

Report of a Post-primary Inspection
Magherafelt High School

September 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Magherafelt High School is a controlled, non-selective, 11-18 school located on the outskirts of Magherafelt and draws its pupils from the town and wider area. Over the past five years, enrolment in the school has increased steadily from 541 in 2019/20 to 655 in 2024/25. Almost one-fifth (19%) of pupils have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). Almost one-quarter (23%) of the pupils have free school meals entitlement.

There have been changes in the senior leadership of the school in recent years, with the principal being in post since February 2021.

The school is an active member of, and contributor to, the Magherafelt and Rural Learning Partnership (MRLP). As a result, the pupils can access a range of post-16 courses in the other schools and there are joint approaches to aspects of staff professional learning (SPL). Collaboration extends beyond the local area with the school designated as a 'GL Advocate Partner' in the use of assessment data and the school's football pitch is designated a 'Peace Pitch' which is twinned with Flanders Peace Field in Belgium.

B. VIEWS OF PUPILS, PARENTS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to pupils, parents and staff in advance of the inspection.

Thirty-four percent (224) of the pupils from across all year groups responded to the questionnaire, with 55 additional written comments provided. Almost all of the pupils indicated that they know who they can talk to in the school if they have any concerns. Most pupils value how they are encouraged to set goals for their learning and the regular opportunities to exercise and are proud to be part of the school community.

Eighteen percent (96) of the parents/carers responded to the questionnaire, 42 of whom provided written comments. Almost all indicated that they are aware of the safeguarding arrangements, consider that the school has good links with community organisations, and they are content with the courses available to their children. Most consider that their child is happy at school, making good progress and would recommend the school to others. The small number of issues were raised in relation to communication and aspects of learning and teaching, and these were shared with the principal and two representatives from the board of governors.

Eighty percent (35) of the teaching staff responded to the questionnaire, with ten additional written comments provided. All staff reported that: they are clear about the school's child protection arrangements; they contribute well to the school's vision; and the strong community links impact positively on the pupils' learning experiences. In addition, ninety-one percent (41) of the non-teaching staff completed the questionnaire and almost all feel that staff wellbeing is promoted effectively, and their professional skills, knowledge and understanding are valued by the school.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The 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 vision is shared and understood by all of the school community.
- The school has a highly inclusive, Christian ethos where pupils of all abilities and backgrounds are welcomed and valued.
- The school has undertaken significant work to promote the wellbeing of the entire school community.
- Self-evaluation processes are identifying well priorities for development. The school recognises the need to build leadership capacity at all levels to bring about further improvements.
- Pupils across the school have access to a well-designed and responsive curriculum that enables them to progress and achieve well.
- Planning, teaching and assessment were mostly effective in promoting successful learning. The inspection supports the school's identification of the need to build consistency in the quality of the classroom practice.
- Flexible and creative approaches are used well to support all pupils to overcome barriers to their learning.
- The school celebrates pupil achievement and successes through a variety of engaging activities and charitable and community-based initiatives.
- Staff professional learning is prioritised, research-based and responsive to need.
- The pupils benefit from well-planned careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) provision.

- The school creates the appropriate conditions to enable a highly effective community of learning. This is an area for wider dissemination, from which others may learn.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Areas for action:

- to continue to build leadership capacity in order to bring about further improvements; and
- to share the effective practice in the school to build consistency in the quality of the learning experiences for the pupils.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The school's commitment to achieving its vision of '**aspiring to the success of the individual**' is evident through the meaningful engagement with all stakeholders, including the local and wider community and schools in the MRLP, to support the holistic development of the pupils and in extending and enriching the learning experiences provided for them. The vision is understood well by pupils, parents, staff, governors and the community.

Self-evaluation processes are identifying appropriately priorities for development, and associated professional learning aligns closely to the vision. Staff are re-engaging with sharing good practice and have identified the need to reflect on the impact of their work.

The governors are actively involved in the life and work of the school; they use their skills to support and challenge constructively the senior and middle leaders. The governors have a clear understanding of the school's current context, recognising the wide range of the pupils' needs, abilities and barriers to successful learning. The governors have a key role in the Friends of Magherafelt High School association, who organise promotional events to raise funds to help the pupils and the school community.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

Planning, teaching and assessment were mostly effective in promoting successful learning. The most effective lessons were characterised by thorough planning, including subject specific strategies to support the pupils with personal learning plans (PLPs), prompt cues, clear modelling of work and appropriate pace and challenge. Less effective lessons tended to be too teacher-led, lacked sufficient differentiation, and relied heavily on closed questioning strategies.

Staff professional learning is well-planned, and the 'MHS Learning Line' a research-based approach, threads through the learning and teaching, ensuring that teachers have a clear lesson structure: "cue, explain, do, review." In discussions with the pupils, they talked about how their teachers set aspirational targets and provide feedback in their lessons. They enjoy practical learning and would like more opportunities to engage actively in their lessons. The school has identified appropriately the need to engage more effectively with the pupils on aspects of their learning.

The pupils across the school have access to a well-designed and responsive curriculum that enables them to progress and achieve well. At Key Stage (KS) 3, the school uses baseline testing to assess the pupils' respective levels of ability on entry to year 8, and progress is regularly monitored through analysis of internal assessments. At KS 4 and post-16, the curriculum offer meets the requirements of the Entitlement Framework. The school keeps the curriculum offer under review to ensure it reflects the changing context, interests and abilities of the pupils.

As the school continues to prioritise the growth and sustainability of the sixth form in line with its vision, it continues to be important that the employing authority, governors and the staff plan for, and manage, issues related to the sustainability of the school's sixth form provision in order to address the current and future needs of the pupils and the staff.

The pupils benefit from well-planned CEIAG provision. Through the taught careers programme, the pupils learn about a range of employment opportunities which supports them in making informed decisions about progression pathways matched well to their interests, needs and local labour market information. The pupils are well informed to make appropriate decisions about the transition from year 12 to post-16. The school provides work experience opportunities for pupils in year 13; the pupils in KS 4 would benefit from similar work experience opportunities.

The preventative curriculum equips the pupils in KS 3 with age and stage appropriate personal development, knowledge and understanding, together with the skills needed to keep themselves safe. The provision across the school is enhanced through the engagement of the pupils with a wide range of appropriate external agencies. The school has identified appropriately the need to develop further the provision for personal development and relationships and sexuality education (RSE) at KS 4 and post-16.

The school's considerable work to support the pupils' emotional health and wellbeing has been acknowledged through the achievement of level 3 accreditation in the Public Health Agency's 'Take 5 steps to wellbeing' and the Gold Award in the Aware NI's Investors in Mental Health for significant contributions to positive mental health.

The pupils are mature, welcoming and respectful and their behaviour is exemplary. During discussions, they told the inspectors that the staff work hard to support their learning and wellbeing; this work reflects the commitment of the school community to their vision of meeting the individual needs of the pupils in a safe, nurturing and supportive environment.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

There is a welcoming and inclusive learning ethos throughout the school with both pupils and staff showing respect for diversity. The staff team work together effectively to create a caring environment in which the pupils can learn and make progress.

As a result of robust monitoring of, and creative strategies to improve pupil attendance, the attendance has increased over recent years and is above the NI average for similar schools. The school has successful links with external agencies to support pupils to re-engage with their learning in school, such as, Education Authority (EA) youth provision, and the EA Behaviour Support Team and its Education Welfare Service. The engagement and progress of the small number of pupils who are educated off site are monitored well by the school.

The school has developed creative and effective approaches to support pupils in literacy and numeracy. The arrangements are flexible and tailored well to the pupils.

The classroom assistants (CAs) know the pupils well, have received appropriate training in line with the needs of the pupils and are flexible in their holistic support of the pupils. The pupils who (are newcomers) are enabled well, through a range of effective strategies, to access the full curriculum and the school communicates effectively with parents who do not have English as their first language.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The pupils' progress from their respective starting points is demonstrated well through individual, departmental and whole school target-setting based on the analysis of a wide range of internal and external qualitative and quantitative information. In 2024, most of the year 12 pupils (80.4%) who attained five GCSE qualifications at grades A* to C or equivalent achieved in line with their ability. The school is now focused appropriately on improving further the number of pupils attaining five GCSE qualifications at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics (51%). At post-16, a majority of pupils (62.5%) achieve in line with their ability for three GCE A level, or equivalent, at grades A* to C. The school continues to prioritise this work across subject departments to ensure that all pupils can achieve and progress to the next stage of their learning or into employment. The pupils with SEN are achieving well above expectation at any five GCSE qualifications at grades A* to C, or equivalents (82%), and in line with expectation at 5 GCSEs qualifications at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics.

Success is defined, embedded, and celebrated through a variety of engaging activities and initiatives. The annual talent show provides students with a platform to showcase their diverse skills, talents and creativity. Charity and community events are integral to the school's ethos, fostering a sense of social responsibility and community spirit among the pupils and provides them with opportunities to give back to society.

The competitive merit system, deeply embedded in school life, motivates students to strive for excellence in both academic, extra-curricular and community pursuits. The pupils talked enthusiastically about the competitive nature of the merit system and how it motivates them to be the best they can be.

The pupils lead and support others through, for example, the student leadership team, student wellbeing team, digital leaders and through initiatives such as the period dignity project. For a number of the pupils who have autism, there is access to the Sensory Hub, which is available at lunch and break times to support their emotional well-being with the support of the CAs.

The post-16 pupils benefit from a range of volunteering opportunities, including in the local special school. The school has introduced recently opportunities for year 13 pupils, through an enrichment programme with the Irish Football Association (IFA), to extend their learning opportunities beyond the classroom and to achieve accredited qualifications in coaching and refereeing. In discussion with the year 14 pupils, they reported that they would like further opportunities for enrichment in preparation for leaving school.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The school creates the appropriate conditions to enable a highly effective community of learning. There are three key aspects to how pupils benefit from the community of learning: being part of a strong school community that lives out its values and vision; gaining access to shared and collaborative learning opportunities across the local area learning community, MRLP; and acquiring additional opportunities through the connections with the wider community.

In the shared lessons observed, the pupils reported that they enjoy and value learning with peers from different backgrounds and who hold different views and beliefs and that it develops their skills and confidence. The highly effective shared education programme is well led and benefits hundreds of pupils across a good range of subjects, including some that address shared history and reconciliation.

Connections with businesses, including local construction, manufacturing and engineering companies, are plentiful and are meaningful and valued by pupils. They can access interview skills, attend a careers fair and participate in work experience; all of which inform their careers options and aspirations.

Staff professional learning is prioritised and research-based supporting well the staff's development. Evidence-based research is promoted well to ensure more effective classroom practice, and the inspection endorses the need for the school to ensure consistency of learning experiences for the pupils. The staff are encouraged to undertake additional learning and qualifications, in line with DE's Learning Leaders. High priority is given to staff welfare and the staff benefit from wellbeing days and events to support their own health and wellbeing, the impact of which is a very high staff attendance rate.

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. The school is aware of changes in arrangements for adult protection and this is reflected in the child protection policy.

4. GOING FORWARD

Magherafelt High School realises its vision of **‘aspiring to the success of the individual’** through strategic leadership and meaningful engagement with all stakeholders including the local and wider community to support the holistic development of the pupils and in extending and enriching the learning experiences provided for them.

Inspectors identified aspects of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which is to be shared more widely is:

- the school’s approach to creating the appropriate conditions to enable a highly effective community of learning.

ETI will monitor the progress of Magherafelt High School in addressing the areas for action as laid out in this report.

5. APPENDIX

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%

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