

Report of a Post-primary Inspection

Our Lady of Lourdes High School,
Ballymoney

DE Ref No 323-0075

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Education and
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Empowering Improvement

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Our Lady of Lourdes High School is a maintained non-selective co-educational school situated in Ballymoney. Over the last four years, enrolment has risen significantly, from 325 to 422 currently, resulting in an increasingly diverse pupil population which is drawn from over 30 local primary schools, across a wide geographical spread, from the controlled, integrated and maintained sectors. Over the same period, the proportion of pupils with free school meals entitlement (FSME) has risen from 40% to 46% and the number of pupils with statements of special educational need (SEN) has also risen, from 105 to 166 pupils. The five well-established specialist provisions for learning in key stages (KS) 3 and 4 have more recently been complemented by five specialist provisions for social and communication needs (SPSC) across both key stages. To accommodate the increased enrolment, two new modular classrooms have been added to the school site.

A new principal took up post in February 2025. The school has a long-standing shared education partnership with Ballymoney High School and Dalriada School. These three schools constitute Ballymoney Area Learning Community (ALC) which facilitates staff professional learning (SPL) and extends the curriculum for a small number of pupils. This year, a small number of pupils in KS 4 access two courses in Dalriada School and a small number of pupils from Ballymoney High School access two courses in Our Lady of Lourdes High School.

B. VIEWS OF PUPILS, PARENTS AND STAFF

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

The responses to the questionnaires are referenced, where relevant, within the main body of the report. A high-level summary of the questionnaire responses, including any concerns raised, was shared with the principal and four representatives of the board of governors.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside Our Lady of Lourdes 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. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

All members of the school community have contributed, through extensive and meaningful consultation, to the vision statement: **Caring, sharing, learning together to meet the future**. This concise expression of the school's vision is well understood and affirmed by all stakeholders; in their responses to the confidential online questionnaires, all of the staff and almost all (93%) of the parents/carers said that they are clear about the school's vision. The vision is complemented by the four key values of **respect, kindness, teamwork and effort** which are grounded in the school's ethos. In discussions with inspectors, it was clear that the pupils understood the values well and were able to articulate what each means.

The school development planning (SDP) process involves comprehensive consultation with pupils, parents, staff and governors to identify the strengths and next steps in all aspects of school life. The priorities for whole-school improvement are strategic and appropriate, and the evidence of this inspection indicates that measurable progress is being made. For example, the key target of raising further the standards attained by the pupils is supported by: a robust and far-reaching review of the curriculum and qualifications on offer; a practical whole-school approach to SPL; the sharper use of data; and the implementation of personal learning plans (PLPs) in mainstream classes. The evaluations of the current provision are evidence based, honest and accurate. Excellent use is made of contextual, pastoral and attainment data to identify the barriers to pupils' learning and to set challenging targets for them, raising the staff's expectations for the pupils and for their own professional learning. The associated action planning processes are well understood by all staff, helping to develop collegial and distributive leadership across all areas of school life. The next step in self-evaluation for the middle leaders is to make first-hand evidence of learning and teaching central to their processes for measuring the impact of their improvement work.

The governors have a suitably wide range of experience and skills in, for example, finance, school leadership and social work which they use proactively to support the senior leaders. They are well informed about the school's priorities for improvement and place the pupils at the centre of the SDP process. Consequently, the governors think flexibly about, and respond readily to, initiatives which benefit the pupils' wellbeing and the outcomes they achieve.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The teachers approach their lessons with assurance and quiet confidence. A key strength in the lessons observed is the quality of the working relationships at all levels. The teachers' relational approaches and intentional use of praise help foster an ethos of trust where the pupils respond readily and share their views honestly. In discussions with inspectors, the pupils told us that the teachers are friendly, approachable and willing to help them. The teachers use questioning and verbal prompts skilfully to consolidate the pupils' previous learning, assess the extent of

their progress in their current work and help correct misunderstandings. This model of ongoing assessment is well embedded in the teachers' practice. While there are examples of effective marking for improvement by the teachers in the pupils books, written formative assessment needs to be applied more consistently across the curriculum.

Where the lessons are most successful, the teachers have a shared understanding of the school's bespoke learning and teaching model, which supports the pupils' progress in learning. The teachers' effective planning for individual lessons is founded on detailed schemes of work which set out the intended developments in the pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills: planning at all levels is a strength. As a result, the pupils engage readily, stay on task and complete work with care and attention to detail. When appropriate, the teachers use skilfully adaptive teaching approaches to help the pupil's overcome barriers to, and make progress in, their learning.

In the small number of instances where learning was less impactful, the lessons were overly directed by the teacher and there were insufficient opportunities for the pupils to develop their oral and thinking skills. The learning tasks did not provide appropriate levels of support to meet the needs and abilities of all of the pupils, resulting in disengagement from learning.

While positive changes have been made to the KS 3 and KS 4 curriculum in recent years to meet the changing and diverse interests, aspirations and abilities of the pupils, including the rapid expansion of the specialist provision, the school has identified appropriately curriculum planning and review as a strategic priority to support better equity of access, continuity and progression in the pupils' learning experiences; the inspection evidence endorses this focus. The pupils access a relatively broad and balanced curriculum at KS 3. The carousel arrangement for music and drama in years 8, 9 and 10 does not allow for continuity and progression in these subjects. All pupils in KS 3 have discrete information and communications technology (ICT) lessons, with most of the pupils progressing to accredited courses at KS 4 where digital skills are a core element. A majority (73%) of pupils told us through our questionnaire that the use of digital technology in school helps them learn.

The KS 4 curriculum meets the requirements of the Entitlement Framework (EF) and is well matched to the pupils' interests, aspirations and abilities. It provides pupils with three appropriate pathways to select from a range of general and applied subjects, including the option to study GCSE qualifications through collaboration with another post-primary school. A small number of pupils in KS 4 do not have access to citizenship and religious studies. The appointment of three non-qualified teachers delivering one subject in the KS 4 curriculum does not comply with the [Department of Education's Circular 2023/07](#). The school has taken prompt action to address this issue by timetabling qualified staff to support the delivery of this subject.

There are appropriate opportunities for the pupils in the KS 3 specialist provisions to work alongside their peers in mainstream classes. The pupils in the KS 4 specialist provisions integrate well with their mainstream peers and take a suitable blend of entry level, GCSE, Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications. Almost all (91.7%) of the pupils in year 12 who left the specialist provision in 2024 to 2025 achieved five or more GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C.

The pupils benefit from a well-planned careers programme. Through the taught careers education, information, advice and guidance lessons, supplemented by a suitably wide range of events including industrial visits and external speakers from local business representatives, further education and training providers, the pupils gain clear insights to varied courses and job opportunities. The pupils in KS 4 benefit from work experience and work-related learning, along with interview practice facilitated by a range of local and regional employers from the Rotary Club, which prepares them well for transition beyond school. As the staff continue to refine further the options process for pupils in year 10, a suitable range of additional events is being planned to enhance further the collaboration with parents/carers at this key transition point; the inspection endorses this work. Almost all (95%) of the pupils in years 11 and 12 who completed our questionnaire told us they feel well prepared for their next steps. In 2024 to 2025, almost all (93%) of leavers in year 12 moved to colleges of further education, training or employment. A small number of leavers from the specialist provisions moved to special schools with sixth form provision.

The highly effective provision for the health and well-being of pupils is enhanced through the wellbeing hub, sensory room, garden and the calm, nurturing environment throughout the school. In the parents' written responses to the online questionnaire, they describe the school as a caring and supportive place where the children are valued and thrive. The pupils benefit from participation in a range of extra-curricular sports, encouraging them to be physically active and enhancing their well-being. The school's commitment to helping the pupils to make healthy lifestyle choices is reflected in, for example, its participation in the Education Authority's [Being-Well-Doing-Well](#) programme.

The preventative curriculum, including the provision for relationships and sexuality education (RSE), is delivered mainly through the pupils' learning for life and work (LLW) lessons. It is age appropriate and addresses relevant contemporary issues such as consent, healthy relationships and domestic violence. It equips the pupils effectively with the knowledge and information they need to stay safe. The RSE programme is further enriched by specialist input from a judicious and suitably wide range of external agencies, supporting the school in the delivery of a responsive, tailored preventative curriculum which meets well the needs of the pupils.

Through our discussions with the pupils, it is evident that they: are very well cared for; are supported effectively to make informed choices to keep themselves and others safe; and know how to access support if needed. This is also reflected in the questionnaire responses with almost all of the pupils (96%) reporting that they feel safe in school.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

Our Lady of Lourdes High School has established successfully a deeply inclusive community in which every pupil is valued as an individual with talents and abilities that are recognised, understood, encouraged and developed. This culture is reflected in the integration of pupils from increasingly diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds and the school's provision of sports clubs which appeal to all sections of the community. The participation of pupils from the specialist provisions in whole-school events and activities including charitable fund-raising, the formal, breakfast club, assemblies and sports day further reinforces the school's inclusive ethos. The staff work collaboratively and demonstrate dedication, respect and genuine care in striving to meet the pupils' needs and interests and enable them to succeed.

A key and appropriate priority within the SDP is building equity in learning, through the implementation of personal learning plans (PLPs) to meet the needs of the increasing number of pupils with SEN across the school. The well-constructed PLPs include clearly defined targets and are reviewed twice annually. The staff use relevant data insightfully to understand the pupils' needs, alongside the professional judgment of subject specialist teachers, to ensure that targets are suitably challenging, individualised and practical. The PLPs capture successfully both the pupils' and parents'/carers' views, strengthening collaboration between home and school. There is flexibility in the timetables for pupils within the specialist provisions to join mainstream classes for specific subjects or examination courses closely matched to their interests and aspirations.

The specialist provision classes across the school have been well resourced and are designed thoughtfully to suit each class group. The pupils who met with us spoke positively about the specialist provision classes, sensory spaces and breakout rooms which help them manage their emotions and persevere with their learning. Well-planned movement breaks are used productively by the staff to help keep pupils engaged in learning throughout the day. The learning support assistants (LSAs) in both mainstream and specialist provisions demonstrate a high level of understanding of pupils' needs and work sensitively to help the pupils make progress. They collaborate very effectively with teaching staff, who value highly their contributions. In the online questionnaire, almost all (97%) of the LSAs stated that their views are sought, valued and acted upon, and all reported that they have benefitted from recent SPL.

The school takes a proactive approach to the early identification of pupils in year 8 who would benefit from additional literacy and/or numeracy support in small groups and delivered by subject specialists. Support lessons are appropriately challenging, interactive, engaging and fun; teaching strategies are used skilfully to have a positive impact on the pupils' learning.

Although pupil attendance in 2024-25 is in line with the NI average for similar schools (88%), the school has identified appropriate actions to improve the pupils' attendance to 90% and is using a range of strategies, including termly and yearly awards. In discussions, the pupils told us that they value these awards, including

'100%' badges for those with full attendance, and know about the importance of attending school. The staff are using successfully a range of strategies to support pupils and to keep them engaged in their learning and in education, resulting in a reduction in the number of pupil suspensions over each of the last four years.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The school's vision and values inform how the school defines, recognises and celebrates the uniqueness of every pupil. Pupil success is defined not only in terms of academic achievement but also by how well the pupils live out the school's values of **Respect, Kindness, Teamwork, Effort**. There is a vibrant culture of celebration of the pupils' achievements both inside and beyond the school through: attractive displays of the pupil's work, for example the **Amazing Things Happen** board; regular celebration assemblies; and the extensive use of social media.

A well-conceived, effective rewards system, based on the accumulation of achievement points, is linked closely to school values. The pupils are rewarded for positive behaviour, acts of kindness, working well with their peers, application, sporting and academic achievement. The pupils appreciate that their efforts are valued, recognised and acknowledged regularly throughout the year. In our discussions with pupils, they told us that the rewards system encourages them to live out the school values. Similarly, in their written responses, the parents/carers affirmed that the achievement points encourage their child to be 'the best version of themselves'.

The pupils approach their learning positively and take pride in their work. As they progress through the school they develop well as independent and responsible learners. Their interpersonal and team-working skills are fostered through well-planned opportunities to work with their peers in a range of contexts. The pupils reported during discussions with us, that they enjoy and benefit from their work in practical subjects: as they learn from doing, their skills are developed incrementally. Their numeracy skills and mathematical thinking are enhanced in real-life contexts. The pupils' oral and written skills are fostered consistently across the curriculum. They speak confidently on a range of topics and articulate their views clearly. They are given opportunities to write independently for an appropriately wide range of purposes and audiences: their writing is well presented and increasingly accurate in expression.

The staff have invested greatly in the use of quantitative and qualitative data to set targets for pupils, departments and at whole-school level. This includes the recent introduction of attitudinal and cognitive data at KS 3 to support pupils' attainment and help their parents/carers to understand their progress, address barriers to learning and inform the GCSE options process. Effective staff analysis and departmental planning ensure that interventions and adaptations are targeted precisely and monitored effectively.

Over the past three years, in GCSE English and GCSE mathematics, most of pupils (88.2% and 85.1% respectively) attained at grades A* to C. In 2025, and in line with the school's high expectations, nearly all (93.8%) of the year 12 pupils attained five or more GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C, with a majority

(72.9%) of these pupils attaining five or more GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications, including English and mathematics, at grades A* to C. The school is focused appropriately on closing the gap for pupils who have FSME attaining five or more GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications, including English and mathematics, at grades A* to C.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The school is well embedded in the local community. Long-standing, purposeful partnerships with local sports clubs, charities and youth and community organisations extend pupils' experiences beyond the classroom and enhance their wellbeing. In their responses to the online questionnaire, most (88%) of the parents/carers and almost all (94%) of the teachers agreed that the school has community links which impact positively on the pupils' learning and outcomes.

The school is an active member of Ballymoney ALC, which extends the curriculum meaningfully, particularly through shared education initiatives and joint classes for pupils. Ballymoney ALC also facilitates joint SPL, as well as clusters for SEN and pastoral staff. There are long-standing and effective links with local primary schools to help children in year 7 prepare for successful transition to Our Lady of Lourdes High School. Curricular links for pupils in year 7 include the popular taster day in school and highly valued art projects delivered in primary schools. These are complemented by the appointment of a dedicated primary liaison teacher and the open sharing of academic, pastoral and SEN-related information, which helps ensure that the pupils in year 7, including those entering the specialist provisions, are well supported when they start year 8.

SPL, aligned closely to the priorities in the SDP, is having a clear and sustained impact on the consistency of the pupils' learning experiences. First-hand evidence of learning and teaching is being used strategically by senior leaders to support high-quality professional dialogue and a shared understanding of effective pedagogy across the school. The development and use of shared online resources for staff promotes consistency in learning and teaching across the curriculum. The provision of specific SPL for early career teachers, including an open-door policy to observe more experienced colleagues, helps them develop a deeper understanding of maximising the pupils' learning and align their own teaching with the effective practice already well embedded in school. In addition, SPL for the LSAs and staff in the specialist provisions helps equip them to meet more effectively the increasingly complex needs of the pupils. Additionally, three members of staff are completing the EA 'Steps into Leadership' programme linked closely to the priorities for school improvement, including the development of the SEN provision, the strategic use of data to raise attainment and enhancing the rewards system.

The parents/carers value the high-quality and regular communication between school and home: in their responses to the online questionnaire, most (85%) of parents/carers agree that they receive helpful information about their child's progress. A notable addition to the partnership between school and home is a new software application which extends further meaningful engagement between staff and parents/carers.

Authentic learner participation is a significant strength of the school. The pupils are given progressive leadership opportunities which enable them to demonstrate responsibility and commitment, and to contribute meaningfully to school improvement and to the wider life of the school. The senior pupils help promote inclusion and equity, for example, helping staff to oversee the use of the sensory room and assisting pupils with SEN to participate fully in school life. The student council facilitates a strong and inclusive platform for pupil voice across the school and there is clear evidence of its impact on decisions which affect the pupils, such as meal options in the canteen, the provision of a new sports club for girls and the implementation of the rewards system. The views of pupils are integral to the review of learning and teaching as part of the SDP. As a result of all these roles and responsibilities, pupil leaders demonstrate confidence, maturity and advocacy for their peers.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

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.

3. NEXT STEPS

Our Lady of Lourdes High School is living out successfully the vision statement, **Caring, sharing, learning together to meet the future** which distils concisely the pupil-centred, communal and aspirational ethos which is at the heart of the whole school community. It is expressed practically in the mutually respectful and supportive relationships at all levels which enable the pupils to thrive, the deeply inclusive culture across the school and the priority given to every aspect of the pupils' wellbeing. The priorities for whole-school improvement are strategic and appropriate, and the evidence of this inspection indicates that measurable progress is being made.

As set out in the school's current development plan, the next steps for Our Lady of Lourdes High School are to take forward the following area for action: to review the curriculum to provide pupils at key stage 3 equal access to music and drama throughout key stage 3, and increase continuity and progression in the pupils' learning.

The District Inspector will monitor the school's progress in addressing the area for action, as part of ETI's routine monitoring processes.

Inspectors identified aspects of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely are:

- the deeply inclusive and welcoming school community in which all of the pupils' needs are identified and addressed, notably through the insightful and practical personal learning plans; and
- the staff's commitment to giving pupils an authentic voice, through enhanced learner participation in decision-making and purposeful leadership roles.

4. 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: SMALL SCHOOLS

In all post-primary schools where the enrolment number is below the minimum number of 500 in years 8 to 12, as set out in the Department of Education's [Sustainable Schools Policy](#), it will be important that the employing authority, school governors and the staff plan for, and manage, issues related to the sustainability of the school provision and school budget, in order to address the current and future needs of the pupils and the staff.

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