



Validated self-evaluation



Falkirk Council
1 March 2011

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Joint Statement

Falkirk Council requested that HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) work alongside the Council to undertake a validated self-evaluation (VSE). Throughout the VSE, council staff worked alongside HM Inspectors (HMI). This joint report includes HMIE's assessment of the rigour of Falkirk's self-evaluation process. It describes how the VSE will contribute to the ongoing self-evaluation of Falkirk Education Service and provides a summary of the agreed key strengths and future actions.

The aims, nature and scope of the VSE process are described in the [HMIE website](#).

1. The context of self-evaluation in Falkirk Council

HMIE joined Falkirk Council to carry out the VSE in the second year of the authority's planned three year self-evaluation programme. As a regular part of HMIE's support and challenge role, the District Inspector (DI) had worked closely with the Education Service to assist them in continuous improvement, particularly in the development of a new Quality Improvement Framework for school services. The VSE was therefore embedded within the authority's existing programme of improvement planning and in their work with the DI.

Prior to HMIE engagement in 2009, Falkirk Education Service had already carried out a comprehensive self-evaluation using Quality Management in Education 2 (QMIE2). The three year evaluation programme had started with an extensive and systematic stakeholder consultation to evaluate the services provided by the education authority (EA). A wide range of stakeholders contributed to the evaluation and this was used to identify key areas of strength and areas for further development. In addition to the information obtained from stakeholders, the EA used other sources of data to help inform future improvement priorities. For example, they used information from audit reports, HMIE inspection reports, benchmarking with other authorities and national and comparator statistical information in relation to attainment. From this rich source of information the EA identified priority areas for further improvement. Implementation Task Groups were then established to take forward five priority areas:

1. Enterprise, More Choices More Chances (MCMC) and 16+ (Task Group 1)
2. Strategic implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence* (Task Group 2)
3. Outcomes for Looked After Children (LAC) (Task Group 3)
4. Evaluation of the Parent Strategy (Task Group 4)
5. Reconfiguration of the Quality Improvement Framework (Task Group 5)

2. The process of validated self-evaluation in Falkirk Council

During the VSE, HMIE joined the Implementation Task Groups in their planned activities which were designed to help them take forward their areas for improvement. This involved, for example, joining meetings with relevant partner agencies, meeting with stakeholders to evaluate the impact of a strategy, engaging with other officers of the Council and Education Services to plan next steps in the development of policy and practice, and contributing to focus groups. During these activities, HMIE engaged in discussions with officers and stakeholders and modelled the type of questions and analysis which are necessary to enhance the quality and interpretation of information obtained from the activities.

Following the first VSE week, the Education Service's Management Team and HMIE met to take stock of the initial findings and the progress of the VSE. The next stage included a smaller HMIE team who worked alongside Senior Officers and the Lead Officers of the Implementation Task Groups to further refine the authority's self-evaluation and so improve the original task evaluations and proposals for improvement. This led to a clearer focus on outcomes for stakeholders. As a result of this joint work with HMIE, the reports from the VSE will provide a framework for future Education Services' performance reporting.

3. HMIE's assessment of the quality of self-evaluation in Falkirk Council

In all of the task groups, staff were highly motivated and committed to gathering high quality information to support improvements in policy and practice. For example, Task Group 3 had available a substantial amount of performance data showing trends over time including 5-14 data, SQA tariff scores, attendance, absence, exclusions and leaver destination figures for looked after children. Analysis of data included comparisons of gender, tariff scores, highest qualification, current status and details of the first two destinations taken after school. The data was further analysed by Looked After at Home (LAAH) and Looked After away from Home (LAAFH). The group had also looked at a sample of case files to provide more qualitative information about the experiences of Looked After Children in Falkirk. HMIE worked closely with all of the Lead Officers of the task groups to ensure that the data sources were used effectively to identify key areas for improvement and to triangulate evidence from a range of sources. At times too much information was available which made it difficult to focus on the key messages. The work identified scope to improve efficiency in relation to the amount of data required to inform future improvements.

In all Task Groups, members worked well together demonstrating very good partnership and a clarity of vision. For example, the Enterprise and Education Steering Group meeting (Task Group 1) showed that members had a clear understanding of where they needed to improve services, had robust statistical and qualitative information from a wide range of initiatives and had used some of this well to inform future practice. HMIE worked with the task groups to further improve their use of data so that they could better evidence the impact they were

making on outcomes for their stakeholders. By the end of the VSE, all of the Task Groups were making better use of the very comprehensive and robust data which had been meticulously and systematically collected for self-evaluation.

The quality of questioning used by Task Group members improved over the week. There was a growing emphasis on questions which would enable the Task Groups to evaluate the impact and outcomes on stakeholders. For example, in Theme 4, parent groups, headteachers and other stakeholders were increasingly asked more probing questions about, for example, the difference the Parent Strategy had made to their lives and what evidence they could give to demonstrate the impact.

Engagement with stakeholders and HMIE enabled each of the Task Groups to develop their understanding of how their area for improvement impacted on other service providers. For example, in Implementation Task Group 2 it was recognised that greater collaboration and sharing of information between the quality improvement officers and curriculum development officers would help to make decision making more robust, increase its validity and improve the quality of services. This became a key action point for future engagement of these officers.

In the second stage a smaller team of HMI and an associate assessor worked closely with Senior Officers and Task Leaders to further refine their self-evaluation. This resulted in a strengthening of the evaluative statements in the reporting documents. HMIE reinforced the need to make the links between the evidence gathered and the outcomes for stakeholders. These discussions resulted in Lead Officers revising the VSE reports for each of the Implementation Task Groups. Falkirk Education Services will use the amended task group reports and learning which took place during the VSE to model future work within the Education Service and possibly with other partners in the Council.

At all times there was an openness and honesty which reinforced the high levels of motivation shown by all staff to improve services to children, young people and their families.

4. Summary of HMIE's assessment of the quality of self-evaluation in Falkirk Council

During the VSE, Task Group members worked very well with HMIE and further developed their existing partnerships through planning, working and evaluating together. There was a strengthening culture of self-evaluation across the service. Staff were strongly committed to improvement through self-evaluation and this was characterised by a willingness to question their existing practice and look at ways in which to improve the robustness of evidence gathering. Overall, the programmes and activities were well-considered and provided good opportunities for the team to consider the quality and outcomes of a wide range of provision. Some activities in the themed groups were too broad and required a more focused approach. Through the VSE process, staff became increasingly aware of the range of data that was available and of the need to use this more effectively to

corroborate evidence. As a result of the VSE process, Falkirk staff improved their capacity to self-evaluate in order to bring about service improvement. During professional discussion with HMIE, Senior Officers were both reflective and self-critical, interrogating their own practice, resulting in a better understanding of where services were less effective. They welcomed and took full advantage of the independent benchmarking of quality which HMIE provided. The VSE process also provided insight into how the methodology could be successfully used across other Council services such as the Children's Commission. This will be further progressed by Senior Officers. The Resources Division found the process particularly useful and will be further developing the approach.

5. What strengths has the validated self-evaluation identified?

Falkirk Council and HMIE jointly identified the following high-level strengths:

- Strong commitment of the Convenor, Director and Heads of Service to continuous improvement, including the Education Service's clear vision, values and aims, strengthened through the strategic document Learning to Achieve.
- Strengthening approaches to support and challenge within the service leading to improved performance, particularly for vulnerable groups.
- Strong early years provision supporting children to have the best possible start in life, and steady improvements in attainment across primary and secondary stages with improved performance in attendance, exclusions and positive destinations.
- Extensive range of cultural and sporting opportunities provided for learners.
- A wide range of positive partnerships and innovative approaches to involving children, young people and parents in policy development and review.

6. What is the Council's capacity for improvement?

Falkirk Education Service has demonstrated its ability to secure improvements in important areas and to make significant contributions to Council and national priorities, for example, improved pupil attainment and achievement. There is evidence that the service's capacity to improve has strengthened in recent years and that the pace of implementing key changes has increased. Senior managers have focused on developing a culture of self-evaluation where staff at all levels have been encouraged and empowered to make decisions and adopt creative approaches to improving processes and service delivery.

VSE has been effective in further developing Falkirk's self-evaluation skills, resulting in a further refinement of plans to improve quality improvement

approaches across all areas of the Education Service. The process has also helped the service focus more clearly on outcomes and on making even more effective use of data to achieve improved outcomes. This will provide the department with the confidence to continue to innovate, in particular, in its implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence* and to develop the VSE approach with other partners across the council.

We have confidence in Falkirk Council Education Service's capacity for further improvement.

7. What does the Council plan to do next?

As a result of the work undertaken within the VSE process, Falkirk Council and HMIE have agreed the following areas for further improvement:

- Build on existing systems to make even better use of data to inform and direct the improvement agenda and enhance the impact being made by the service on outcomes for learners;
- Further develop and implement the Quality Improvement Framework for schools and extend the methodology used in VSE to all services provided by the Education Service and appropriate areas within the Council to continue to increase the impact of these processes;
- Through rigorous self-evaluation, continue to identify key themes for in-depth scrutiny as part of a rolling programme of quality improvement;
- Further improve the implementation of the Education Service's Quality Improvement Framework by creating better structures to allow more joint working across teams (for example, joint working between the quality improvement and curriculum development teams);
- Develop a strategic plan in collaboration with partners that addresses the Senior Phase of *Curriculum for Excellence* in a comprehensive way so as to embrace the whole 16+ agenda, More Choices, More Chances, Determined to Succeed and 'My Future's in Falkirk'; and
- Redefine relationships and linkages with Community Learning and Development to ensure strong partnership working.

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1 March 2011

How can you contact us?

Should you wish to comment on any aspect of validated self-evaluation you should write to Dr Gill Robinson, HMCI, at HM Inspectorate of Education, 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 Julia Swan, Director of Education, Sealock House, 2 Inchyra Road, Grangemouth FK3 9XB.