

# A Lessons Learned Investigation into Shetland Islands Council Enhanced Provision Strategy: with reference to Aith Junior High School

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## 1. Executive Summary with Recommendations

In June 2025 a decision was taken by Shetland Islands Council to pause the plans to establish Enhanced Provision at Aith Junior High School following concerns which were raised publicly and directly to the Chief Executive, the Director of Children's Services and Elected Members.

It was agreed that a Lessons Learned investigation should take place which would inform the future implementation of Enhanced Provision for other designated schools identified for such work in Shetland Islands Council's (SIC) Learning Estate Strategy.

The investigation has examined the planning, decision-making and communication processes which took place over a 2 year period between 2023-2025, with a particular focus on Aith Junior High School.

From analysis of the information gathered, it is clear that a different strategic approach is now required in order to sustain the implementation of future plans for Enhanced Provision in designated schools across Shetland, and to improve outcomes for all children and young people.

Lessons which have been learned with participants through the course of investigation relate to: Governance and Leadership; Consultation and Communication; Assessment Data; Quality Improvement Planning; and Transitions for Children and Young People.

Recommendations for making improvements should be implemented at all levels in the system within the wider context of the Children's Services Support for Learning Review.

### Recommendations

These recommendations take account of the need to support the Council's Learning Estate Strategy and Children's Services Plan. Implementing all of the recommendations, in a planned, incremental way, will build stronger foundations from which to deliver better outcomes for children and young people across Shetland.

The main over-arching theme of the lessons learned is the need for greater strategic collaboration across all services and with parents and partners. Strategic collaboration is vital because it unlocks capabilities, resilience, and innovation that no single service or individual can achieve alone. Parents and partners bring different strengths and perspectives that when combined with Children's Services' expertise can help tackle some of the more complex challenges faced by Shetland Islands Council in meeting the diverse range of needs which children and families may have. Successful collaboration will help to build trust, mutual respect, and a shared understanding of the principles and practicalities of Enhanced Provision for schools.

1. SIC should establish a strategic oversight group which has clear governance of the Enhanced Provision Strategy with a multidisciplinary membership including practitioners with specialist knowledge of children and young people's complex additional support needs. Oversight should ensure that there is clear alignment with the School Estate Liaison Group, and with the Support for Learning Project Board. The methodology for implementation of the strategy must adhere to council approved project management standards, including clear and robust reporting processes.
2. In applying such project management standards to governance of the Enhanced Provision Strategy, all stakeholders (particularly staff, parents and pupils) must be consulted on a regular basis with methods such as focus groups and workshops. This should include a clear communication strategy with a timeline.
3. Related to the above, roles and responsibilities for staff involved at all levels in the implementation of Enhanced Provision should be detailed within the Strategic Outline Programme to ensure that there is appropriate autonomy and accountability for decision-making. Associated with this, there should be an assessment of the capacity and readiness of school leaders to undertake implementation of Enhanced Provision on behalf of SIC and for their communities.
4. Quality Improvement processes for schools must integrate planning for Enhanced Provision within the School Improvement Planning process to ensure that there is a strong connection for responsibility and accountability from the relevant council committees to head teachers, classroom teachers and support workers.
5. The Accessibility Design Brief (ADB) should be revised to take account of the updated Northern Alliance ADB (2024) and should include greater clarity of what Enhanced Provision means. The elements of design must be clearer about what provision for complex health and care needs comprises; and should pay due regard to the accessibility requirements for Curriculum and Communication as well as the Physical Environment, thereby addressing the need for a strategic accessibility plan. ([Planning improvements for disabled pupils' access to education: guidance for education authorities, independent and grant-aided schools - gov.scot](#))
6. The range of data used to inform the implementation of Enhanced Provision (including the Accessibility Design Brief) needs to widen to include assessment information gathered from the Child's Planning process which takes account of children's lived experience at different stages in their education.
7. Assessment and planning processes for children and young people with Additional Support Needs must be quality assured in order to know that they are meeting

legislative requirements as well as being able to inform what provision is required in schools across the SIC. This should include the tracking and annual auditing of decision/plans for children and young people in transition.

8. The recommendations included should be considered, and inform, future policies and guidelines for Children's Services, including guidelines to accompany policies in relation to transitions.
9. Consultation and collaboration with multiagency partners in all processes associated with planning for children's additional support needs should pay due regard to what and where the professional boundaries lie in relation to educational provision and school placement.
10. The role and responsibilities of a Lead Professional should be reviewed in relation to the coordination, oversight, participation and progress for the Child's Planning process. As a matter of urgency this should apply to children who are in transition for August 2026.
11. Providing a 'Roadmap' for parents regarding decision-making about provision to meet their child's needs should be included in the Schools Admissions Policy and made available at meetings and on appropriate areas of the Council's website.
12. Parent Council Chairs meetings should have Enhanced Provision as a standing item on their agendas, with associated opportunities for learning and training about Additional Support Needs.
13. Plans for Enhanced Provision at Aith Junior High School need to be revised as soon as possible in order to take full account of the assessment of children's complex needs and how they interact with the day-to-day life of the whole school.
14. A steering group should be established for Aith Junior High School with representation from all key stakeholders including Parent Council representatives.

## 2. Rationale for the Lessons Learned Investigation

2.1 In June 2025 a decision was taken by Shetland Islands Council to pause the plans to establish Enhanced Provision at Aith Junior High School following concerns which were raised publicly and directly to the Chief Executive, the Director of Children's Services and Elected Members. These concerns related to a lack of consultation with all key stakeholders; the lack of clarity about what Enhanced Provision is; and the proposed plans for changes to Aith Junior High School's building, in particular for children with complex needs. It was agreed that a 'Lessons Learned' Investigation should take place to be led by an independent consultant which would inform the future implementation of Enhanced Provision for other designated schools identified for such work in Shetland Islands Council's (SIC) Learning Estate Strategy.

2.2 The aims of the Lessons Learned Investigation were to:

- Focus on the effectiveness of planning and partnership working for Enhanced Provision
- Identify areas of strength in practice and what works well in Enhanced Provision
- Examine decision-making processes including communication with all those concerned
- Establish whether a different approach could have improved outcomes and sustained the implementation of plans for Enhanced Provision at Aith Junior High School
- Learn together across all areas for improvement or change in practice with regard to future implementation of Enhanced Provision in other designated schools within the wider context of the forthcoming Support for Learning Review

### 3. Background and Context to the Lessons Learned Investigation

3.1 The Learning Estate Strategy for SIC (2021-2031) was published following Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy: Connecting People, Places and Learning (2019). It is an ambitious and comprehensive strategy which requires robust project management and governance from all relevant directorates. The following statements from the strategy are most relevant to this investigation:

- *Shetland's Learning Estate is diverse, covering a wide range in age, condition and geographic spread which all adds to its complexity. The aim of the Learning Estate Strategy is to ensure that all of our learners are given the opportunity to achieve the best outcome and reach positive destinations; to do this we must ensure Enhanced Provision facilities are available to all those with complex additional support needs.*
- *Learning environments should support the wellbeing of all learners, meet varying needs to support inclusion and support transitions for all learners*
- *There will be enhanced provision in all High Schools, Junior High Schools, and Scalloway, Bells Brae and Sound Primary Schools. This will ensure that within each cluster, there will be a school that is fully equipped to meet varying additional support needs, both within buildings and outside spaces.*
- *It will be important to engage and consult with all stakeholders (especially pupils, parents and community groups) when making decisions about the learning estate and our most important stakeholders are the children and young people in our communities. Focus groups and co-design workshops involving both young and adult participants in the relevant communities will form part of this process, as well as surveys and calls for responses promoted by traditional and social media.*
- *The Children's Services Directorate proposes to re-constitute its School Estate Liaison Group to meet at key points in the year to review progress against the implementation of the strategy and actions which have been identified. The group will monitor the latest available data to support the planning process across the relevant service areas and identify new priorities and required actions for individual schools and localities.*

3.2 The Learning Estate Liaison Group was re-established in 2021 to co-ordinate and support works across the learning estate, excluding emergency repairs and statutory maintenance. The group was then used as the vehicle for discussions related to the Business Justification Case and the Accessibility Design Brief for Enhanced Provision.

The group monitors suitability and condition data, prioritises refurbishment works, and ensures annual reporting to the Scottish Government. It also oversees a rolling five-year programme of condition and suitability assessments. The group is chaired by the Executive Manager for the Learning Estate and includes:

- Executive Manager – Schools (Programme Manager)
- Executive Manager – Environment and Estate Operations
- Executive Manager – Assets, Commissioning and Procurement

Between June and September 2023, the Learning Estate Liaison Group initiated the development of: the Strategic Outline Programme for Enhanced Provision; the Business Justification Case for Aith JHS; and the Children’s Services Accessibility Design Brief for schools. Members of this group were almost all from Learning Estates; Assets, Commissioning and Procurement; and Environmental & Estate Operations. Education were not on the core membership of the group but were invited in occasionally depending on the agenda.

3.3 With regard to the outcomes which the Enhanced Provision Strategic Outline Programme intended to achieve, the recent findings from Audit Scotland (2025) are very relevant: *‘in continuing to evaluate how education is funded, staffed and assessed to support all pupils to reach their full potential, they also need to consider the continual growth in pupils requiring ASL within their wider approach to improving child development.’* (Audit Scotland 2025)

3.4 Alongside local policy planning, the national policy context with regard to Additional Support Needs (ASN) over recent years has indicated that local authorities should take account of the Morgan Review (2020) and the Hayward Report (2023) in relation to the accessibility and ‘flexibility of different pathways to promote inclusion particularly for learners with additional support needs’ (Hayward, 2023). Education Services should also have due regard to key areas of legislation/policy including the Presumption of Mainstreaming Guidance (with regard to the Education 2000 Act); the Additional Support for Learning Act (2004, amended 2009); and the Equalities Act (2010).

3.5 In line with the national trend, Shetland Islands Council’s data shows a steady increase in the number of children recorded as having Additional Support Needs over the last 5 years, with almost 41% currently identified as having at least one ASN which is in line with the Scottish average of 40%.

3.6 Research into the educational provision and integrated strategic planning and provision for children with complex needs is fairly limited and findings should therefore be treated with caution. However, there are some common themes:

- Strong and supportive leadership of change with teachers who are trained in inclusive pedagogy and view it as their role to teach all learners in a diverse classroom [National Framework for Inclusion - The General Teaching Council for Scotland \(gtcs.org.uk\)](https://www.gtcs.org.uk)
- Workforce planning and professional development including support staff ([Deployment of Teaching Assistants | EEF](#))
- The effectiveness of partnerships with other agencies and with parents (Pupils with complex additional support needs: research into provision ([www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot))).
- Assistive Technology: qualitative evidence has highlighted that more training and multi-agency work is needed to communicate effectively with disabled children and young people (National Institute for Health & Care Excellence, 2022).
- Environmental adaptations: qualitative evidence has shown that children and young people benefited from a consistent approach as it is more predictable and helps them to generalise across different settings. (National Institute for Health & Care Excellence, 2022).
- Children, young people and their families should be at the centre of planning and decision-making (Pupils with complex additional support needs: research into provision ([www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot))).
- The importance of individual staff who know and work closely with children – and can make a positive difference to the quality of their support [National Framework for Inclusion - The General Teaching Council for Scotland \(gtcs.org.uk\)](https://www.gtcs.org.uk).

3.7 The current Aith Junior High School was built in the early 1980s to service the community of West Mainland. It has educational provision for children aged 3-16, similar to most junior high schools. There are approximately 100 children in primary and 100 in secondary with about 25 children in the Nursery.

58% of children have a recorded Additional Support Need, which are predominantly related to barriers to their learning (moderate learning difficulties) and their social and emotional needs. A small but significant number of children have complex needs which require accessibility arrangements for their communication, the curriculum and the physical environment, as well as their health and care needs.

3.8 During the period which the investigation focused on (June 2023 – June 2025) there were a number of Central Education Service leadership staff changes.

3.9 At the time of writing a Support for Learning (SfL) Review is now underway which is using council approved project management tools. The objectives are to:

- Identify effective practices benefitting children, young people and their families.
- Highlight existing challenges and gaps in provision which negatively impact on children, young people and their families.
- Implement recommendations for improvement.

The SfL review will be overseen by a Project Board which is responsible for:

- Providing overall direction and decision-making.
- Authorising project stages.
- Monitoring progress and risks.
- Resolving escalated issues.
- Ensuring resources and funding.

A final report outlining findings, recommendations and subsequent improvements will be compiled not later than August 2027.

Findings from this Lessons Learned Investigation will inform the Support for Learning review.

## 4. How the Lessons Learned investigation was carried out

This Lessons Learned Investigation took a systemic approach. Such an approach goes beyond individual or professional practice to explore underlying systemic factors, the links with organisational factors and the wider context. A key feature of this approach is to reflect and learn from what has happened in order to improve practice for the future. The focus is on accountability not culpability, on learning and not blame.

4.1 Participants were asked to focus on:

- Contextual factors during the investigation period
- Assessments and decision-making
- Actions taken
- Interactions with parents, other professionals and services
- Areas of effective practice
- Areas of challenge and where there could have been some improvements

4.2 Participants included: staff from Children's Services (including Learning Estates), Central Education Staff; Assets, Commissioning and Procurement Staff; the Head Teacher and Depute Head Teacher at Aith Junior High School; Parents directly affected by the plans for Enhanced Provision; Aith Junior High School Parent Council representatives; Partner agencies.

4.3 Visits and observations took place at Aith Junior High School and Scalloway Primary School. The investigator also had recent experience of provision for Additional Support Needs at Brae High School and the Anderson High School.

4.4 The period of time which the Lessons Learned Investigation covered was between November 2023 – June 2025, although some relevant policy documentation from 2021 was also referred to.

4.5 Relevant National and Local Policy/Guidance and Research was referred to in order to place this Lessons Learned investigation within a wider context and gain a perspective on the significance of the lessons learned.

4.6 Correspondence related to the concerns which were raised with Shetland Islands Council in June 2025 was referred to along with a chronology of the planning and actions associated with Enhanced Provision for Aith JHS.

## 5. Episodes which contributed to Aith JHS Enhanced Provision planning being paused

In order to understand what happened over the 2 year period of planning for Enhanced Provision at Aith JHS, the process of investigation identified key practice episodes which were used to prompt participants to: describe their involvement, highlighting the actions taken and the reasons underpinning them as well as assessments of the situation at the time. There was an opportunity to ask clarifying questions, engage in discussion and begin to identify key issues and learning points.

5.1 While the Learning Estate Liaison Group discussed updates related to the Aith JHS project, it was not established for this purpose. Its remit is broader, covering strategic planning and prioritisation of works across the Learning Estate. **Although reference is made in the Strategic Outline Programme (SOP) to the expectation that project management standards would be adhered to, no evidence was found of this in relation to Aith JHS.**

5.2 Between September-October 2023 the SOP was developed and visits were made to both Aith JHS and Brae HS, with Brae not being progressed due to Scottish Government funding being agreed for the new building. **Lines of governance to Children's Services were not clear during this period, and there were no methods built into the programme timetable to include early and regular consultation with staff, parents and pupils.**

5.3 A meeting with all head teachers of schools included in the SOP was arranged for January 2024, led by Learning Estates Management and the Inclusion Team. The focus for the presentation to head teachers was on the physical aspects of Enhanced Provision. **There was no reference to how they should consult with staff and parents; and no reference to how they would evaluate their readiness through school improvement planning.**

5.4 The Learning Estate Liaison Group, along with informal meetings involving the Inclusion Team, held several discussions about the Aith project between January and March 2024. At the Learning Estate Liaison Group meeting in April, **consultation with school staff and parents was referred to but no timeline or specific plans agreed.**

5.5 From April 2024, meetings between Learning Estate officers and the Head and Depute Head Teachers at Aith JHS were a feature of how the programme was being implemented over the next 12 months, with communication and planning largely between Learning Estate officers and the Head and Depute Head Teachers who requested that the plans be changed on at least 3 occasions. **At no point were concerns raised by the Head Teacher which could have been fed back into the strategy group, albeit that the group did not appear to continue to meet on a regular basis.**

5.6 Between August and Early December 2024 the focus of work seems to have been on agreeing costings for the Business Justification case for Aith JHS, which went to Policy and Resources Committee on 02.12.24. It did not go to Education and Families Committee as it was presented as part of the Asset Investment Plan and required P&R Committee approval for the capital budget spend. It stated that: *'An Enhanced Provision school will provide fully accessible facilities both internally and externally with the equipment required in order for those with the most complex needs to be able to meet their full potential, thus enabling the staff to deliver education in an environment that is fit for purpose.'* **The wording in this report led many stakeholders to believe that Enhanced Provision would be the same as a Special Unit because it was being designed to be accessible for children with the most complex needs.**

5.7 Between January and May 2025 there was correspondence between the Parent Council and council officers, occasionally via the Head Teacher, in an attempt to find a mutually agreed date to meet. This did not happen until June 2025.

5.8 In February 2025, the SOP and BJC went to the full council meeting with assurances from officers that Enhanced Provision at Aith JHS was comparable with provision at Bells Brae Primary School, which has a special unit. The differences between Enhanced Provision and a Special Unit have subsequently been explained in a FAQ document issued in June 2025 by the Children's Services Director **but at this time it was not clear how the different terminology related to children's additional support needs, including those with complex needs.**

5.9 In April 2025 Trade Union representatives and SIC's Health and Safety Manager requested a visit to Aith JHS to see the current use of space and the floor plans for the proposed Enhanced Provision. This took place with no reference to the Learning Estate Strategy Group or Heads of Service. The reason given for this visit was to carry out an exercise similar to one which had taken place previously at Anderson High School. Following the visit, the EIS representative raised concerns in writing with Learning Estates and Education Service officers, and a meeting subsequently took place although no immediate action was taken in relation to the plans for Enhanced Provision.

5.10 The Head Teacher shared the final plans for Aith JHS Enhanced Provision with all staff on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of May at planned collegiate sessions. Teachers were asked to discuss positives and negatives of the plans. **This information was not fed back into the Learning Estate Liaison Group who continued to meet although Aith JHS was not a standing item at every meeting. By the time the proposed plans were shared with school staff there was less than 3 months before Enhanced Provision work was due to begin at Aith JHS.**

5.11 On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June the latest plans, Strategic Outline Programme, Accessibility Design Brief, equality impact assessment and Business Justification Case were all shared with

representatives from the Parent Council. Following this there was further correspondence between the Parent Council and officers with concerns raised by the school community.

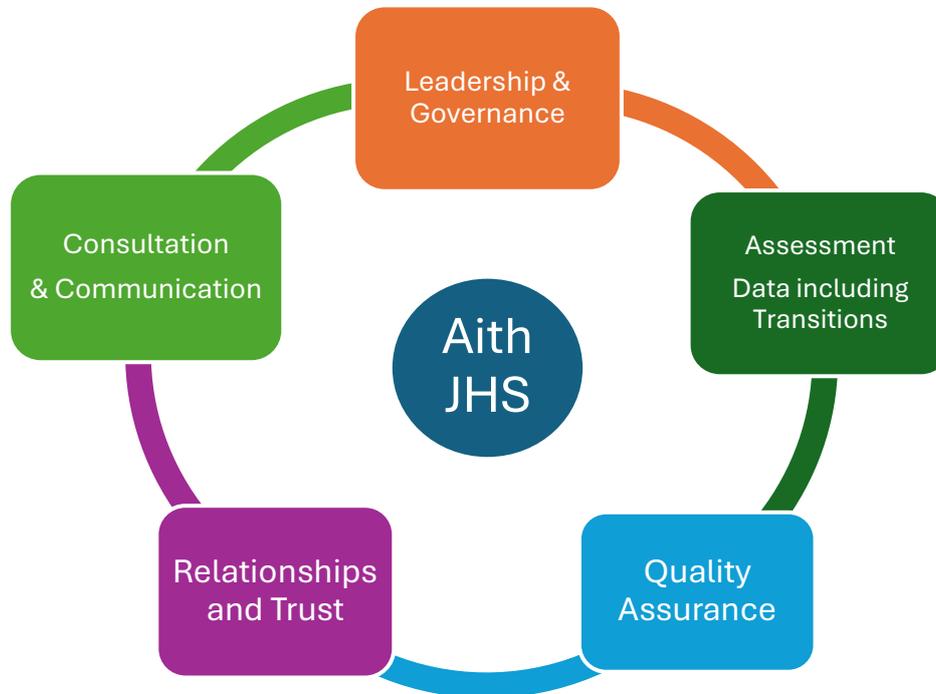
5.12 The Parent Council then called a meeting with all parents on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June where plans were shared and parents could raise questions and suggestions about the plans for Enhanced Provision. Following this meeting, a few parents shared their concerns on social media and with the Press. Many parents and members of the public, elected members and MSPs also made complaints or raised concerns with Shetland Islands Council, all of which were investigated and responded to. **The majority of the complaints and concerns related to the lack of consultation and the changes to the building which the proposed design of Enhanced Provision entailed.**

5.13 On the 17<sup>th</sup> of June a meeting took place between the Children's Services Director and Learning Estate officers with the Head Teacher and Parent Council representatives, and a subsequent meeting with parent council and Learning Estate officers was held to look at the various versions of the plans which had been amended over the previous year.

5.14 By the end of June the Director of Children's Services issued guidance with FAQs along with the decision to pause implementation of Enhanced Provision at Aith JHS and elsewhere until a Lessons Learned investigation had taken place.

## 6. Lessons Learned from the investigation

The lessons learned from this investigation are inter-related, each one depending on the others. They reflect how these key areas in the system influence how people make decisions and the consequences they can have.



### 6.1 Effective Practice

It is important to acknowledge that during the course of this investigation some examples of effective practice were identified including:

- The Learning Estate Strategy (2021-2031) was a key driver for change which provided a strong basis for the Enhanced Provision Strategy. It is a comprehensive and ambitious approach which takes account of the particular challenges which SIC face in making provision for all of its children including those who live in remote rural settings.
- The nature of open discussion and honesty of all participants during the investigation have enabled insight and connection between the complexity of factors in this review. Their reflectiveness and openness to change offers great potential for making considerable improvements to the Enhanced Provision strategy.

- The thorough record-keeping of Learning Estates staff who maintained a strong sense of accountability for their actions throughout the process, albeit without clear governance or project management.
- The consistent message from everyone involved that children and young people with complex additional support needs should be at the centre of planning and their needs fully understood; and wherever possible that they should be educated as close to their local community as possible.
- The Frequently Asked Questions and thorough response from SIC to parents and the wider Shetland Islands communities.

These effective practices should be continued in the future implementation of Enhanced Provision and the Support for Learning Review.

## 6.2 Implementation of the Enhanced Provision Strategy for SIC requires clear Leadership and Governance between all relevant services within the Children's Services Directorate

- The Programme Management Arrangements referred to in the Strategic Outline Programme (November 2023) were insufficient to ensure that the implementation of the Enhanced Provision Strategy would meet project management standards. Had there been such a requirement there would have been more robust oversight of decision-making at every stage in the planning process. The concerns and risks which emerged in May 2025 would have been scoped and anticipated much sooner, and any underlying factors could have been addressed.
- However, decision-making for the SOP was devolved to the Learning Estate Liaison Group with a limited diversity of professional experiences in its membership. It should have included officers and staff with extensive specialist knowledge of children's complex needs. In doing so, there would have been a broader perspective on what should be included in the Accessibility Design Brief.
- The SOP lacked clarity on roles and responsibilities of key staff involved in implementing Enhanced Provision in schools. Much of the decision-making was devolved to Aith JHS's Head and Depute Head Teacher and the Learning Estates Officers, with limited involvement from Education Officers. It was therefore unclear as to what should reasonably be expected of a Head Teacher in such a process, and where the responsibility lay for signing off on the various changes to the plans.

- However, it should be noted that Shetland Islands Council has an expectation that *‘Head Teachers work collaboratively and collegiately in their approach, challenging themselves and stakeholders to be solution focused embracing joint working with the learning community, parents, children and young people, teachers and support staff, partners, other schools and the Local Authority.’* (SIC Devolved School Management Scheme, 2022-2025) It is unclear from the DSM Scheme where the responsibilities for oversight of changes and maintenance to school buildings lies.
- Related to this aspect of leadership, none of the associated documentation for Enhanced Provision makes reference to the significance of a school’s readiness for Enhanced Provision. The briefing for Head Teachers in January 2024 was a missed opportunity to make it clear to Head Teachers that their school improvement planning processes with regard to Inclusion/ASN were central to the objectives of Enhanced Provision Strategy being met. In fact, there was no evidence found of clearly stated expectations and links between service and school quality improvement planning.

The connections between the Education and Learning Service Plan, the Enhanced Provision Strategy and the Schools Service Plan need to be clearly understood and evidenced in schools’ improvement plans.

### 6.3 There should be clear expectations of the Consultation requirements for Enhanced Provision

- One of the consequences of the lack of governance of the Enhanced Provision Strategy was the lack of consultation throughout the process. Whilst being referred to in the SOP, and in the Equality Impact Assessment, there was inadequate involvement of all stakeholders. Had a robust consultation process taken place, the range of views, including concerns, would have been taken into account in the ongoing development, design and delivery of the programme. It should be noted that this was fully acknowledged publicly by the Director of Children’s Services in June 2025.
- From reviewing documentation and interviewing participants, it seemed that consultation was something which would have been carried out once the plans had reached an agreed stage of design, rather than as a method which should be initiated at an earlier stage in the design process. Gathering views and providing opportunities for stakeholders to ask questions is a collaborative way in which they could contribute to a developing a shared vision and understanding of what Enhanced Provision was meant to achieve for children in their communities.

- The failure to gather views meant that by the time staff and parents heard about the plans for Enhanced Provision at Aith JHS, through unplanned and incidental communication, the challenges and disagreement which emerged were outwith any agreed consultation process, and trust had been badly damaged.
- Had there been proper consultation with the Parent Council (and Parents Council Chairs), Officers could have explained the rationale for establishing Enhanced Provision within the context of managing the school estate across SIC. This could have included the significance of the Business Justification Case and the options appraisal. For parents at Aith JHS, this might have helped in creating a shared understanding of why an extension to the school was not a viable option.
- Similarly, had the Head Teacher fully appreciated the importance of consulting much earlier with all of the staff at Aith JHS, and the locus of Enhanced Provision in relation to the school's improvement plan, there could have been meaningful participation of school staff in how they could reflect on their practice and provision for meeting all children's needs.
- Consultation with parents whose children were not yet attending Aith JHS, but for whom it had been identified as the school which would meet their child's needs, could have been achieved indirectly had the child planning process been better. Parents said that they did not feel listened to and that no-one was leading or taking responsibility for their child's transition.
- Children and Young People should have a voice in what helps them to learn and develop, and the support which they find helpful. Although consultation with the children and young people at Aith JHS was being considered, it should also have been undertaken at an earlier stage. This could have included a range of accessible methods of gathering their views, including those with the most complex needs. By simply observing them engage in their day-to-day learning activities it would be apparent that they need to experience consistency and coherence throughout their time in school.
- Enhanced Provision is being planned for the benefit of children and families across Shetland and offers opportunities for a place-based approach to meeting their needs. As such, it is relevant to other agencies which contribute to the assessment and planning for children's health and care needs. However, there was no planned involvement of other agencies with relevant knowledge of children's complex needs in the design and development of Enhanced Provision. There needs to be a shared understanding across all children's services about the range of provision which can

meet children and young people's needs, and the respective roles which different agencies/services have – and where the professional boundaries lie.

- The way in which Trade Unions and the Health and Safety Officers became involved was not proactive and came at their request. Their views were therefore gathered very late in the process and came in response to concerns raised by staff, rather than it being part of a planned consultation process.
- All of the aforementioned opportunities for consultation could have informed the Equality Impact Assessment at a much earlier stage and better identified the impact that the proposal would have on those with protected characteristics.

Consultation is not a separate process to the design and delivery of services. It should be used as an integral form of research to engage with all stakeholders and to inform how well services for children can be designed.

#### 6.4 The Accessibility Design Brief should be reviewed to include a wider range of child-user information and data

- The Accessibility Design Brief (2023) was outward looking and based on Aberdeenshire's model as well as the overarching Learning Estates Strategy (2021-2031). It focuses primarily on the physical environment, whereas the Learning Estate Strategy should address broader aspects such as curriculum and communication accessibility. Unlike Aberdeenshire, which has separate but linked documents, Shetland currently lacks a distinct Accessibility Strategy - a gap that needs to be addressed by the Education and Learning Service. By omitting these significant aspects, the weight of attention, and possibly responsibility, could be assumed to be with the Learning Estates Service rather than being shared with Education staff, both centrally and in schools.
- It is important to acknowledge the balance which the Learning Estate Strategy has to achieve in designing schools which are 'future-proofed' for a diverse range of children and adults' needs and anticipate long term changes in population, whilst being able to take account of exceptional circumstances which arise regarding children and families with complex needs who live in remote rural settings.
- However, the quantitative data which was gathered and analysed in relation to the design of learning spaces was insufficient to inform both the long term and day-to-day 'activity' for children with complex needs. A review of the Accessibility Design Brief needs to consider:

- scenarios of a child/ren's day in school related to their needs (curriculum; physical; communication) - 'a day in the life of' a child and the staff who work with them
- the compatibility of different children's needs including age and stage
- projections of the number and nature of children's complex additional support needs across Shetland as well as in local communities
- projection of children's needs as they grow and develop - young people will become adult-sized and with adult support will need sufficient space)
- Use of other learning spaces outwith the school, e.g. leisure centres
- Timetabling analysis which takes into account movement around the school over a week of classes/activities etc – the **flow** of the school day/week
- qualitative data such as surveys, workshops and focus groups
- The capacity of schools to include children with complex needs may need to be redefined to acknowledge that there could be an upper limit on the number of children with complex needs who can attend a school with enhanced provision. In doing so there must be due regard to relevant legislation including:
  - The Presumption of Mainstream Guidance (Standards in Scotland's Schools Act, 2000) with reference to the exceptions to inclusion
  - The Equalities Act (2010) in relation to reasonable adjustments
  - The Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act (2004, amended 2009)
- Any community-based data which is held in Children's Services for strategic planning purposes could also inform how place-based provision is enhanced for families.
- The implications of the Accessibility Design Brief for staff professional learning and development must also be considered. Factors to consider include:
  - What does learning and teaching practice need to consider in a school with Enhanced Provision?
  - What training do all staff need on curriculum and pedagogy (appropriate to their roles) including communication frameworks?
  - What does assessment and planning need to consider?

Integrating diverse data types - quantitative, qualitative, and experiential – into the Accessibility Design Brief can ensure that *'equity, excellence, inclusion and sustainability is truly achieved'* for children and young people in schools with Enhanced Provision.

## 6.5 Quality Assurance of Assessment and Planning processes for Children and Young People should contribute to Strategic Planning for Additional Support Needs

A common theme from all those involved in the investigation was the need for improvements in the planning process for children and young people with ASN, particularly at key points of transition. Concerns related to the following areas:

- Tracking and monitoring of decisions in the child's planning process is not yet systematic or embedded in practice. A robust auditing process would support service and school self-evaluation and improvement planning. It would also highlight where concerns are emerging and can be responded to before they escalate into disputes. Similarly, effective practices could be recognised and shared more widely.
- For children and families with complex needs which involved several practitioners, professionals and more than one school, there are unresolved issues about who the Lead Professional is and how they are accountable. Particularly at times of transition, this can lead to decisions not being made or delayed; great uncertainty for parents and children; and inefficient planning for school placement and associated resources, including staffing. A workflow would assist with 'self-auditing' the child's planning process.
- The School Admissions Policy with regard to placement for children with complex needs to provide clearer criteria in order to guide better decision-making. Parents referred to the need for a 'roadmap' which would help them to navigate the decision-making process for how and where their child's needs would be met, and their rights and responsibilities relating to placing requests and school transport.
- Assessment of Needs (individually and collectively in communities and whole authority) informs what provision is required and the extent to which those needs can be met in a local community school (enhanced or catchment). This in turn will depend on a number of factors (which also relate to the Accessibility Design Brief) and will need to be reviewed on an annual basis:
  - Number of children with complex needs in each sector/stage

- Nature of their needs and extent to which they are compatible for sharing spaces in which to learn
- The extent to which the learning environment is accessible: physically; curriculum; communication
- Evaluation of quality indicators from School Improvement Plans related to Wellbeing, Equalities and Inclusion

By considering the data associated with the growth in pupils requiring additional support for learning, SIC can better evaluate how provision is funded, staffed and assessed in order to support all pupils to reach their full potential.

## 6.6 Building Trust and Confidence with all Stakeholders

It was acknowledged by all participants in the investigation process that trust and relationships have been damaged over the period of time in which planning for enhanced provision has taken place.

The lack of consultation led to poor communication and created doubt and uncertainty for many people. For some parents, their experiences of planning for their children over many years has undermined their confidence in the Enhanced Provision strategy and what SIC will do next.

Between all those involved there has been a breakdown in collaboration, misinterpretations of intent and resistance to change. Recognising these factors is important in designing the future of enhanced provision that will rebuild trust through empathy, consistency, and open dialogue.

Restorative conversations with Aith JHS staff and parents can begin to address this through their active participation and ongoing consultation of plans for Enhanced Provision. There will need to be transparency about what can be achieved and what the limits to reasonable adjustments might be in the school's capacity for children with complex needs over time.

Related to this, staff professional development in inclusive pedagogy must be prioritised along with aligning school policies with inclusive values and legal frameworks. Monitoring and accountability will be essential to track progress and ensure transparency.

Relationships matter in communities; in families and schools; between colleagues and partners. They contribute to how decisions are taken; how trust affects them; and what can help them to be restored by using the lessons learned to look ahead and have a more resilient strategy for enhanced provision.

## 7. Recommendations from Lessons Learned

1. SIC should establish a strategic oversight group which has clear governance of the Enhanced Provision Strategy with a multidisciplinary membership including practitioners with specialist knowledge of children and young people's complex additional support needs. Oversight should ensure that there is clear alignment with the School Estate Liaison Group, and with the Support for Learning Project Board. The methodology for implementation of the strategy must adhere to council approved project management standards, including clear and robust reporting processes.
2. In applying such project management standards to governance of the Enhanced Provision Strategy, all stakeholders (particularly staff, parents and pupils) must be consulted on a regular basis with methods such as focus groups and workshops. This should include a clear communication strategy with a timeline.
3. Related to the above, roles and responsibilities for staff involved at all levels in the implementation of Enhanced Provision should be detailed within the Strategic Outline Programme to ensure that there is appropriate autonomy and accountability for decision-making. Associated with this, there should be an assessment of the capacity and readiness of school leaders to undertake implementation of Enhanced Provision on behalf of SIC and for their communities.
4. Quality Improvement processes for schools must integrate planning for Enhanced Provision within the School Improvement Planning process to ensure that there is a strong connection for responsibility and accountability from the relevant council committees to Head Teachers, classroom teachers and support workers.
5. The Accessibility Design Brief (ADB) should be revised to take account of the updated Northern Alliance ADB (2024) and should include greater clarity of what Enhanced Provision means. The elements of design must be clearer about what provision for complex health and care needs comprises; and should pay due regard to the accessibility requirements for Curriculum and Communication as well as the Physical Environment, thereby addressing the need for a strategic accessibility plan. ([Planning improvements for disabled pupils' access to education: guidance for education authorities, independent and grant-aided schools - gov.scot](#))
6. The range of data used to inform the implementation of Enhanced Provision (including the Accessibility Design Brief) needs to widen to include assessment information gathered from the Child's Planning process which takes account of children's lived experience at different stages in their education.

7. Assessment and Planning processes for children and young people with Additional Support Needs must be quality assured in order to know that they are meeting legislative requirements as well as being able to inform what provision is required in schools across SIC. This should include the tracking and annual auditing of decision/plans for children and young people in transition.
8. The recommendations included should be considered, and inform, future policies and guidelines for Children's Services, including guidelines to accompany policies in relation to transitions.
9. Consultation and collaboration with Multiagency partners in all processes associated with planning for children's additional support needs should pay due regard to what and where the professional boundaries lie in relation to educational provision and school placement.
10. The role and responsibilities of a Lead Professional should be reviewed in relation to the coordination, oversight, participation and progress for the Child's Planning process. As a matter of urgency this should apply to children who are in transition for August 2026.
11. Providing a 'Roadmap' for parents regarding decision-making about provision to meet their child's needs should be included in the Schools Admissions Policy and made available at meetings and on appropriate areas of the council's website.
12. Parent Council Chairs meetings should have Enhanced Provision as a standing item on their agendas, with associated opportunities for learning and training about Additional Support Needs.
13. Plans for Enhanced Provision at Aith Junior High School need to be revised as soon as possible in order to take full account of the assessment of children's complex needs and how they interact with the day-to-day life of the whole school.
14. A steering group should be established for Aith Junior High School with representation from all key stakeholders including Parent Council representatives.
15. With regard to preparing committee reports, the appendices with floor plans need to be included in order that elected members are fully informed of what enhanced provision entails.
16. Similarly, floor plans need to be labelled with care and not with their current purpose (e.g. cupboards being adapted for sensory spaces)

17. Enhanced Provision is an 'umbrella' term and consideration should be given to how each school could name its own provision (e.g. the Hub; the Pod etc)
18. The interface between primary and secondary stages in Junior High Schools with Enhanced Provision needs more explicit reference to joint working and sharing of curriculum and learning spaces across both stages. In being responsive to children's development in this way, staff can be provided with meaningful professional learning opportunities.
19. Learning Support Workers were not included in the investigation and yet they form a core part of the provision which aims to meet children and young people's additional support needs. Serious consideration should be given within the Support for Learning Review to current research and guidance related to their deployment <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/teaching-assistants>
20. A review of the Devolved School Management Scheme should clarify where the responsibilities for oversight of changes and maintenance to school buildings lies.

## 8. Conclusion

From analysis of the information gathered during the course of this investigation, it is clear that a different strategic approach is now required in order to sustain the implementation of future plans for Enhanced Provision in designated schools across Shetland, and to improve outcomes for all children and young people.

The investigation has required the meaningful participation of the people who will need to implement the lessons learned. By taking an approach which has enabled reflections on accountability and learning, rather than blame and culpability, it is hoped that the recommendations will lead to stronger and more sustainable implementation of policy into practice. In turn this can rebuild confidence and trusting relationships between council officers, education staff, parents and the wider community.

## 9. References

Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy: Connecting People, Places and Learning (2019)  
[Learning estate strategy - gov.scot](#)

[Planning improvements for disabled pupils' access to education: guidance for education authorities, independent and grant-aided schools - gov.scot](#)

[National Framework for Inclusion - The General Teaching Council for Scotland \(gtcs.org.uk\)](#)

[Deployment of Teaching Assistants | EEF](#)

[Introduction - Pupils with complex additional support needs: research into provision - gov.scot](#)

[Recommendations for research | Disabled children and young people up to 25 with severe complex needs: integrated service delivery and organisation across health, social care and education | Guidance | NICE](#)

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