporting inclusion and equality. Senior leaders and staff have a highly developed understanding of the social, cultural and economic context of the school and island. Children experience and promote an inclusive culture across the school, with the community and with partners and visitors from across the world. Mitigations against the school's geographical isolation are considered and addressed extremely well. For example, older children greatly valued the opportunity to play in competitive sports recently as part of the shared headship school team. They demonstrate a very strong sense of belonging, supported by small yet meaningful actions such as being given a school sports strip. Overall, staff and children overcome the challenges of equity of experience and social inclusion highly successfully. Children know and can explain what is working well and suggest new ideas.

- Supporting children's wellbeing during times of transition is an outstanding feature of the school's work. Due to the island's location, boarding away from home will almost always be a part of children's secondary education experience. Staff support children from a very early age to become familiar, comfortable and confident with residential stays on Mainland Shetland. The headteacher provides very well-considered shared experiences with peers at the shared headship school as well as the secondary school in Lerwick that Fair Isle pupils will attend. Senior leaders also support children and families exceptionally well as they prepare to move to the island. They make very effective use of digital technologies to provide early interactions, develop new friendships and to share transition information across schools. This approach is also used skilfully to maintain connections with children's wider family and school friends. Parents and children feel that approaches are extremely supportive, especially for children who require additional nurturing support at times in their life and learning. As a result of the school's work, children are exceptionally well-prepared for transitions throughout their time at school.

- Children demonstrate an extremely well-developed understanding of diversity and equality. Staff are proactive in planning and providing highly authentic and innovative learning experiences. They make the most of opportunities to learn and interact with the wide range of interesting residents and visitors to the island. Children benefit from a culturally rich and diverse curriculum. They have explored and created arts representing minority and indigenous communities in other parts of the world. Staff and children connected and worked with a city school on Scotland's mainland to support children to discuss, identify and address discrimination. This supported children to feel more confident and well-informed. Children celebrate cultural diversity and show understanding of different faiths and backgrounds. Staff engage families, partners and the community skilfully to support and enhance curriculum lessons, assemblies and whole school events. Senior leaders could build on this very strong practice to extend children's understanding of protected characteristics through authentic, meaningful experiences.


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## Other relevant evidence

- Overall attendance for academic session 2025-26 was 95.9%. A high level of attendance has been sustained over a three-year period. Last session, there were no children with attendance below 90%. The geographical context, sea conditions and local weather bring exceptional challenges for travel to and from the island. At times, this can impact on school attendance. Children are supported very well by staff to catch up on loss of learning caused by any absence.
- Children benefit from a progressive skills programme in French. They also explore other modern languages relating to the island community and visitors, such as Spanish. Children build a strong knowledge of Shetland dialect and vocabulary specific to Fair Isle. For example, they learn words and phrases relating to nautical features, heritage crafts and the natural world, including birds and insects.


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## Practice worth sharing more widely

Outstanding support for children and families through times of transition

The school's inclusive practice is highly responsive to the individual needs and circumstances of children and families. This is particularly evident through the very well-considered approaches to transition. Senior leaders and staff foster exceptionally strong relationships with families, partner agencies and receiving establishments to ensure transitions are carefully planned and highly personalised. Senior leaders demonstrate creativity and flexibility and facilitate sustained partnership working to overcome the challenges of the school's remote island context. Their skilful approaches enable children to experience continuity in their learning and support, develop confidence in unfamiliar environments and maintain a strong sense of belonging during significant periods of change.

Strong approaches to learning for sustainability and children's wellbeing

Learning for sustainability is a major strength and is embedded within the curriculum and daily life of the school. Staff make highly effective use of the island of Fair Isle as an extended learning environment. This supports children very well to engage and connect with the island's natural environment, heritage, culture and community. Learning is authentic and purposeful. Children develop a deep understanding of sustainability through experiences which are directly relevant to their lives. This has a significant positive impact on their wellbeing. Children demonstrate resilience, independence, confidence and a strong sense of identity and place. They understand that they are not only learners within Fair Isle, but valued contributors to its future.

Highly effective community partnership

Community partnerships are fundamental to the quality of children's experiences. The expertise, knowledge and skills of the wider Fair Isle community are used extensively to enrich learning and provide opportunities which extend beyond the classroom. These partnerships are reciprocal, with children increasingly recognising their own contribution to island life. Senior leaders facilitate a distinctive model of 'community-connected' learning in which the school and community work closely together to enhance experiences and outcomes for children.

Skilful use of shared headship model to enhance learning and teaching

The headteacher's creative and purposeful approach to shared headship positively impacts on teaching and learning, strengthens leadership capacity and supports continuous school improvement. Importantly, the headteacher and principal teacher retain the individual identity, relationships and responsiveness which are central to Fair Isle Primary School, while connecting staff and children to a larger all-through school community on Mainland, Shetland. This supports access to wider professional networks, expertise and an increased range of opportunities. Increased collaboration and professional dialogue strengthen classroom practice and help to address challenges of professional and geographical isolation. All children greatly value and benefit from very well-designed shared learning experiences and peer connections. Overall, the headteacher makes very effective use of the shared headship model to enhance the work of the school and to support staff to secure high-quality outcomes for children.


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## Explanation of terms of quantity

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

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|---|---|
| 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.


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