

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Sunnylands Primary School, Carrickfergus

May 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sunnylands Primary School is a controlled co-educational primary school located in the town of Carrickfergus. The school celebrated recently its 70th anniversary. Enrolment has risen over the last four years, from 184 to 205 children. At the time of the inspection, three of the seven teachers were employed in a temporary capacity. The school is engaged in a shared education partnership with two other schools in the town.

The school is situated in an area of significant social disadvantage; 59% of the children have free school meals entitlement. The school has established close links with a local foodbank and other community providers for the benefit of the children in the school and their families. The Department of Education's (DE) Extended Schools* funding is used to provide a range of after-school programmes and a breakfast club.

Throughout the report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk, this indicates that additional information can be found in Appendix 2: Notes.

Seventy (34%) children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN), 18 (9%) of whom have a statement of educational need. There are currently 23 newcomer children in the school.

B. VIEWS OF CHILDREN, PARENTS AND STAFF

Before the inspection, confidential online questionnaires were issued to the children in year 7 and all parents, teachers, learning support staff and other support staff. The responses to the questionnaires were highly positive.

All of the children in year 7 responded to the online questionnaire and the outcomes were generally very positive. In the small number of written comments, the children expressed their pride in belonging to a school where they feel safe and are making progress. They also recognised that their school is a fun, interesting and kind place where they can make many friends.

The inspectors met and spoke with groups of children from years 3, 5 and 7, and also with members of the school council and eco-committee. The children spoke confidently about: how their teachers and classroom assistants help them in their lessons; their enjoyment of taking part in sports; and their appreciation of the rewards system which recognises their application, improvements in their learning, behaviour and contribution to the life of the school.

A majority (59%) of the parents responded to the questionnaire. Around one-third of these parents provided additional comments in which they commended: the approachability of the principal and staff; the clear communication between school and home; the support provided for their children, particularly newcomer children; and the range of sporting and other activities provided beyond the curriculum.

Most of the teachers (77%) responded to the questionnaire. Their responses were highly positive and there were no written comments. A majority (55%) of the learning support staff and a small number of support staff responded to the questionnaires: their responses were also highly positive.

A summary of all the questionnaire responses, including the small number of individual concerns raised, was shared with the principal and the chair of governors.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside the school to consider how well the school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The school's vision is shared by all members of the school community. The whole-school values articulated in the acronym 'BRIGHT' are well understood by the children and underpin the vision.
- The cross-curricular approach to topic work and the teaching of the area of learning, the World Around Us, enables the children to make connections between different areas of the curriculum and to express their creativity.
- The planning, teaching and assessment for learning were effective in the lessons observed: the strategies for learning and teaching were well matched to the pupils' needs and abilities.
- The programme of staff professional learning has enabled teachers to develop their understanding and knowledge of, for example, nurturing approaches and strategies for outdoor learning to engage the children and extend their learning experiences.
- The outdoor environment has been developed thoughtfully to enhance the provision for outdoor learning, including the implementation of the teachers' learning from their engagement in the 'Northern Ireland Forest School Association'*.

- The children’s wellbeing is central to all aspects of the provision and is evident in the nurturing environment and in the high level of care for every child.
- The provision for children with special educational needs is effective: the children’s personal learning plans are detailed and include clear, practical strategies to help them to make progress.
- The children’s academic, sporting, cultural and social achievements are celebrated through, for example, the rewards system, attractive displays of their creative work throughout the school and the big World Around Us evidence books which travel with each class through their seven years in Sunnylands Primary School.
- The school has forged valuable links within the local community and beyond in a network of learning for the benefit of the children and their families.
- The arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Areas for action:

- to re-consider the over-use of worksheets and templates which may limit the children’s independence and creativity; and
- to develop the children’s participation in decision-making.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The vision for Sunnylands Primary School was revisited by staff and governors in 2022, with the aim of bringing it up to date and aligning it more closely to the school’s changing context. The updated vision prioritises appropriately the all-round development of each child, to prepare them for the next stage of their education and for later life, by creating ‘a positive, nurturing, happy school community, based on kindness, honesty and respect for each other and our environment’.

The school vision is supported by the values agreed with all members of the school community and articulated in the child-friendly acronym, ‘BRIGHT’: Be Respectful, Individual, Generous, Helpful, Together. These values are well understood by the children and underpin the rewards system which is central to the school’s positive behaviour policy.

The vision and values are relevant to the context in which the children live; the school is a safe, secure place for all of the children. All members of staff work effectively as a team to ensure that the children’s learning, physical, emotional and social needs are being met. Simple actions, such as providing toast in every classroom at the start of the day, set a positive tone and help the children settle to their learning. The timing of the daily mile for all classes at the start of each day also

helps children manage the transition from home to school by re-establishing relationships with their teacher and peers, while helping improve the children's physical activity levels. These practical outworkings of the school's vision and values are complemented by the senior leaders' willingness to make an additional effort to assist families and direct them towards appropriate external services to support their children's learning and wellbeing.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

A consistent characteristic in all classrooms is the supportive and inclusive ethos, based on mutual respect, and the warm working relationships at all levels, including with parents. The teachers' planning is purposeful and underpinned by effective classroom management. When the work is set at an appropriate level, in most of the lessons observed, the children benefit from the range of support and challenge which they need to progress in their learning. The classroom assistants make a positive impact on the children's learning: they provide active, sensitive and skilful support to the individual children and groups with whom they were working.

A particular strength in the learning and teaching is the development of outdoor learning opportunities which stimulate creativity, enthusiasm for learning and real excitement among the children. The school has adopted a connected approach to the children's learning both indoors and outdoors, as demonstrated in the World Around Us and topic work. Different areas of the curriculum are combined to engage the children, deepen their understanding and extend their skills in, for example, art, digital skills including coding, mathematical investigations in real-life contexts, and STEM*-based research. Educational trips and visits by guest speakers from the local community enrich the children's learning in these areas.

Currently, the work in the children's books indicates that there is an over-reliance on worksheets and templates in, for example, problem-solving. While they may be helpful in certain circumstances, using them too often will limit the development of the children's thinking skills, independence and creativity.

The action-planning process to support school improvement has recently been enhanced and the process is well understood by senior leaders and co-ordinators. The action plans have clear targets for improvement which are based firmly on the analysis of the school's assessment data and, importantly, the teachers' professional judgment. The effective use of the 'plan-do-review' cycle by senior leaders has led to appropriate adjustments to the priorities for improvement work: for example, the school has recently adjusted one priority for staff professional learning based on analysis of staff evaluations and analysis of assessment data. While practical processes for monitoring and evaluating ongoing improvement work are in place, it will be important for senior and middle leaders to develop these processes further by focusing more closely on the impact of their actions on the children's learning through reviews of the children's books, observations of learning and teaching and discussions with focus groups of children.

The governors are particularly knowledgeable about the children's wellbeing and progress and are highly supportive of the work and life of the school. They have prioritised, and made time for, all teaching staff to present to them the improvement work being undertaken within their respective areas of responsibility. This interaction has enabled the governors to work collaboratively with the staff and support key improvements for the benefit of the children.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The commitment of the whole staff to understanding and addressing the diverse needs of the children is a clear strength of the school. The dedicated staff, both teaching and non-teaching, provide emotional and academic support in a nurturing, safe environment in which the children thrive. They work cohesively to deliver an inclusive curriculum that suits the diverse backgrounds of all of the children.

There are purposeful personal learning plans (PLPs) for those children identified as having special educational needs (SEN). The PLPs are detailed and highlight the children's strengths and interests, as well as their specific learning, social, emotional and behavioural needs. The targets are appropriate and the strategies for teachers and learning support staff are practical. In lessons, the classroom assistants work effectively with individual children, and also extend their support to include others working in the same group.

The school has put in place a range of strategies to support the children who have been identified as underachieving in, or requiring additional help with, literacy and numeracy. Two additional part-time teachers provide effective support for small groups of children in withdrawal sessions. One of these support teachers also provides withdrawal group support for the rising proportion of newcomer children in the school. The teachers use well the Council of Europe's standardised Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to monitor the newcomer children's progress in speaking, reading and writing English. This ongoing monitoring informs the next stages of support. The school also uses the services of the Education Authority's (EA) interpreting service during parental consultations, in order to help parents understand and engage with teachers for the benefit of their children.

The teachers in foundation stage identify, as early as possible, those children who have speech and language development needs. An additional classroom assistant provides appropriate literacy catch-up, both in class and in small group withdrawal sessions, to increase the children's phonological awareness and foster their early reading skills.

The development of outdoor learning and the engagement in the 'Northern Ireland Forest School Association' programme have been a benefit to many of the children who have SEN. The activities are inclusive and enable all children to interact socially, achieve in an informal context and take pride in their work.

The school has responded sensitively to a rise in concerns about the children's mental and emotional health by making digital mood tracker apps available in every classroom. These apps enable children to record, understand and manage their emotions. They also send alerts to teachers and enable them to follow up and address any concerns expressed by the children.

To support further the children's mental and emotional health, a counsellor is available in the school on one day each week. Involvement in the local Extended Schools cluster, funded by DE, has enabled the school to provide this much-needed service. While most referrals are made by the teachers, the counsellor appropriately makes time available to see children who refer themselves or who are referred by their parents. This provision is extended by support from external agencies, for example RISE NI* and Aware NI*, which have recently delivered age-appropriate programmes to help children in years 6 and 7 manage their emotions and responses.

Other strategic planning for the children's wellbeing includes a free breakfast club, funded through the Extended Schools programme, which helps ensure that all children have a healthy start to the day. At 8.45 am each day the whole school takes part in 'the daily mile' which helps children with the transition between home and school, gives them time to talk and build relationships both within and across classes, and increases the sense of togetherness. It also acts as an incentive for children to arrive at school on time as the children enjoy participating in this physical activity. Senior leaders and teachers have worked with some success to improve attendance, with an increase of four percentage points over the last three years. A well-attended homework club at the end of the school day also helps children keep up to date with their work and provides access to additional support from the staff.

The school has established a school council and eco-committee. The children in the eco-committee and school council are proud of their achievements; particularly in relation to encouraging the school community to be more sustainable. Going forward, it will be important to listen to and act on, as appropriate, the views of the children and enable them to participate more fully in decision-making.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The staff affirm the children's good behaviour and achievements with positive and encouraging comments during lessons and outside class. They respond positively to the work the children present in their books and they encourage the children to give of their best. In the most effective practice in marking, the teachers highlight the specific strengths of the children's work and give practical guidance on how it may be improved further. Furthermore, the school tracks well the children's progress in literacy and numeracy from their individual starting points; they identify well those who need additional support and put appropriate interventions in place.

There is clear evidence of progress in the children's books, especially in the development of accuracy in written communication. This progress is celebrated in each child's writing record, in which samples of their work from year 1 to year 7 are compiled and the record is presented to each child at the end of year 7. The big photo albums kept by each teacher are particularly effective celebrations of a whole

class's learning and achievement throughout the year. These vibrant albums showcase the children's mathematical investigations, outdoor learning, art, digital skills and STEM-based research and experiments. As a result, by the end of year 7, the children may review their work over seven years in school and appreciate the progress they have made.

The children's work, particularly the artistic and creative pieces completed in their World around Us topics, is prominent on the corridor walls and displays around the school. The children report that they are encouraged by the 'pupil of the week', 'star of the month' and other in-class awards.

The inspectors had discussions with groups of children across key stages 1 and 2. The children were keen to share their views, talked competently and enthusiastically about their progress in learning and are proud of their achievements beyond formal learning, including success in areas such as sports, the arts and local competitions. They were articulate in expressing their opinions and ideas and were respectful of the views of others.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

One of the key strengths of the school is its emphasis on building strong relationships and creating a positive, supportive, and nurturing learning environment for all members of the school community. By fostering strong partnerships with local organisations and businesses, the school enriches its curriculum with real-world experiences and resources that enhance the children's learning.

The school has participated in a partnership with the charity Sustrans*, benefitting from its 'Extended Provision' programme over the last three years. The support has included workshops on 'Ditch the Stabilisers' for children from year 1 to year 3, as well as 'Build a Bike' and 'Bike Doctor' for older children. These very successful practical workshops were made available to parents and children, with a significant number of families participating in them, promoting purposeful engagement with the school.

The school also took part in 'The Big Walk and Wheel', another initiative by Sustrans, encouraging families to leave the car at home and walk, cycle or ride scooters to school. The school demonstrated its commitment to this initiative by winning the competition in 2022-23. The prize money was then re-invested in the children's wellbeing by setting up an orienteering course within the school grounds, another element in the development of outdoor learning. This focus on wellbeing for the children and their families was extended through two associated suggestions from the school council: 'Walk to School Week' and then 'Christmas on Wheels', encouraging children to decorate their bicycles for Christmas and ride them to school.

The school embraced the EA's 'Take 5' programme and was awarded the level 3 qualification. Further work has included a wide range of associated charitable initiatives as part of the 'connecting with other people' and 'giving to others' strands of the programme. A notable associated initiative is the December toy donation by parents in the community. Conscious of the impact of the rising cost of living on

family life, these toys are then made available free of charge to families known to, and connected with, the school who need presents for their children at Christmas. The school is building on the 'Take 5' work by committing to the EA-led Being Well, Doing Well programme which is funded by DE as part of its Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework.

Sunnylands Primary School has a shared education partnership with two other local schools. Due to the disruption caused by Covid-19, the shared work has not been developed as anticipated over the last three years and senior leaders have identified shared education as a priority for further growth.

There are ongoing educational benefits for the children through the school's links with the PSNI for online safety, the NI Fire and Rescue Service for firework safety and the NI Coast Guard for water safety. The school has also worked with Danske Bank and the NI Housing Executive to repurpose wasteland and develop an inviting outdoor learning area for the children. Such engagement ensures that education is a shared responsibility, bridging gaps and building a foundation for a thriving future for the children in the school.

The school welcomes and encourages engagement with parents and carers by facilitating a weekly Mums and Tots group on site, annual 'Muck-Ins' to improve the school site and curriculum evenings to help parents support their children's learning, including a reading workshop with a published author.

Professional learning for all staff is strategically targeted and responsive to the needs of the children. Almost one-half of the teachers extended their own professional development through gaining postgraduate qualifications in courses to support the development of, for example, the children's literacy and health and wellbeing. In addition, the school is supporting six classroom assistants to gain the Training Qualifications UK Level 3 Diploma in Specialist Support in Teaching and Learning in Schools*, and one other in completing the post-graduate certificate in education to gain qualified teacher status. The principal is a member of the East Antrim Primary Principals' Group which enables school leaders to share and learn from one another, as well as facilitating shared training from external providers.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. In discussions with inspectors, the children reported that they feel safe and secure in school. They know what to do and who to speak to if they have any concerns about their safety or wellbeing.

4. GOING FORWARD

The children at Sunnylands Primary School benefit significantly from the commitment of all the staff to their wellbeing, learning and development. The school offers a welcoming, inclusive and nurturing environment in which the children enjoy a wide range of learning experiences which enable them to thrive.

ETI, through the engagement of the District Inspector, will continue to work with the school as it takes forward the areas for action detailed in the body of this report.

5. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

APPENDIX 2: NOTES

Page 1 Extended Schools

The Department of Education's Extended Schools programme aims to improve levels of educational achievement for disadvantaged children and young people by providing the additional support that they might need to help them reach their full potential.

Page 2 Northern Ireland Forest School Association (NIFSA)

NIFSA is the leading Forest Schools programme provider for schools, nurseries and Universities across Northern Ireland. By incorporating innovative approaches to learning, children are encouraged to develop their curiosity and motivation to learn beyond the formal classroom context.

Page 4 STEM

STEM is an acronym for four connected subjects within the curriculum: science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Page 6 RISE NI (Regional Integrated Support for Education in NI)

RISE NI is a regional early intervention service which supports children in pre-school educational and mainstream primary school settings by working closely with parents and education staff to help children develop the foundation skills for learning i.e. speech, language, communication, sensory-motor, visual perception, social, emotional and behaviour skills.

Aware NI

AWARE NI is a charity which delivers mental health and well-being programmes into communities, schools, colleges, universities and workplaces.

Page 7 Sustrans

Sustrans is a charity which works for and with communities, helping them come to life by walking, wheeling and cycling to create healthier places and happier lives for everyone.

Page 8 Level 3 Diploma in Specialist Support for Teaching & Learning in Schools

The TQUK Level 3 Diploma in Specialist Support for Teaching & Learning in Schools Qualification is a recognised qualification as a Teaching Assistant. It enables successful candidates to apply for teaching assistant positions within any school across the UK.

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