

Validated self-evaluation



Argyll and Bute Council
19 February 2013

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1. The aims, nature and scope of validated self-evaluation

2. Validated self-evaluation in Argyll and Bute Council

Argyll and Bute Council has in place a well-established performance management system while Community Services (Education) (the Education Service) has an appropriate infrastructure to manage improvement planning and reporting on the standards and quality of its work. As part of its strategy to drive continuous improvement and ensure that it is delivering best value, the Council invited HM Inspectors (Education Scotland) to join it to work on a validated self-evaluation (VSE). Senior managers from Argyll and Bute worked closely with Education Scotland's Area Lead Officer to prepare for the VSE. Together they identified areas of the Council's work (themes) for focused attention during the VSE. The Education Service took this work forward by preparing helpful self-evaluation documents for each of these themes along with a VSE implementation plan to guide staff involved in the process.

This report includes Education Scotland's assessment of the quality of the Education Service's self-evaluation process. It also summarises high level strengths of the Service as well as the actions it plans to take in order to ensure continuous improvement.

A new Administration was formed in May 2012 and, during the VSE, key elected members worked closely with senior managers to refresh and communicate the Council's vision for education. Both elected members and senior managers expressed a willingness to be creative in their use of resources and to ensure joined up thinking across all areas of the Council's work. They were keen to ensure that the Education Service continues to deliver appropriate experiences and outcomes at a time of financial challenge. They also recognised the importance of keeping organisational structures under review during the process of integrating the delivery of health and social care within the Council area.

The VSE built on ongoing self-evaluation taking place within the Education Service. Senior managers agreed four themes for focused attention during the VSE process.

1. Evaluate the performance and impact of *Opportunities for All*, focusing on curriculum flexibility, skills for learning life and work and *16+ Learning Choices*.
2. Evaluate the impact of strategies to ensure the effective acquisition and retention of literacy skills from the early level to the second level in preparation for the coordination of a cohesive approach to literacy within Argyll and Bute.
3. Evaluate the performance and impact of an integrated Early Years Service in terms of creating a positive start for children and their families.
4. The Education Service's work to strengthen its approach to reviewing the quality of education provided by its schools.

Themes were carefully chosen to ensure that the VSE had maximum impact on the experiences of a broad range of Argyll and Bute's learners. Senior managers were insightful in putting in place very effective VSE working groups. This helped to build further the Education Service's capacity to carry out high quality self-evaluation, refine staff skills and promote organisational learning.

VSE working groups, each led skilfully by a senior manager, were put in place to cover the four themes. Well-researched scoping papers for each theme were organised around the quality indicators from *Quality Management in Education 2*¹. The papers incorporated intelligence, evidence and evaluative statements. Each had a strong emphasis on improvements in performance and impact on learners. Along with a range of supporting data, the papers proved to be very helpful in informing the VSE programme.

A well-planned and highly appropriate programme of activities was put in place by the Education Service for the core phase of the VSE. The Service gave careful consideration to the involvement of stakeholders and partners when planning and setting up self-evaluation activities. HM Inspectors (HMIs) and Associate Assessors (AAs) linked with clearly-focused VSE working groups while the latter gathered information from various sources. These included focus groups, observations of practice, visits to establishments and reviews of data. These activities were characterised by high quality professional dialogue and allowed senior managers to broaden and deepen their knowledge and understanding of the work being carried out in each theme area. Professional support was incorporated into many of the activities and senior managers and staff recognised that this was most effective when complemented by professional challenge. Senior managers reflected carefully on their observations and adapted their approach as required. They recognised that there is scope to develop further staff confidence and skills in techniques for sharing good practice and professional challenge to drive improvement. They noted that for some working groups which met regularly, staff would have benefited from having a higher awareness of the strategic context of their work. They identified the need to strengthen the link between ongoing self-evaluation, school review and improvement planning.

At the end of the core phase of the VSE, HMIs and AAs worked together with the Education Service to take stock of the findings to date. They reflected on the methodology, the quality of organisational learning which had taken place, and on the range of activities within the VSE programme. They reached a shared view on the robustness and reliability of the evidence gathered, and on the levels of confidence they could have when evaluating work in each of the four theme areas, and in identifying next steps. All involved concluded that the VSE had been well-led and could be used to inform strategic planning. It was clear that the methodology which had been developed and refined during the VSE would have much wider applications across the Education Service. The Education Scotland team was satisfied at this stage that the approach to self-evaluation and the techniques being used within the Education Service were of high quality.

¹ *Quality Managements in Education 2* (HM Inspectorate of Education 2006) is a framework of self-evaluation for Local Authority Education Services.

The Executive Director and Head of Service regarded the VSE process as valuable Continuous Professional Development and an organisational development opportunity for the Education Service. They were strongly committed to incorporating the outcomes of the VSE into service improvement planning. As a result, a second (developmental) phase of VSE was put in place. This allowed senior managers to work in partnership with HMIs and AAs on aspects of the four themes. During this phase, Themes 1 and 2 were brought together and intensive developmental and policy work was carried out by senior managers, with HMIs and AAs offering professional support and challenge. Examples of work carried out during this phase include the refining of a literacy strategy paper and the refreshing of the policy on school review.

3. Education Scotland's assessment of the quality of self-evaluation in Argyll and Bute Council

The Education Service routinely uses data from a range of sources to inform its improvement planning. It has been successful in improving a number of aspects of its work. These include securing significant improvements in the number of young people moving on to positive destinations after leaving school and improved arrangements for delivering early years services. Its well-established approaches to self-evaluation were refined and strengthened as a result of VSE, and during the VSE the Service demonstrated high levels of skill in planning and implementing self-evaluation processes and activities. Staff were knowledgeable about the value of high quality self-evaluation in planning for improvement. Their well-considered approach to preparing for self-evaluation, including the scoping of themes using a recognised quality improvement framework, provided a firm foundation on which to base the VSE process. Their highly-professional approach to VSE included them engaging openly with the Education Scotland team. They embraced the opportunity to reflect critically and constructively on the quality of their work and its impact on learners. They engaged in high quality professional dialogue with each other and were able to make very good use of the independent perspective of HMIs and AAs. They adopted a robust approach to reviewing the sources and quality of their evidence and their methods for gathering it. The opportunity to work collaboratively with HMIs and AAs raised their awareness of practice in other council areas and improved further the quality of their analysis of data.

In conducting self-evaluation activities, senior managers drew on the expertise of a wide range of staff and made use of an appropriate range of types and sources of data. As the VSE process progressed, coherence across the areas for focused attention increased and important connections between areas were established. For example, activities related to the Positive Starts and Literacy themes were combined in the developmental phase. This helped to make more effective use of resources and helped staff to focus on the high level outcomes which self-evaluation was seeking to promote. Increasingly, the Service was aware of the need to build on its best practice in balancing support and challenge through the use of robust questioning techniques to ensure that its conclusions were based on the highest quality evidence. Examples of partnerships external to the Education Service and the Council were included in the Education Service's self-evaluation activities.

These created helpful opportunities for the Service to take a wider (beyond school) perspective when evaluating those aspects of its work which it requires to deliver collaboratively. For example, work carried out during the VSE with Argyll College allowed a shared action plan to be agreed and developed.

What strengths has the validated self-evaluation identified?

Argyll and Bute Council and HMIs have jointly identified the following high level strengths through the VSE.

- The shared commitment across the Education Service and its partners to strengthening approaches to self-evaluation and to applying these to drive improvements.
- High levels of professionalism, knowledge and skill amongst senior managers and staff.
- Senior managers' creative and responsive approach to finding solutions to meet corporate objectives and identified needs.
- Examples of significant improvements in outcomes, including improvements in the number of young people achieving positive post-school destinations.
- Examples of improvements in arrangements for the delivery of services, for example in early years, as a result of established self-evaluation processes.
- The engagement of elected members and senior managers in developing a shared vision for education in Argyll and Bute.

What is the Council's capacity for improvement?

There is a strong commitment within the Education Service to continuous improvement. Highly professional staff have good levels of knowledge and skill in self-evaluation and are increasingly applying these attributes to improving outcomes for learners. The Service routinely draws on an appropriate range of quantitative and qualitative data to inform its improvement planning. The Service has demonstrated that by working purposefully with its partners, it can make significant improvements to learners' outcomes. Elected members and Executive Officers are supportive of the Service's approach to continuous improvement. Education Scotland is therefore confident that Argyll and Bute Education Service has the capacity to continue to improve the quality of its work and is well placed to use its well-established self-evaluation processes and skills to do so.

4. What does the Council plan to do next?

HMIs and Argyll and Bute Council have agreed the following areas for further development. The Education Service will continue to:

- strengthen arrangements for developing and communicating the vision for education and ensure that all relevant stakeholders are included and involved in this process;
- clarify the roles, remits and reporting arrangements of working groups which are taking forward corporate priorities to ensure that participants are clear about the operational and strategic scope of their work;
- clarify the link between ongoing self-evaluation, school review and improvement planning and develop staff confidence and skills in techniques for sharing good practice and professional challenge to drive improvement; and
- ensure that approaches to reviewing the impact of education involve an appropriate range of partners.

Further details of the Education Service's strengths and areas identified for improvement are given in the reports prepared by Argyll and Bute Council as part of the VSE process.

**Clare Lamont
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Education Scotland**

19 February 2013

How can you contact us?

Should you wish to comment on any aspect of validated self-evaluation you should write to Mr Alastair Delaney, Strategic Director, at Education Scotland, Denholm House, Almondvale Business Park, Almondvale Way, Livingston, EH54 6GA. Alternatively, if your query is related to this report, you may also write to Ms Sally Loudon, Chief Executive, Argyll and Bute Council, Council Offices, Kilmory, Lochgilphead, PA31 8RT.

Appendix: Argyll and Bute Council self-evaluation

<http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/education-and-learning/validated-self-evaluation-documents>