

|             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| Agenda Item | 3A.        |
| Report No   | EDU 10A/20 |

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Education

**Date:** 6 August 2020

**Report Title:** Return to School (A) - Education Improvement Strategy

**Report By:** Head of Education

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of work undertaken by the central Education Improvement Team (EIT) and Area Teams immediately before and during the Covid-19 school closure period, to ensure the ambitious improvement plans set out for schools continue to make progress. The key to this ambitious agenda is the collaborative and collegiate partnership approach between frontline staff, school leaders and education leaders in the central team, with the correct balance between support and challenge.
- 1.2 Work to deliver on the ambitious improvement agenda already agreed in previous Committee papers, was well under way prior to the lockdown period and new approaches to this challenge are described in section 4, below. Once the schools closed, the focus of the EIT's work inevitably changed, and this is described in section 5, below.
- 1.3 Section 6 outlines plans for the EIT in school session 20/21 and the medium term, and section 7 summarises some of the key lessons that have been learned in the past session, that will influence and support progress going forward.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
  - i. note the content of the report;
  - ii. note the external validation from Education Scotland, of the good practice that is emerging in the Highlands regarding curricular recovery, digital learning, health

- and wellbeing and Gaelic provision, and the positive feedback from Education Scotland regarding local delivery planning and the return of schools; and
- iii. recognise the progress that has been made in bringing key leaders together in taking a collaborative approach, to the improvement of education within the Highlands and note the importance of this continued focus.

### **3. Implications**

- 3.1 Resource – The resource required to continue educational performance improvements will be covered as be part of a broader council wide recovery report.
- 3.2 Legal – There are no legal implications for the recommendations of this report.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) – Planned improvements will take into account the specific challenges of inequality, Covid-19 recovery, poverty and rurality.
- 3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever - The benefits provided by digital engagement will be considered to ensure the reduction of travel by the many thousands of school staff will be built upon in order to reduce our carbon footprint.
- 3.5 Risk – There are reputational and life chance risks for young people should this collaboration not continue and improve educational outcomes.
- 3.6 Gaelic – Gaelic pedagogy and improvement planning for education is ongoing and in line with current legislation; close monitoring will ensure there is a clear focus on Gaelic. **Appendix 2** highlights the progress made during Covid-19.

### **4. Education Improvement Team priorities and progress before the covid-19 school closures**

#### **4.1 Reorganisation and establishment of the team:**

Up until December 2019, central support for education was organised across two teams: The Quality Improvement Team and the Change Team (comprising five seconded Head Teachers). The teams came together to re-prioritise all workstreams and remits so that everyone was working as one team focused on delivering improvement and to provide closer working relationships with schools. This resulted in the newly formed Education Improvement Team (EIT) who prioritised a) Aspiration, Attainment and Performance, b) Integration, Inclusion & Partnerships, c) Curriculum & Pedagogy and d) Leadership & Career Long Professional Learning. Individual EIT members had specific remits within these four workstreams. Each member of the EIT was linked to one or two Associated Schools Groups to provide HT support and challenge and linear line management rather than the previous matrix management approach.

#### **4.2 Secondary attainment meetings:**

In the early days of the newly integrated EIT, the focus was very much on addressing and improving issues relating to attainment across Highland schools. Each secondary head teacher (HT) met with EIT team members to explore attainment patterns, tying these in to the school's Senior Phase linked to exam performance and learners' skills acquisitions and achievements. These robust conversations allowed for scrutiny of

performance, initial target setting and emphasised the accountability of each individual school in contributing to overall Highland Council attainment performance. In the past three years, the 6 HMI inspections of secondary schools in Highland have led to one evaluation of Very Good for “Raising attainment and achievement”, 3 evaluations of “Good” and 2 evaluations of “Satisfactory”. The intention is to ensure that in future inspections, all evaluations for “Raising attainment and achievement will be at “Good” or better. Follow up attainment meetings will take place in September to ensure that the agreed targets set at school and departmental level are on track.

#### 4.3 **Primary ASG attainment meetings:**

Alongside the secondary attainment meetings, Primary HTs were brought together in Associated Schools Groups (ASGs) for meetings with EIT members. The focus for discussion in these groups was attainment patterns, moderation and the sharing of strategies for improving attainment. Approaches to ASG planning and moderation were promoted to build consistency of approach to raising attainment. In the past three years, the 42 HMI inspections of primary schools in Highland have led to 2 evaluations of Very Good for “Raising attainment and achievement”, 12 evaluations of “Good”, 19 evaluations of “Satisfactory”, 8 evaluations of “Weak” and one evaluation of “Unsatisfactory”. The target now set is that in future inspections all evaluations for “Raising attainment and achievement will be at “Good” or better. Follow up attainment meetings will take place in October to review individual quality indicator performance in each school and ensure that agreed targets are on track.

#### 4.4 **Target-setting and use of data:**

In both the secondary and primary ASG attainment meetings, the focus was on the use of attainment data to inform planning for improvement, and this was followed up by intensive data training events to help to support the process. These meetings built on sessions delivered in previous years by the quality improvement team (QIT), but this year were in the context of the attainment targets that schools were asked to use to allow for measurement of success in terms of progress in this area. Early indications were that planned improvements to provision, including curricular adjustments, would have led to improvement in line with targets in the Senior Phase of secondary. These improvements were reflected in the estimates that were submitted to the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) following the cancellation of the examination diet (see also the section on SQA attainment below). The emphasis on target setting allowed for subsequent focused discussions about attainment between HTs and link member of the EIT (though the Covid-19 closures inevitably affected this process).

#### 4.5 **Leadership:**

The EIT undertook work to promote leadership in Highland schools and support the philosophy of “grow your own home- based talent”. This included encouraging staff to sign up for specialised in house training delivered by current HTs, to compliment *Into Headship*, this will help the Council to better positioned to recruit to its Head Teacher posts in the future. A group of HTs and one member of the EIT have participated in the Education Scotland training programme, *Evolving Systems Thinking*, which explores effective leadership systems across the world. Closer links have been developed with Education Scotland for our Middle Leaders who have been encouraged to sign up for the professional learning programme focussed on developing confidence in the use of coaching, and these are now being offered more locally which will increase participation. (see also section 7 below).

#### 4.6 **Curriculum:**

The 'Refreshed Narrative on the Curriculum for Excellence' was published this year by Education Scotland and the EIT has organised sector-specific sessions for HTs and secondary timetables on how this new emphasis on key capacities and focus on skills can be used to enhance the curriculum across Highland schools and raise attainment. Scottish Government/ Education Scotland engagement events on the refreshed narrative supported this work. Separately, work was carried out with secondary HTs and deputy head teachers (DHTs) to explore the opportunities for diversifying / enhancing the Senior phase curriculum for all of our young people. This training was led by EIT, drawing on case studies from a variety of Highland schools, and was supported by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Regional Liaison Manager and Business Development & Customer Support Manager. In particular, the sessions explored ways in which the extensive SQA catalogue of courses and awards could be used to enhance Senior Phase provision through the creation of opportunities for young people, to study vocational courses relevant to their own local communities and delivered in tandem with local partners. Curriculum discussions also formed part of the attainment meeting discussions, this will continue next session.

#### 4.7 **Empowerment:**

The empowerment agenda is central to National Policy in moving all school's quality indicator performance from the overall standard of "good" to "very good" and "excellent". Papers outlining what empowerment would mean for schools, families, the wider school community and local authorities have been produced in draft form by Education Scotland, along with an approach to self-evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of empowerment processes. Education Scotland organised a series of seminars across Scotland to explore how these draft papers might be finalised, with Highland EIT members participating. The final versions of these documents were due to have been completed by June, but this has now been put back until September at the earliest. The EIT organised a series of engagement events for HTs at various locations to establish levels of progress. Subsequent sessions for middle leaders, unpromoted staff, children and young people, parents and partners would have followed, but the Covid-19 lockdown meant these had to be paused. The conclusions drawn from the events which did run is that much further work requires to be done to build understanding of the empowerment agenda and to ensure that staff at all levels see empowerment as part of their role. Education Scotland's own research reaches the same conclusion. Work on this agenda will need to continue and to accelerate in session 20/21.

### 5. **Education Improvement Team work after the Covid-19 school closures**

#### 5.1 **Communications strategy:**

When the announcement was made on 20 March that schools were to close from Monday 23 March until further notice, it was immediately clear that an increase in effective communication with schools would be of the utmost importance. Good communication would be essential to ensure that schools were clear about the expectations in terms of providing online learning and support for children and families, and to ensure that statutory duties were fulfilled. Even before lockdown, the EIT had produced collaborative briefing papers for schools to convey key messages, and these were then issued daily in the early days of the closures. As the term progressed, and in response to surveys of HTs, the briefings were restricted to once per week, issued

each Monday with content covering all aspects of educational provision during lockdown. These briefings shared with the education strategic chair contained external links to essential guidance documents and recommended reading, as well as advice that would be useful for staff, learners and families. An example of such a briefing is included at **Appendix 1**. In all, between the school closures on 23 March and the end of the summer term, approximately 20 briefing papers were released to schools. Additionally, a set of Frequently Asked Questions were produced by EIT members working with the Council and Health partners to support the reopening of schools in August. In June, the EIT began working on developing a communications strategy, based on the key principles of transparency, responsiveness, consensus, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, accountability and participation. This is work in progress and it will be essential moving forward to engage with all stakeholders in the development of this strategy as a key priority.

## 5.2 **Area Team engagement:**

The area team structure provides an essential communications pathway linking in local information from school communities with Council wide and national information and guidance. Each of the Area Care & Learning Managers (ACLMs), supported by Education Quality Improvement Managers (EQIMs) and members of the EIT as appropriate, met twice weekly with HTs in order to gather views, share consistent key messages and to discuss key items in the education briefing (see above). These meetings were usually organised by Associated Schools Groups, though at times meetings were for all Area HTs or for sector-specific groupings. Two representative groups of HTs were established (each one combining HTs from two of the Areas) and these groups, led by the Interim Head of Education along with the ACLMs, carried out action research on emerging good practice in learning and teaching during lockdown. Working in this way has helped to create stronger links between the Central team and the Area teams with the delivery of both operational and strategic elements, which has been helpful in allowing schools to hear consistent messages. The regular meetings have given HTs more opportunities to ask questions, connect with central staff and to express their views. These sessions have progressed a more inclusive culture which will provide longer term benefits in terms of opening up dialogue about making improvements across all sectors in Highland education. These sessions have also contributed to the positive feedback received in the staff surveys where it is notable that Education staff are feeling much more part of the Council.

## 5.3 **ELC / Primary support:**

After the announcement of school closures, the initial work of the EIT in supporting primaries was to provide advice on the expectations regarding online learning, especially in terms of providing a balance between providing learning opportunities for children and supporting their wellbeing. As schools became more confident in their provision, the work of EIT, making use of working groups (using classroom practitioners and PSAs), extended to cover, for example, guidance on Early Learning and Childcare on reopening, play pedagogy – which has attracted national and international recognition through the Padlet of resources created, training for ELC and primary staff on *Realising the Ambition*, recovery support frameworks on literacy, numeracy and outdoor learning (which has also recently gained national recognition), health and wellbeing support, curriculum refresh, learning for sustainability and Curriculum for Excellence achievement of a level assessment support. Fuller details about the substantial work done by EIT in these areas of support are available as

required. The team are currently focussing on highland wide assessment support materials to assist with the quick recovery of learning and teaching for our children and young people.

#### 5.4 **Secondary Support:**

As with primary support, the initial focus was on advice about expectations regarding online learning. However, as the term progressed EIT, engaging with a short life working group of HTs and other school staff, as well as development officers, have produced extensive support for schools on curriculum matters, including the 'recovery curriculum', Developing the Young Workforce, Skills Development Scotland support, College partnerships, curriculum resources, use of Education Scotland curricular support packs, professional learning, Principal Teacher networks (see below), Northern Alliance curricular workstream, parental engagement (for example with supporting literacy and numeracy with learners), timetabling and SEEMiS, return to school curriculum models, UCAS support and ASN support. Fuller details about the substantial work done by EIT in these areas of support are available as required

#### 5.5 **Transitions:**

Given the fact that the school closures will have had a significant impact on pupils' experience of transitions this session (nursery to primary, primary to secondary, secondary to work/further learning and transition between stages), a specific EIT workstream was established to provide support on this important issue. Support materials have been produced including guidance for parents and carers. This followed surveying of the views of parents and pupils and promotes consistency of approach across Highland schools. Online drop-in sessions were organised and well attended for young people on the topic of transitions and mental wellbeing. A further drop-in was arranged for young carers and looked after children and young people, as community meetings indicated for young carers will be particularly challenging. Work on transitions will continue in the new term.

#### 5.6 **Gaelic Medium Education (GME) and Gaelic Learner Education (GLE) support:**

The EIT was augmented by the secondment of a team member with specific responsibility for supporting GME. The weekly briefings have provided this support by identifying GME support materials and approaches that will be beneficial for schools where GME is on offer. Support covers the same areas outlined in the sections above about the primary and secondary curricula. Work done to support GME during lockdown has been well received and 'Cluichidh sinn Còmhla', the GME framework for Early Level learning support at home has been adopted by The Gaelic College in Nova Scotia. Further information on GME developments during Covid-19 can be found at **Appendix 2**.

#### 5.7 **Digital support:**

Highland Council schools entered lockdown in a stronger position than many authorities due to previous the roll-out of one-to-one devices (augmented by the distribution, post-lockdown, of some spare devices and technology that allowed access to the internet to some families who were finding this problematic). Our schools had already begun to make progress in terms of developing approaches to digital learning (as has been identified by HMI in several recent Highland inspections) so teaching staff were often well placed to move quickly to online learning. To support this endeavour,

the EIT Digital Support Team have produced a wide range of support materials for all staff and for families, available through the interactive online Digital Hub. Advice and training in the use of online software, interactive discussion sessions on good practice and the production of clear guidelines on the use of interactive online meeting software helped to ensure that our staff and learners were safe online and engaged on productive learning activity. Members of the EIT also staffed an online helpline, as well as fielding requests for help via email, ensuring that any disruption to learning was kept to a minimum. Highland Council's response to the switch to online learning has been widely praised nationally and data analysis shows that staff from other authorities have been accessing Council resources. EIT members recently ran training for staff from Stirling Council to assist them in delivering their own online provision.

#### **5.8 Scottish Qualifications Authority:**

The cancellation of the SQA examination diet, and the introduction of the new estimate and ranking system caused high levels of stress for schools. The EIT supported schools by producing Highland Council up to date position papers to assist with in-school processes and with communication for families and candidates. These support documents covered the estimates process itself as well as advice about interrogating historical data to assist in the process. Datasets were produced for each school to demonstrate historical attainment and estimate patterns, and schools found these EIT-produced datasets much more useful than the parallel document eventually produced by SQA. Support continued for schools throughout the closure period, with weekly online meetings with SQA Coordinators in the schools and six separate meetings with secondary HTs to discuss approaches to managing the new process. In this way, the EIT was able to continue to be well informed about how the submission process was going and to gather information about the progress of each school's quality assurance of the estimates and rankings, as well as checking that there was consistency in schools' understanding of SQA advice and instruction. A Highland Council timeline for the results and appeals processes has also been shared for use in all schools. For this, and for the earlier HC SQA position statements, the use of a bespoke SQA working group (comprising two EIT member, two HTs and 2 SQA Coordinators, along with the SQA Regional Liaison Officer as appropriate) proved beneficial.

#### **5.9 Secondary Principal Teacher networks:**

During the period of school closures, the EIT has established and supported online discussion/peer support and sharing of good practice for secondary Principal Teachers (subject). This has helped to develop consistency of approach across our secondary schools in terms of subject delivery and will continue to do so next session, especially if there are further national or local lockdowns which would necessitate a return to online or blended learning. The EIT Digital Support Team has been instrumental in establishing these professional networks. Future discussions will include the proposed introduction of a 'grow your own' leadership academy for aspiring leaders.

#### **5.10 Working Groups:**

When the schools closed on 23 March, working groups were re-established as a key strategy and have been central to the work of the EIT. The range of working groups includes Digital Strategy, Evolving Systems Thinking (Leadership), Gaelic Medium Education, Improvement Planning, Primary Curriculum, Secondary Curriculum, SQA, Personal and Social Education, Transitions (at all ages) and Area representative groups of HTs. By the end of term, a total of 62 schools were represented on at least

one working group and the plan is to increase that number in session 20/21. Each working group is led by a member of the EIT, the working group outcomes are then linked into the development of the Council wide strategic approach achieving greater inclusion and better-informed decision making. Feedback from representatives have been very positive.

**5.11 Health and wellbeing support:**

The health and wellbeing of school communities (pupils, staff, families and the wider community) has been at the heart of planning and delivery of education during the school closure period. A suite of resources and support material has been produced by the IT and Educational Psychology Team to support schools in this regard, and this has been well received by schools. It will be of particular importance when children and young people return to school after the summer break and its use will be monitored, with a view to providing further support as necessary. The Educational Psychology team have received national recognition on the National Improvement Hub for their work in gathering views of our young people, this will support learner participation in the future.

**5.12 School Improvement Planning support:**

The summer term is usually the time when schools work on their Standards and Quality Reports and School Improvement Plans. For obvious reasons it was not possible for schools to follow their normal procedures with these statutory documents. While the Council waited for national advice on how to proceed, the EIT took the initiative and produced adapted versions of the templates for these documents and extended the deadline for submission to reduce pressure on schools. Consultation of the content of these templates included discussions with a working group of Head Teachers across the sectors, as well as with members of the Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers. Along with the templates, support videos were produced to assist with document completion. In due course, the national advice was issued, and the Council's approach is in line with that advice. By acting quickly, the Council was able to provide reassurance for schools. The focus for all projects included in School Improvement Plans for session 20/21 will be on 1) Health and wellbeing, 2) Recovery of learning, teaching and assessment and 3) Attainment in session 20/21 (focusing on identifying new or widened gaps caused by the Covid-19 situation). Support will be provided about how these priorities will be addressed, including through the use of Pupil Equity Funding and other Attainment Challenge monies where appropriate.

**5.13 Education Scotland engagement:**

Even before the schools closed on 23 March, Education Scotland paused all inspection activity and delivery of training and courses. This affected Highland schools very directly, as there were two primary schools due to be inspected week beginning 16 March and others to follow (they were notified of cancellation late on Friday 13 March). There were also a number of Highland Council teaching staff and promoted staff engaged in training programmes with Education Scotland. However, as the summer term progressed Education Scotland re-engaged with those signed up for training through providing online alternative sessions, and Highland staff participated in these. The EIT, through the weekly briefing and in other ways, have encouraged staff to participate in these regular online webinar engagement events which have covered, amongst other topics, subject areas, parental engagement, rural settings, Broad General Education transitions in secondary, Additional Support Needs, early level /



primary transitions and Head Teacher health and wellbeing. Through promoting engagement with these webinars, the EIT is stressing the continuing importance of professional reading and development, which will be very important during the recovery phase for Highland education following schools reopening in August.

#### 5.14 **Local Delivery Phasing Plan (LDPP):**

All of the work done to support schools during lockdown and the plan for the reopening of schools in August fed into the production of the *Local Delivery Phasing Plan* for Scottish Government, which was submitted in June. This document, which was written by the EIT, is included as **Appendix 3**. The Scottish Government, through Education Scotland / HMI, provided feedback on this document, expressing praise for the quality of the work represented which can be found at the start of **Appendix 3**.

### 6. **EIT work moving forward in session 20/21**

#### 6.1 **Maintaining engagement:**

Much has been done in the period of school closures to sustain and strengthen engagement between the Area Teams, EIT and schools and moving forward in session 20/21 this will be of great importance. Monitoring school progress with addressing the key improvement priorities will require proactivity on behalf of the EIT as they communicate with HTs. With HMI activity paused (probably until 2021), there is an opportunity to take advantage of the forthcoming months to ensure as many schools which are due for inspection as possible remain focussed on the expectations with an inspection process. Members of the EIT with HMI experience, working alongside HT Associate Assessors can lead this work. Developing an approach to Validated Self Evaluation will underpin this work, and input from HTs and other school staff in devising a Highland Council process on this will be of key importance. Communication will continue to be of key importance as we develop school-to-school learning through sharing of effective practice.

#### 6.2 **Supporting return to school:**

An immediate priority, of course, will be supporting schools with the reopening process in August and beyond. EIT members and Area Teams will need to ensure they have the capacity to be responsive to need, the details of which are as yet uncertain. A focus on health and wellbeing is of key importance (see above) but it is important that learning, teaching and assessment remain central to school improvement planning, with a consequent focus on attainment and closing any gaps that may have existed prior to the Covid-19 closures or which may have developed during the closure period. Schools will need to be supported in new data analysis, leadership at all levels and curriculum adjustment to ensure that children and young people recover any lost ground as soon as possible. This will be particularly sharply focused in the Senior Phase, where there maybe adjustments to SQA courses and exam arrangements but will also be very important in early Learning and childcare settings and throughout the Broad General Education.

#### 6.3 **Return to key improvement agenda:**

As mentioned above, the focus in all schools' improvement plans for the coming session will be on the recovery agenda. This will require a very focused approach to establishing need in each setting. EIT will provide immediate support with this in late August/early September, focusing on the key types of data collection and analysis

(attainment data, demographic data, data about the effectiveness of practice and information gathered about people's views). This work on leading improvement to address the negative impacts of the extended school closures will require effective sharing of practice, good relationships and school-to-school learning, overseen by the EIT, to ensure that lessons are learned without delay, and effective interventions are put in place as quickly as possible. As the session progresses schools will be able to focus ahead to ongoing improvement priorities that reach beyond the present Covid-19 situation. As that scenario develops the role of the EIT will be important in guiding priorities to support authority-wide improvement in terms of outcomes (for example, in attainment, equity, positive destinations, inspection outcomes and so on).

#### **6.4 Primary / ELC curriculum:**

As schools build on the Refreshed Narrative on the Curriculum for Excellence and further develop the curriculum in ELC settings and primaries, the role of the ELT will be key in establishing consistent approaches which nevertheless allow for local contexts to be taken into account in curriculum design. Strong leadership will be required to oversee consistent development of learning and teaching (including digital and outdoor learning), assessment and moderation, family learning, national expectations regarding 1+2 language learning and learning for sustainability. Supporting schools in the use of data and other information will be a key area, and in particular the way that the various kinds of relevant data (see above) are used to inform the development, delivery and evaluation of key improvements. This strategic overview will be essential in bringing about improvement across Highland schools.

#### **6.5 Secondary curriculum:**

As is the case with leading improvement in primary schools, strong leadership and strategic direction will be essential in improving outcomes in secondary schools. As well as the priorities mentioned above (Learning and teaching, curriculum and family learning), there are secondary-specific areas to address, such as Senior Phase curriculum design and diversification, wider achievement awards, partnerships with colleges and other providers of accreditation, effective working with the Scottish Qualifications Authority, development of the Career Education, Work Placement and Career Management Skills Standards. A strong, well-led EIT will be essential as we build consistency in our secondaries, while still promoting curricula which reflect the diversity of our various local communities.

#### **6.6 Leadership, performance and empowerment:**

It is vital that the Council develops a consistent and effective approach to developing the nationally-important empowerment agenda. This will require strong leadership and engagement with schools to build understanding of the agenda and to develop leadership at all levels within the authority, from probationers to classroom teachers, to middle leaders and Head Teachers. Liaison with the General Teaching Council for Scotland and Education Scotland's Professional Learning and Leadership team will help us to develop an approach to professional learning which will lead to a more consistent and coordinated approach to improving outcomes in our schools. The development of a leadership framework (Academy) covering all levels of provision will be at the heart of this work, led by the EIT and involving close working with HTs and other staff from schools. Developing approaches to self-evaluation and leadership of change will be the core work to support this workstream.

## 6.7 **Inclusion:**

Continuing work on all aspects of inclusion will be required to ensure equity of opportunity for all of our children and young people. A strong lead will be required to ensure consistency in school approaches to the promotion of health and wellbeing, children's rights, safeguarding, equalities, liaison with health and social care, supporting care-experienced children and young people, supporting young carers, accessibility and connected issues. Ensuring resource is used as effectively as possible will require strong central leadership, supported by Area implementation and school engagement. The work of the Education Psychology team during COVID has been instrumental in supporting the recovery of Education with a focus on inclusion, staff training and engaging with young people and their families. This work is outlined in **appendix 4**.

## 6.8 **Links with Northern Alliance and national bodies:**

In all of the above it will be essential to maintain and develop strong relationships across the Northern Alliance and with Education Scotland and other national bodies which can support our improvement activities. The EIT will be the focus of this liaison, with HTs and other school staff providing the school-to-school linkage that will allow us to benefit from the expertise that exists beyond the boundaries of Highland and to ensure the Highland expertise is shared broadly too. This engagement will require strong and clear leadership to ensure time and resources are used as effectively as possible to maximise improvements in outcomes.

## 7. **Conclusion**

- 7.1 Much has been learned during the Covid-19 situation and it is important that, moving forwards, the benefits and opportunities that have arisen out of 'schools' lockdown' are embedded and further developed as well as emerging issues are addressed.
- 7.2 Firstly, the work done on developing opportunities for digital learning has been an impressive aspect of the lockdown situation. The emergency need for Council and School staff to upskill very quickly has shown that there is a high level of versatility amongst our school workforce (and, indeed, amongst our families). Schools and the EIT will need to ensure that this versatility is harnessed appropriately as we pursue the improvement agenda in the future (as well as making sure we don't lose sight of our digital gains when the schools reopen).
- 7.3 Secondly, joint working between Area Teams and the central EIT has been closer in the past few months than it has been for some time, and this has had very clear benefits in clarifying lines of communication for schools and ensuring consistency of messages. There is still work to do in this, and long-standing ways of working still require some adjustment to maximise the clarity of messages out to schools. Progressing to a simplified support and challenge structure for schools must be progressed as a matter of urgency to create stability and accelerate progress. Continuing to build coherence in our educational system will be a priority moving forwards.
- 7.4 Thirdly, the use of working groups and the regular online engagement sessions with a variety of staff, including Head Teachers, has emphasised the importance of hearing and listening to a wide range of representative voices within the context of the

ambitious improvement agenda. The pressures of the Covid-19 situation forced the implementation of creative approaches to communication with and between schools and it will be important that this is built upon.

- 7.5 Fourthly, schools have become much more resilient and resourceful during the Covid-19 closures and this must continue to be supported and encouraged. The empowerment agenda (see above) has a focus on autonomy and accountability at all levels in education and the crisis staff and families have been through and from which they are now beginning to emerge from has helped us to understand the way that each school is part of an organic whole, and that individual work on delivery contributes importantly to the Highland-wide picture. The key message going forward is that, paradoxically, the isolation caused by lockdown led to some very effective school-to-school learning and moving forward we must rationalise that into a pan-authority approach to improvement and mutual support.
- 7.6 Finally, the Covid-19 crisis resulted in the EIT having to respond with versatility to the emerging issues and difficulties as they arose (much as this versatility was essential at school level). It will be crucially important, moving forward, that this is maintained to ensure that the dedication and abilities of the EIT members, working with all of our learner settings, is harnessed correctly to bring about measurable improvements in Highland education.

Designation: Head of Education

Date: 22 July 2020

Author: Nicky Grant, Head of Education

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1 [Education Briefing](#)

Appendix 2 [Gaelic Education Update](#)

Appendix 3 [HMIE letter](#)  
[Reopening Plan](#)

Appendix 4 [HCPS Supporting resilience and recovery](#)