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# Case Studies of Equality Data Collection in the Scottish Public Sector: Highland Council



**Equality, Poverty and Social Security**



# A good practice case study of the collection and use of equality data: Highland Council Children's Services

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The Scottish Government is committed to addressing inequality in Scotland. [Scotland's Equality Evidence Strategy 2017–21](#) set out a vision for a more wide-ranging and robust equality evidence base, to enable policy makers to develop sound, inclusive policy.

There are many costs and challenges to collecting, analysing and reporting equality data and, despite improvements in recent years, significant gaps remain in Scotland's equality evidence base. To address this, the Scottish Government launched the [Equality Data Improvement Programme](#) in April 2021. This programme builds on [research](#) which explored the collection of equality and socio-economic disadvantage data by Scottish public sector bodies.<sup>1</sup> The 27 organisations who took part in this research faced various barriers and challenges in this area of work, but they also identified factors that helped support the collection and use of high-quality equality data.

This document presents one of a series of six case studies produced to complement this research. The case studies aim to support the sharing of good practice by showing how different organisations have approached collecting and using equality data to provide better services and better outcomes for their 'customers'. Each of the case studies illustrates different aspects of practice across the public sector in Scotland. They do not provide a comprehensive picture of the work undertaken by organisations; rather they illustrate some of their positive actions in collecting, using and improving equality data.

## Highland Council Children's Services...

- Has put in place processes to improve the collection of equality data for children and young people in nurseries and schools.
- Established an Equalities Improvement Group covering Education and Children's Services with a remit to work strategically to reduce inequality among children and young people with protected characteristics.
- Has defined outcomes within its [Mainstreaming Equality Report](#) that will require the collection and analysis of high-quality equality data on school pupils – specifically, related to attainment and post-school destinations.
- Implemented a wide range of interventions which have been targeted to reduce poverty and inequality among children and young people with protected characteristics.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: 'equality data' refers to 'equality and socio-economic disadvantage data' and covers the protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act 2010 (age, religion and belief, race, disability, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, and gender reassignment) and (any) indicators of socio-economic disadvantage.

## About Highland Council Children's Services

Highland Council provides services to around a third of the land area of Scotland, including the most remote and sparsely populated parts of the United Kingdom. The council has the seventh highest population out of the 32 authorities in Scotland (235,540) while at the same time having the lowest population density at 8 persons per square kilometre.

Following the introduction of the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014, Highland Council approached the legal requirement to integrate its health and social care services differently to other areas of Scotland. Highland Council adopted a 'Lead Agency' model, which means that the health board and local authority took responsibility for delivering specified integrated functions. In Highland, the health board is responsible for the management and strategic planning of adult health and social care services and the council is responsible for children's services – health, social care and education.

This case study focuses on equality data collected by the Education and Social Work Departments of Highland Council.<sup>2</sup> Until very recently (2021), these two services formed part of a single Care and Learning Service but had separate data management systems – 'SEEMiS' in Education and 'Care First' in Social Work. These data management systems are standardised and used by local authorities across Scotland, thereby enabling comparisons to be made between local authorities.<sup>3</sup>

## The data collections

In Highland Council, the pupil record, created and maintained by the Education and Learning Service, contains data on all children enrolled in council-run early learning and childcare services or schools. The pupil record holds demographic information about each child, including information about their protected characteristics, together with details of attainment, and – where a child has been referred to Social Work – basic information provided by the Social Work Department (e.g., if the child is on the child protection register or is care-experienced). Data are collected from the child's parent or carer through an online form when the child is first enrolled in nursery or primary school. The form requests information on age, religion and belief, race, disability, and sex. Socio-economic data (parental income / receipt of benefits) are also collected to assess a child's eligibility for free school meals among families who apply for this.

The pupil record is updated annually by the child's parent or carer, and in an ongoing way by education professionals for children with additional support needs (ASN). Information held on SEEMiS contributes to a number of national statistics publications, including the [annual pupil census](#) (which includes information about the number of school children with ASN and the number registered for free school meals), [school summary statistics](#), [school leaver initial destinations and attainment statistics](#), [pupil absence](#), [exclusions](#), etc. All of these publications provide a breakdown of statistics by one or more protected characteristics.

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<sup>2</sup> It does not cover information held by NHS Highland in relation to a child's health record.

<sup>3</sup> Development work on both systems is undertaken at a national (rather than local) level. For example, Scottish Government-led work is currently underway to revise definitions related to additional support needs within SEEMiS. Once agreed, these revisions will be implemented by all local authorities.

If a significant concern is raised with the Social Work team about a child under the age of 18, an investigation is carried out, and basic information about the child (including demographic characteristics and protected characteristics) is entered into the Care First information management system. The social worker may not be able to complete all questions at their first assessment but is expected to add to the data over time. Data are collected on age, religion and belief, race, disability, sex, and (depending on the age of the child) marriage and civil partnership. Data are not collected on pregnancy and maternity, but if a young person is pregnant, this will be recorded in the case notes.

The information held by the Social Work Department is used to produce national children's social work statistics (e.g., [children on the child protection register and looked-after children](#)), which provide an analysis by protected characteristics. Data from Care First are also linked (anonymously) with data from the pupil record on SEEMiS to produce national statistics on [educational outcomes for looked-after children](#).<sup>4</sup>

In Highland Council, data sharing arrangements are in place to enable certain limited information to be shared between the Education and Social Work Departments for children and young people who have contact with the Social Work Department – specifically, whether the child is looked-after.

### Good practice in the collection and use of equality data

A number of factors have supported better collection and use of equality data within Highland Council Children's Services. All of these factors have led to an increasing commitment to the equality agenda and a growing awareness of issues relating to equality and diversity – both within Children's Services and within individual schools. In particular:

- Increasing Scottish Government requirements for equality data have helped to drive improvement work and have prompted Highland Council to work with schools to ensure they gather accurate and complete data. As a result, the processes for gathering equality data within Highland Council have become more 'built in' over time – particularly in education.
- The Lead Agency approach and the single Care and Learning Service<sup>5</sup> have helped to support better cross-checking of information between health, education and social work, with the same staff teams involved in data gathering and checking across the service.
- Whilst the quality and completeness of equality data have improved over time, using the data can still be more of a challenge. In Education, the establishment of an Equalities Improvement Group (including an LGBTI+ sub-group) within the Care and Learning Service has helped in this respect. This group has had an important role in ensuring that data from SEEMiS and other sources are scrutinised and used more strategically by the council to inform service developments and improvements.

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<sup>4</sup> These statistics are not broken down further by the nine protected characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Note, as stated above, Highland Council's single Care and Learning Service has now been split into two separate services.

As noted above, local authorities are required to report annually to the Scottish Government on a wide range of issues relating to children and young people. One area for which statistics must be reported is that of ASN, as detailed in the box below.

### **Spotlight: Improving data on the additional support needs of school pupils**

Highland Council has invested resources in training and supporting local schools to (i) identify pupils with ASN, and (ii) provide more accurate information about those pupils, with central staff following up with schools to encourage completion. In addition, a senior council officer now routinely checks and monitors the data. These efforts have led to improved data on ASN in Highland and have informed a major redesign of services for children with ASN.

In the past, national reports on ASN have shown significant variations between local authorities, with some evidence (from the [pupil census](#)) that the percentages of pupils with ASN in primary and secondary schools reported by Highland Council were consistently higher than those reported by many other local authorities. These higher rates may be a consequence of the efforts described above. Indeed, there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that, as other local authorities have begun to address data quality issues in relation to their own collection of data on ASN, their figures have become more comparable with those published by Highland Council.

## Impacts of equality data collection

Highland Council is committed to ensuring that equality, diversity and children's rights are central to Highland Council's work with children, young people and families. At an individual level, Highland Council uses information about a child's equality characteristics to tailor services to that child. At a strategic level, equality data are used to develop, measure and monitor equality outcomes and initiatives. Highland Council's updated [Equality Outcomes for the period 2021–2025](#) include two outcomes that will require the ongoing collection of high-quality equality data on children and young people living in Highland. Outcome 7 aims to 'increase the number of young people with protected characteristics leaving school moving into positive and sustained destinations', and Outcome 8 aims to 'reduce the attainment and achievement gaps between pupils with protected characteristics and also those living in poverty'. Both of these outcomes have been carried forward from the [\(previous\) Equality Mainstreaming for the period 2017–2021](#), and they align with priorities in the [National Performance Framework](#).

To achieve these outcomes, Highland Council implements – and monitors the effects of – a range of interventions, some of which are described below.

- [Highland Council's Mainstreaming Equality and Equality Outcomes Report](#) notes evidence of gender stereotyping in Highland schools by the time pupils reach age 5-7. This has led to training being delivered to early years staff on gender stereotyping, and work being undertaken jointly with Skills Development Scotland (SDS) to address the low numbers of girls in Highland pursuing higher and further education opportunities in STEM subjects.<sup>6</sup> Data on sex are used to track student attainment and post-school destinations, and to give feedback to schools in support of this work.

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<sup>6</sup> Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

- Bullying incidents are recorded and analysed in relation to the protected characteristics of the pupils involved. These statistics are used in equality training for school staff, and trend data are tracked and fed back to schools. Highland Council has worked with other [Northern Alliance](#) education authorities and the Misty Isle Youth Forum on Skye to develop a [prevention policy and guidance](#) to address bullying in schools.
- Highland Council and its Northern Alliance partners have also supported the Equality Forum at Nairn Academy to update the Equality Guidance and Inclusion Policy and to provide [a self-evaluation tool](#) for schools to use to enhance their inclusive practice in relation to pupils (and staff) with protected characteristics.
- As a participant in Scotland's Syrian Refugee Resettlement Scheme, Highland Council supports a range of activities aimed at helping Syrian families to integrate into Highland society. It also provides language support to Syrian school pupils and delivers targeted support to individual young people (with a separate young women's and young men's group) to help build relationships, confidence and self-esteem.
- Interventions have been developed to support Gypsy / Traveller families to access schools, nurseries, and other educational opportunities.
- Highland Council's [Emerging Literacy](#) approach, which is based on work undertaken by school staff working with allied health professionals and educational psychologists, has been rolled out across the council area but has been targeted specifically at schools participating in the [Scottish Attainment Challenge](#) – i.e. schools with a large proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and in receipt of [Pupil Equity Funding](#). In Highland, this comprises around 89% of schools.

### Next steps

As with other local authorities, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on Highland Council. In particular, the pandemic has affected the ability of the council to publish verified data for 2020 and 2021 that would ordinarily be used to measure progress on outcomes for specific groups (e.g. care-experienced and looked after children; children with disabilities; children excluded from school; children with ASN; and children from Armed Forces families).

At the same time, the former Care and Learning Service in Highland has recently been reorganised into separate Education and Learning, and Health and Social Care services. This is at an early stage, with new service plans and improvement priorities being developed. The impact on equality data collection by Highland Council is not yet clear. However, senior management commitment in maintaining a focus on gathering equality data and using these data for strategic planning purposes will be important.

### Contact for further information

Queries and further information in relation to this case study should be directed to: Highland Council Policy and Reform Department, [equal.opportunities@highland.gov.uk](mailto:equal.opportunities@highland.gov.uk).

### **The Scottish Government Equality Data Improvement Programme**

The Scottish Government launched its [Equality Data Improvement Programme](#) in April 2021. The first phase of the programme, which will run from April 2021 to December 2022, aims to raise awareness across the public sector of why equality data are needed, and how these data can be used to improve policy-making and outcomes.

**Do you have an example of good practice in collecting and using equality data at your organisation that you would like to share?**

Contact the Scottish Government at: [social-justice-analysis@gov.scot](mailto:social-justice-analysis@gov.scot)



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