HMIE | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland
Luchd-sgrùdaidh an Rìgh airson Foghlam ann an Alba

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry – Phase 11

Protecting children in care from abuse: present and future

Report by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland

20 October 2026

CONFIDENTIAL

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1. Introduction

1.1 This report has been produced in response to a Section 21 Notice dated 8 September 2026 from the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (the Inquiry).

1.2 This report is intended to provide the Inquiry with information, as requested in Appendix 1 of the Section 21 Notice, to assist its examination of the nature, extent, and prevention of abuse by children in residential care settings.

1.3 Many children in residential care attend educational settings, a school, either within or out with their residential placement. All schools[1] in Scotland are subject to inspection by HM Inspectors.

1.4 This report explains how HM Inspectors inspect schools and review and evaluate the approaches taken by schools to safeguard children and young people from abuse by their peers.

1.5 This report provides information as required by the Inquiry under the following headings:

- National policy and guidance
- Data and evidence
- School responses and safeguarding practices
- Improvements within the educational context

2. History of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education

2.1 The Education (Scotland) Act 2025[2] ("the 2025 Act") was passed by the Scottish Parliament on 25 June 2025 and received Royal Assent on 6 August 2025. The 2025 Act provided for the establishment and functions of the office of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland. S37 (1) of the 2025 Act sets out the functions and purpose of the Chief Inspector as:

(a) recognising effective practice adopted by relevant educational establishments,
(b) promoting improvement in the quality of education in Scotland, including by:

(i) supporting relevant educational establishments to improve by:
(A) identifying areas for improvement,
(B) establishing where support may be required to make improvements,
(C) sharing effective practice,
(ii) sharing evidence to inform the development of education policy,

[1] In Scotland, there are public schools, grant-aided schools and independent schools. A public school is a school under the management of an education authority. A grant-aided school is a school in respect of which the Scottish Ministers give grants to the school's managers. An independent school is a school which is neither a public nor a grant-aided school and is managed by its proprietor.
[2] Education (Scotland) Act 2025

(c) providing assurance to the public that the quality of education provided in relevant educational establishments is being assessed and that establishments are being held to account accordingly.

2.2 His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) was established as an independent inspectorate on 1 April 2026 when the inspection function was transferred from Education Scotland.

3. National thematic reviews

3.1 As well as carrying out individual school inspections, HMIE also carry out thematic reviews. The purpose of a thematic review is to examine specific high-priority education themes by reviewing evidence from a sample of education establishments across the country. This evidence is used to highlight what is working well and identify key recommendations to promote improvement across the education system.

Two thematic reviews carried out in recent years by HMIE are particularly relevant to this current investigation by the Inquiry.

3.2 Approaches to recording and monitoring incidents of bullying in schools

3.3 In 2022 HMIE carried out a thematic review of approaches to recording and monitoring incidents of bullying in schools[3]. The report was published in February 2023. HM Inspectors visited 25 schools across all 32 local authorities and gathered feedback from over 8000 children and young people and over 1600 parents and carers. The report recognised positive practice in schools, including how staff promoted inclusion fairness and support for learners. The report made the following key recommendations:

- Scottish Government should work with partners to review the functionality of the bullying and equalities module (BEM) within the SEEMiS[4] system to make it more practical for schools to record and monitor incidents of bullying.
- Schools should work in partnership with parents, learners and staff to agree a shared definition of bullying within their school community. This will help to strengthen approaches to recording and support monitoring of alleged incidents of bullying.
- Schools should ensure they have suitable arrangements in place to encourage children and young people to report, with confidence, all incidents of alleged bullying.
- Schools must regularly record bullying incidents accurately and monitor this information systematically. This will allow them to identify more readily the scope and scale of bullying incidents and make improvements in policy and practice to support learners' wellbeing.

[3] Approaches to recording and monitoring incidents of bullying in schools | National thematic inspections | Inspection reports | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland

[4] SEEMiS is the Scottish local government's Education Management Information System (MIS) provider. As the standard MIS within Scottish Education, all local student data is processed and managed by SEEMiS software

3.4 Relationship and behaviour: Inspection findings from academic year 2024/2025[5]

3.5 During 2024, HM Inspectors published advice on how they would strengthen the evidence they gather and report on behaviour. HM Inspectors used evidence from 246 school inspections carried out between 2024 and 2025. HM Inspectors found that in most schools children and young people experience positive relationships with staff and peers, which help create a positive environment for learning and wellbeing. HM Inspectors identified five essential points:

- Relationships are a clear strength across most schools;
- Low level disruption is impacting learning;
- Serious disruptive/violent behaviour is less common but has a disproportionate impact;
- Incident recording, especially for serious and discriminatory behaviour, is inconsistent; and
- Better outcomes are linked to consistent whole-school practice and multi-agency support.

3.6 This report was published on the HMIE website on 30 September 2026.

3.7 The findings and recommendations of these national thematic reviews are reflected in the responses to the Section 21 Notice.

3.8 The following sections provide responses to each of the questions asked in Appendix 1 of the Section 21 Notice.

4. National policy and guidance

With reference to the relevant national policy and guidance, please describe what educational settings are expected to do to support children to develop healthy respectful peer relationships within the school environment.

4.1 Schools are expected to promote wellbeing, equality and inclusion through the frameworks and national guidance used across Scottish education. HM Inspectors evaluate schools against the quality indicators contained within How Good Is Our School? (4th Edition)[6] (HGIOS4), particularly Quality Indicator 3.1, Ensuring Wellbeing, Equality and Inclusion, and safeguarding arrangements within Quality Indicator 2.1. Schools are expected to provide environments that promote positive relationships, children's rights, inclusion, participation and the wellbeing of all children and young people.

4.2 Schools are also expected to implement national child protection guidance and guidance contained within Included, Engaged and Involved, including behaviour, attendance,

[5] Relationships and behaviour: Inspection findings from academic year 2024 to 2025 | HM Chief Inspector reports | Inspection reports | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland
[6] How Good is Our School (4th edition)

relationships, physical intervention and seclusion. HM Inspectors evaluate how schools promote positive relationships, support learners' wellbeing and address behaviours that may place children and young people at risk.

4.3 Schools are expected to implement child protection policies and guidance that aligns with the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 (updated 2023)[7]. Schools are expected to ensure policies and practices align fully with the specific requirements of the national guidance. Schools must ensure that all staff understand their responsibilities, including those with additional duties. All staff should receive professional learning to support them to fulfil their responsibilities in relation to any disclosures, complaints or changes to children's presentation or behaviour. Staff are expected to be fully competent in speaking with children in a sensitive way, acting promptly and without bias, reporting, recording and escalating any concerns or incidents in line with school policy. Independent schools must provide a statement confirming that all persons employed by or in the school have undertaken appropriate child protection training within the previous 12-month period. HM Inspectors speak with staff and visitors during inspection to ensure they are fully aware of the school's policy and practice, and their responsibilities for child protection.

4.4 HM Inspectors expect policies and practices in schools to take full account of national guidance related to behaviour, relationships, attendance, exclusions, physical intervention and bullying. HM Inspectors evaluate how well schools uphold the rights of learners and promote their safety and wellbeing against national guidance including:

4.5 Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools[8] sets out Scotland's national approach to promoting attendance and addressing absence. It emphasises inclusive school cultures, positive relationships, learner engagement, and partnership working with families to remove barriers to attendance and participation. HM Inspectors evaluate how well schools monitor attendance and take appropriate steps to ensure children are safe when not in school. HM Inspectors examine the impact of activities and initiatives taken by a school to promote regular attendance and remove any barriers children face preventing them from attending school.

4.6 Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2: Preventing and Managing School Exclusions[9] provides guidance on preventing exclusion. It promotes relationship-based, inclusive approaches that address underlying needs and behaviours, ensuring exclusion is used only when required and that children and young people remain supported and connected to learning. Schools are expected to record and monitor the use of exclusions, be responsive to changing or emerging needs, and provide additional support to children and families as appropriate. Schools are also expected to ensure that children are fully supported with their learning and wellbeing during an exclusion and are helped to return to school successfully.

[7] National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 - updated 2023 - gov.scot
[8] Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools - gov.scot
[9] Included, engaged and involved part 2: preventing and managing school exclusions - gov.scot

4.7 Included, Engaged and Involved Part 3: A Relationships and Rights-Based Approach to Physical Intervention in Schools[10] outlines expectations for preventing and responding to distressed behaviour. It promotes children's rights, early intervention, de-escalation and co-regulation. It provides guidance in relation to the use of restraint or seclusion. Schools are expected to monitor closely the use and frequency of restraint and seclusion. All incidents should be reviewed, with adaptations made to risk assessments and children's plans as appropriate. Debriefs should take place following any incident, with children supported to contribute fully.

4.8 Respect for All: Scotland's national anti-bullying guidance[11] provides a framework for preventing and responding to bullying and promoting respectful relationships.

4.9 Schools are expected to translate guidance into consistent whole-school approaches that promote positive and respectful relationships, value learner voice and embed children's rights in everyday practice. Staff are expected to work in partnership with children and young people, families and other services to create inclusive environments where children and young people feel safe, listened to and involved in decisions that affect them. Schools are expected to implement effective strategies to prevent bullying and discriminatory behaviour, identify concerns and respond to harmful peer behaviour through restorative, relationship-based approaches.

How does HMIE evaluate educational settings adherence to Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People and other relevant national policy and guidance and approaches relating to:

- child protection and safeguarding;
- wellbeing;
- relationships and behaviour;
- participation and inclusion?

4.10 HM Inspectors evaluate how well schools understand and implement Respect for All guidance through scrutiny of a range of evidence during inspection. This includes reviewing anti-bullying policies and procedures to assess the extent to which expectations are understood and implemented by staff.

4.11 HM Inspectors review a proportionate range of documentation, for example, complaints, chronologies, children's plans, risk assessments and approaches to the administration of medicine. They examine records relating to bullying incidents, including recording and monitoring arrangements and follow-up actions. They consider whether

[10] Physical intervention in schools - a relationships and rights based approach: guidance - gov.scot
[11] Respect for All: national approach to anti-bullying - gov.scot

incidents are documented consistently, whether responses are timely and appropriate, and whether the actions taken have resulted in improved outcomes for children and young people.

4.12 The views and experiences of children and young people form a key source of inspection evidence. Through pre-inspection questionnaires, focus groups, discussions and observations, HM inspectors evaluate the extent to which learners feel safe and respected. HM Inspectors consider the wider culture of the school, including the quality of relationships, learner participation and staff understanding and implementation of anti-bullying approaches. In all school inspections, pre-inspection questionnaires for children and young people include a number of questions related to wellbeing. For example, children and young people are asked if they feel safe in school, if peers treat them with respect and if the school deals well with bullying. HM Inspectors analyse responses from children and young people to evaluate how well schools keep children and young people safe. While questionnaires are confidential and children and young people have the option to remain anonymous, in some instances, HM Inspectors will disclose specific information or the name of a child or young person to senior staff in the school. This would occur if it was deemed that the information provided by the child or young person indicated a potential safeguarding issue.

4.13 HM Inspectors triangulate all evidence gathered through inspection activity to reach their judgements and determine whether there are strengths or areas for development in safeguarding arrangements in relation to Respect for All.

4.14 *Evaluation of child protection and safeguarding arrangements*

4.14.1 HM Inspectors evaluate safeguarding and child protection as a core part of every school inspection, using standard practices and guidance to gather and assess evidence consistently. Before inspection, schools complete a safeguarding and child protection self-evaluation form, which HM Inspectors discuss with staff and, where appropriate, children and young people.

4.14.2 HM Inspectors review a proportionate range of evidence, including safeguarding policies, children's plans, risk assessments, behaviour management plans, chronologies, records of physical intervention, relevant multi-agency documentation, complaints and arrangements for administering medicines. They also seek the views of children, parents, staff and partners[12]. In independent schools, HM Inspectors examine governance arrangements and the scrutiny and challenge they provide. This evidence is triangulated to identify effective practice and any concerns requiring action.

4.14.3 Where concerns are identified, HM Inspectors ensure areas for improvement are explicitly recorded and shared with the school and local authority/proprietor. HM Inspectors

[12] Partners associated with schools are organisations or individuals who contribute to the school or curriculum in order to support children and young people. This may include allied health professionals, social work services, school chaplains and local community organisations.

follow clear escalation procedures for circumstances where there may be evidence of immediate or significant risk. In such cases, concerns are raised promptly through established HMIE processes to ensure appropriate action is taken. Inspection findings reflect both the quality of safeguarding arrangements and the extent to which further improvements are required.

4.15 *Evaluation of wellbeing*

4.15.1 Wellbeing is evaluated principally through HGIOS4 Quality Indicator 3.1, Ensuring Wellbeing, Equality and Inclusion. HM Inspectors assess how effectively schools promote wellbeing, inclusion and equitable outcomes through observation, document review, questionnaires and discussions with learners, staff, parents and partners.

4.15.2 Evidence includes children's responses about safety and health, focus-group discussions, curriculum and wellbeing-tracking information, and the use of the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) National Practice Model[13] to identify needs, plan support and improve outcomes. HM Inspectors also consider targeted support plans, their impact on engagement and progress, and the school's work to promote attendance and remove barriers to participation.

4.16 *Evaluation of relationships and behaviour*

4.16.1 HM Inspectors evaluate relationships and behaviour by considering both preventative practice and the school's response when concerns arise. Evidence includes observations of learning and interactions; the views of children and young people gathered through questionnaires, discussions and focus groups; discussions with staff and leaders; and review of positive relationships policies, behaviour management plans, incident records and relevant learner records.

4.16.2 HM Inspectors assess whether rights-based approaches promote respectful relationships and a safe, inclusive learning environment. Where a child may present a risk to themselves or others, they examine risk assessments and planning arrangements, including any use of physical intervention, restraint or seclusion, to determine whether practice is lawful, proportionate, properly recorded and consistent with national guidance.

4.16.3 HM Inspectors also evaluate how effectively schools prevent and respond to bullying, prejudice-based incidents and harmful peer behaviour. They consider whether concerns are identified promptly, recorded, managed and followed up; whether recurrence is addressed; and whether individual plans, risk assessments and shared strategies reflect the views of children and families.

4.17 *Evaluation of participation and inclusion*

4.17.1 Participation and inclusion are evaluated through HGIOS4, particularly Quality Indicator 3.1. HM Inspectors engage directly with learners through questionnaires, focus groups, meetings and informal discussion. They assess how effectively schools include

[13] National Practice Model - Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) - gov.scot

children and young people in learning, provide appropriate support, and enable participation in school life and decision-making.

4.17.2 In evaluating participation, HM Inspectors consider the quality and range of opportunities provided for children and young people to be involved in the life of the school and in decisions that affect them. This includes exploring the extent to which learners contribute to school improvement, policy development, wellbeing, inclusion and school culture. HM Inspectors evaluate how well schools ensure that participation is inclusive and representative of the wider learner population.

4.17.3 HM Inspectors evaluate how effectively schools meet the needs of children and young people requiring additional support. This includes how well barriers to participation, achievement and wellbeing are identified and addressed. HM Inspectors evaluate experiences and outcomes for children and young people with protected characteristics, those affected by poverty, care-experienced learners, young carers and other vulnerable groups. HM Inspectors scrutinise policies and practices to ensure that the school promotes equity and diversity and that children and young people feel valued and included within the life of the school.

4.17.4 HM Inspectors gather evidence about how safe children and young people feel within the school environment. This includes evaluating whether learners know how to raise concerns, access support and report bullying or discrimination. Through engagement with learners, parents/carers and staff, HM Inspectors determine how well approaches to concerns and complaints are understood, and whether children and young people are confident that concerns will be listened to and addressed appropriately.

5. Data and evidence

What information does HMIE gather or review in relation to:
- child protection and safeguarding,
- wellbeing
- relationships and behaviour., and
- participation and inclusion?

5.1 HM Inspectors will identify and review a range of evidence provided by the school related to child protection and safeguarding; wellbeing; relationships and behaviour; and participation and inclusion in order to evaluate the school's approaches in these areas.

5.2 HM Inspectors will review the following evidence provided by schools during the inspection:

- samples of child protection plans and children's plans;
- samples of risk assessments and behaviour management plans;
- wellbeing and attainment information;
- records of physical intervention and restraint;

- samples of chronologies and minutes of meetings with partner agencies;
- relevant policy documents;
- samples of files, including those who are on the child protection register and care-experienced learners;
- current or recent complaints related to safeguarding and child protection;
- notifications to the Care Inspectorate regarding safeguarding issues;
- records or logs of incidents of bullying including sexual harassment and assault;
- physical intervention policy and records;
- records of administration of medicines;
- accidents and injuries log and any overviews;
- attendance, late coming and exclusion statistics;
- safeguarding and child protection self-evaluation forms;
- staff, learner, parent and partner questionnaires;
- evidence from observation of classrooms and wider school activity;
- focus group evidence from children and young people; and
- discussions with child protection coordinators, school leaders, staff and partners.

What information are educational settings expected to record when they become aware that a child may have experienced bullying or other harmful behaviour from another child?

• How does HMIE review such records as part of its inspection?

• What are the limitations of the available evidence, and how might these limitations be addressed?

5.3 Schools should follow approaches for reporting and recording bullying in line with national guidance, Respect for All. This includes:

- the children and young people involved, as well as staff or other adults;
- where and when the bullying took place;
- the type of bullying experienced, for example, name-calling, rumours or threats;
- any underlying prejudice, including details of any protected characteristic;
- consideration of personal or additional support needs and wellbeing concerns; and
- ensuring that children and families are kept fully informed and provided with support.

5.4 HM Inspectors review and evaluate evidence about bullying and peer relationships in every inspection as part of their wider evaluation of wellbeing, safety, positive relationships and children's rights. In all inspections HM Inspectors listen to the views of children and young people about how well their school deals with incidents of bullying and harmful behaviour. HM Inspectors do not investigate individual allegations; that responsibility rests with the appropriate agencies and authorities. Where inspection evidence indicates

weaknesses or gaps, HM Inspectors undertake proportionate additional scrutiny to establish their significance and impact, including further discussion with leaders and review of relevant learner records.

5.5 HM Inspectors examine bullying records alongside a sample of children and young people's personal records. The sample is informed by questionnaire responses, discussions with learners and professional dialogue with leaders and staff. It typically includes children involved in child protection processes, care-experienced learners, those displaying distressed or challenging behaviour, and those who face barriers to learning or require additional support.

5.6 HM Inspectors assess records against national guidance to determine whether concerns, incidents, interventions and follow-up actions were recorded and addressed promptly, proportionately and in a child-centred manner. They consider this evidence alongside school policies, discussions with staff and learners, and evidence of partnership working. This enables them to evaluate the quality of decision-making, risk assessment, support planning and coordination, and to identify areas for improvement or further professional learning.

5.7 There are some limitations in the available evidence, examples of which are detailed below:

- inspection is not designed or intended to detect individual instances of bullying or abuse;
- there can be variability in approaches and interpretation of national guidance;
- HM Inspectors do not investigate safeguarding or child protection concerns. Should concerns of this nature arise during inspection, HM Inspectors follow our own safeguarding policies and protocols to ensure recording and referral are undertaken timeously. The school or setting once made aware, must then ensure that all necessary steps are taken in dealing with the concern in line with their own child protection procedures. HM Inspectors will then seek assurance that all necessary actions have been taken by the school or setting;
- inspection evidence depends significantly on the documentation available at the time;
- in some schools records are incomplete and in some cases absent or of poor quality;
- children and young people may be reluctant to report bullying, abuse or harmful behaviour; and
- some information may be held by, or reported only to, other agencies.

5.8 Schools use a range of systems and approaches to record, monitor and analyse concerns and incidents. Current national guidance, including Included, Engaged and Involved and Respect for All, allows for local interpretation by schools and local authorities. This results in variation in recording and reporting practices. While local authorities use the SEEMiS system to record and manage information, independent schools do not use this system and therefore have their own systems in place. The Respect for All guidance sets out

how bullying should be addressed, including recording and monitoring of bullying incidents. This guidance provides a structure for local authority officers and schools to measure the effectiveness of schools' arrangements, enabling them to analyse patterns and trends and strengthen existing approaches to quality assurance.

5.9 Information sharing across agencies is challenging due to the use of multiple electronic data systems and the subsequent risk of breaching data protection legislation. HMIE currently has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Care Inspectorate to enable sharing of information. Addressing these issues requires more effective mechanisms for sharing information and data between agencies.

5.10 At present, there is no consistent national dataset or overview that captures the prevalence of these harms, the number and nature of incidents, or the characteristics and experiences of children and young people involved. This limits the ability to identify trends, assess impact and target support effectively at local and national levels.

6. School responses and safeguarding practices

What steps are educational settings expected to take when they become aware that a child may have experienced or engaged in bullying or other harmful behaviours?

6.1 When concerns arise regarding bullying, harmful sexual behaviour, peer conflict, child protection or potential criminal behaviour, HM Inspectors expect schools to demonstrate a clear understanding of the nature of the concern and respond appropriately, in line with national guidance, relevant legislation and their own policies. Staff should be able to evidence clear decision-making regarding when incidents can be managed through school-based wellbeing approaches and when referral to child protection processes or other statutory services, such as police or social work services, is required. Schools should ensure that children and young people who have experienced harm are listened to, supported and protected from further harm. This should include consideration of their safety, wellbeing and emotional support needs.

6.2 HM Inspectors expect schools to provide appropriate support and intervention for children and young people whose behaviour has caused harm. This may involve assessing underlying wellbeing needs, addressing attitudes and behaviours, implementing targeted interventions, involving parents or carers, and working with partner agencies where appropriate.

What measures are educational settings expected to have in place to prevent, identify, and respond to bullying and other harmful behaviours, and to safeguard children from harm?

6.3 Schools are expected to have in place a number of approaches to prevent, identify and respond to bullying and safeguard children and young people from harm. These include:

- curriculum programmes to support positive relationships and prevent bullying and harmful behaviour;
- systems for recording bullying incidents;
- current safeguarding and child protection policies;
- relevant staff professional learning and training;
- child protection coordinator (and depute);
- risk assessments and individual plans;
- child protection arrangements;
- behaviour or positive relationships policies;
- appropriate procedures governing physical intervention, where relevant;
- systems for recording and reporting safeguarding concerns;
- arrangements for responding to complaints and concerns raised by children and young people; and
- arrangements for engaging with parents and carers to support their child's positive behaviour.

6.4 HM Inspectors expect schools to demonstrate strong preventative approaches to bullying and harmful behaviour. These approaches should be embedded within the culture, ethos and daily practices of the school. Schools should promote positive relationships, respect, inclusion, equity and children's rights through a whole-school approach. Schools are expected to ensure children and young people feel safe, valued and confident in their learning environments. Where identified, children and young people should receive targeted, bespoke support to help keep themselves and others safe.

6.5 Children and young people should understand how to report concerns. Effective practice is often characterised by meaningful learner participation, with children and young people contributing to the development, implementation and review of policies, practices and approaches related to wellbeing, relationships and safety. Preventative work should be supported by a curriculum that provides age-appropriate learning on areas such as relationships, consent and online safety.

6.6 Professional learning for staff is an important factor to ensure a preventative culture. Staff should receive regular and appropriate professional learning to recognise, prevent and respond to bullying, harmful behaviour, online harms and child protection concerns. HM Inspectors expect staff to understand fully their safeguarding responsibilities and be confident in identifying concerns and taking appropriate action. Senior leaders are expected to monitor and review safeguarding approaches, identifying any emerging patterns or trends in, for example, hate crime, bullying or the use of seclusion. Any increased risk should be reviewed and responded to through wider or extended preventative strategies.

How does HMIE evaluate educational settings' approaches to safeguarding, child protection, and risk management?

Please describe how HMIE engage with children during this process, including:

- the methodology used,

- the type of evidence gathered, and

- how this evidence informs inspection findings.

6.7 HM Inspectors evaluate safeguarding, child protection and risk management through policies, plans, records, self-evaluation, questionnaire responses, observation, focus groups and discussions with children and young people, staff and leaders. They assess alignment with legislation and national guidance, staff understanding, leadership oversight, the quality of risk assessments and plans, and whether practice improves children's safety, wellbeing and rights.

6.8 Follow-up activity is determined by the outcome of inspections. Where safeguarding arrangements are found to be effective, no additional scrutiny is required. Where non-urgent areas for improvement are identified, HM Inspectors may include these within agreed improvement priorities for the school and governing body to take forward. In cases where there are urgent weaknesses, HMIE will undertake more intensive follow-up activity, requiring evidence of improvement within a specified period. This would include further engagement to evaluate progress. If a significant concern is identified then the school and local authority are alerted to this immediately.

Inspection findings are reported to schools, parents and governing bodies through published reports which highlight strengths, areas for improvement and, where necessary, specific safeguarding concerns.

6.8.1 Engagement with children and young people during inspection

Inspection methodologies

6.8.2 HM Inspectors gather children's views through pre-inspection questionnaires, focus groups, classroom and wider observation, group meetings, informal discussion and, where appropriate, direct meetings. In residential and secure settings, HM Inspectors may use informal approaches, such as speaking with children during breaks or lunch, recognising that some children may be reluctant to speak formally with unfamiliar adults.

Evidence gathered

6.8.3 HM Inspector's review evidence provided through engagement with children and young people about feeling safe, wellbeing, rights, relationships, learning experiences, school culture and the support available to them.

How children's evidence informs findings

6.8.4 Children's views contribute to evaluations of wellbeing, inclusion, safeguarding, relationships and overall school effectiveness. HM Inspectors review questionnaire responses before the visit and identify matters requiring further exploration. Safety or wellbeing concerns are escalated, with immediate-risk concerns acted upon without waiting for the inspection visit. This means the HM Inspector would contact the senior leader or

child protection coordinator within the school and the local authority (if necessary) immediately. Evidence from children is considered alongside documentary evidence, observation and discussion with staff and partners when HM Inspectors reach their evaluations.

6.8.5 While views shared during an inspection are treated with sensitivity and reported in a way that protects individual identities, HM Inspectors also have a responsibility to act where information indicates that a child or young person may be at risk of harm. Where a disclosure is made, or where an immediate safeguarding or child protection concern arises, HM Inspectors follow established safeguarding procedures. They take prompt action to share concerns with the appropriate school leaders and, where necessary, relevant agencies. In these circumstances, the safety and wellbeing of the child or young person take precedence over confidentiality.

6.8.6 HM Inspectors adapt engagement approaches to meet the needs of children and young people. HM Inspectors may use differentiated communication methods, visual supports and individual conversations to support children and young people with additional support needs to express their views.

6.8.7 HM Inspectors discuss children and young people's experiences, support and relationships within their residential setting and across the wider school community. HM Inspectors take account of the unique secure care contexts, vulnerabilities and rights of children and young people.

Have HM Inspectors identified any safeguarding interventions, programmes, or approaches that appear particularly effective in preventing or responding to bullying and other harmful behaviours in educational settings? If so, please provide examples and describe any common characteristics, principles, or factors that contribute to their effectiveness?

6.9 HMIE does not routinely identify or endorse individual named programmes as universally effective across all settings. Inspection evidence indicates that effective practice is more commonly characterised by coherent whole-school approaches that are well led, consistently implemented and regularly evaluated for impact. Effective approaches tend to include a clear anti-bullying or positive relationships policy, developed with children and young people; a shared understanding among staff of bullying, harmful behaviour and child protection thresholds; consistent recording and monitoring of concerns; timely support for children affected; and appropriate assessment and intervention for children who have caused harm.

6.10 HM Inspectors have also identified the importance of trusting relationships, a strong ethos of respect and inclusion, effective supervision and safe spaces, meaningful engagement with children and young people, and close working with parents, carers and partner agencies. In settings where responses are most effective, leaders use evidence from

incidents, complaints, learner voice and wellbeing data to identify patterns, review risk and adapt practice. Approaches are strongest where prevention, early intervention, safeguarding and support are connected rather than treated as separate processes.

7. Improvements within the educational context

In HMIE's view, what further steps, reforms, or improvements are needed to strengthen protection for children from bullying and other harmful behaviours within educational settings? Please comment on any gaps and potential improvements in relation to:

- **policy, guidance, regulation training and resources;**
- **identification, reporting, and prevention of bullying and other harmful behaviours; and**
- **support for children affected by bullying or other harmful behaviours.**

7.1 Further improvements to strengthen protection for children from bullying and other harmful behaviours should focus on strengthening consistency, clarity and assurance across the education system. There would be benefit in ensuring that all educational settings have a clear and shared understanding of bullying, harmful peer behaviour, harmful sexual behaviour and child protection concerns, and of the different actions required in response to each. Schools should move beyond policy compliance towards demonstrable impact, including evidence that children feel safe, know how to report concerns and receive timely support when concerns arise.

7.2 Additional improvement could include strengthened use of data and sharing of information across agencies such as education, police, health and social work.

7.3 There is also scope to strengthen how children and young people, including those in residential, secure, boarding and specialist provision, are involved in shaping prevention, reporting and support arrangements.

7.4 *Gaps in policy and guidance regulation, training and resources*

7.4.1 National policy and guidance provide the framework for safeguarding, child protection, wellbeing and anti-bullying. There should be continued engagement with schools, parents, children and young people and other stakeholders to support the development of policies and guidance that recognise and reflect the emerging issues such as online bullying and harmful sexual behaviour in schools. Staff require ongoing training to recognise and respond to bullying, harmful sexual behaviour, online harm, prejudice-based behaviour and wider safeguarding concerns.

7.5 *Gaps in identification, reporting and prevention arrangements*

7.5.1 Identification and reporting remain challenging because children may not always recognise behaviour as bullying or abuse, may be reluctant to disclose concerns, or may not

have confidence that adults will respond effectively. Some harmful behaviour may occur online, outwith the direct supervision of staff, or in informal spaces where patterns are less visible. Recording may also vary between schools and sectors, which can limit the ability to identify recurrence, escalation, prejudice-based patterns or risks involving particular locations, groups or individuals.

7.5.2 Improvements should focus on safe and accessible reporting routes for children, stronger quality assurance of records, better analysis of incident data and more systematic use of learner voice. Preventative work should continue to include curriculum-based learning, whole-school approaches to respectful relationships, targeted support for vulnerable children and staff awareness of emerging risks.

7.6 *Gaps in support for children affected by bullying or harmful behaviour*

7.6.1 Schools should ensure that systems are in place to support children and young people to report incidents of bullying and harmful behaviours. These systems should be well promoted and children and young people encouraged to report their concerns in the knowledge they will be dealt with appropriately. Schools should continue to ensure that children who experience bullying or other harmful behaviour receive timely, proportionate and child-centred support in line with national guidance. Rigorous and robust application of current guidance will help schools prevent and respond appropriately to bullying and harmful behaviour. Schools should always aim to protect children, prevent recurrence and support positive change while maintaining a clear focus on the impact on any children and young people who have experienced bullying or harm.

8. Conclusion

8.1 The evidence shows that protecting children from bullying, abuse and other harmful behaviour requires a coherent, rights-based and child-centred approach. Effective protection depends on clear national guidance, strong leadership, confident and well-trained staff, consistent recording and monitoring, meaningful engagement with children and young people, and effective partnership working. Together, these elements create inclusive environments where children feel safe, trust that concerns will be taken seriously and receive appropriate support

8.2 Through inspection and wider scrutiny, HMIE will continue to provide independent assurance on child protection and safeguarding across Scotland's schools and settings. It will share effective practice, identify areas for improvement and promptly report concerns to the appropriate bodies. This work will support system-wide improvement and uphold the safety, wellbeing, inclusion and rights of all children and young people.

8.3 HMIE trusts that this report provides the information requested in the Section 21 Notice and assists the Inquiry in its consideration of these matters. HMIE would be pleased to discuss any aspect of the report in more detail, clarify the evidence presented or provide any further information that may assist the Inquiry in its work.

On behalf of the Office of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland

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