

In Highland Council schools, digital learning helps to improve equity and prepares pupils for a future of flexible work

About Highland Council

With 32 local authorities, Highland Council is the largest local government area in the United Kingdom. It was the 7th most populous council area in Scotland at the 2011 census. The council manages 203 schools, varying in size from just a few pupils to more than 1,500.

Managing a council with diverse education needs

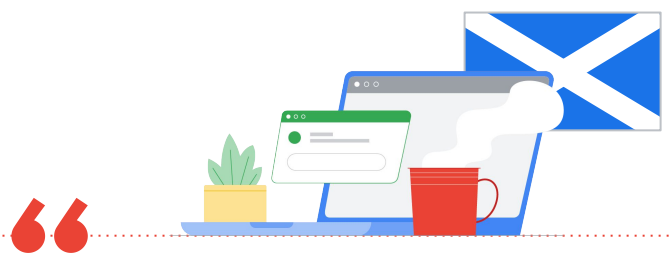
In a council with a wide range of communities—from cities such as Inverness to remote rural island communities reachable only by boat—managing the needs of pupils and teachers is not a “one size fits all” proposition. The variety of locales means the council has a very wide range of students and learning environments. “We cover an area about the size of Belgium,” explains Tania Mackie, ICT in Learning, Strategy and Improvement for Highland Council. “And in that group we have everything from country schools with just a handful of pupils to urban campuses with over 1,500 students.”

Adding to the mix, Highland Council also includes numerous schools that conduct all or part of their teaching in Gaelic. “Northern Scotland has a strong historical connection to Gaelic, which we want to support in our schools” says Robert Quigley, ICT in Learning, Pedagogy and Curriculum for Highland Council.

The geography and demographics of such a large council meant there was a fair amount of inequity in access to resources. “It has seemed unavoidable that the schools with the most students get the most attention and resources, the most staffing, and so forth,” says Robert.

However, the addition of cloud-based teaching and learning technology has offered a pathway to close these gaps. In 2014, the council’s schools began using Google Workspace for Education, followed shortly thereafter by Chromebooks.

“Fortunately, we had a very forward-thinking department leader in 2016 who oversaw acquisition of our first Chromebooks, replacing the patchwork of Windows devices we had,” says Robert. “Shortly thereafter, we implemented Chromebooks 1:1 for every student in secondary school, with students 11 and under sharing devices.” The council currently has about 30,000 Chromebooks in its schools.



That was a complete game changer, once we had all the infrastructure in place, we could actually start focusing upon the skills needed and how we could make best use of these tools, knowing that all our schools had been provisioned,” he says. “We saw it as a way to equalise things.”

Robert Quigley, ICT in Learning, Pedagogy and Curriculum for Highland Council



Choosing digital tools that suit the council's needs

But this technology push was about more than the devices themselves. While Education Scotland had been providing the Glow digital learning platform, Robert, Tania, and their team wanted to see if they could improve on Glow, and instead encourage all Highland Council schools to use Workspace and Google Classroom.



It was actually quite a brave decision on our part, it means we're having to ask staff to access tools that are new and different. But everyone has worked through that, and learned how to use Workspace and Classroom."

Tania Mackie, ICT in Learning, Strategy and Improvement for Highland Council

The shift from Glow to Classroom was also a bold decision because it meant declaring some autonomy from Education Scotland. "We just wanted more control over things from an administrative side—for example, to make our own decisions about apps to push out to our students," Robert says. When the council wanted to offer Gmail to secondary students, ICT leaders were able to roll it out on their own overnight rather than apply through a lengthy process with the previous managed service provider.

Changes both large and small highlight the value of technology

As ICT learning leaders introduced Workspace, Classroom, and Chromebooks to Highland Council schools, some of the more remote, rural schools were not ready to take full advantage of the digital tools due to the absence of training and support resources. "Some of our schools, the ones that were already keen on technology, were off and running, but some of the others didn't have that kind of organic adoption," Tania says.

Then, when the pandemic forced Highland Council schools to switch to remote learning in March 2020, everything changed. "Before that time, digital learning wasn't really viewed as integral to the curriculum," Tania explains. "There was only a very small team to support the Chromebook rollout, and a lot of schools didn't have digital leaders." But thanks to the efforts of Tania, Robert, and their team, this was about to change.



The pandemic has been awful, but just in terms of this one challenge—equity in our schools—it has forced some changes that are going to be beneficial in the long run. Working from home was a big equaliser, and once that started we knew we had a chance to make equity a reality. It's not an exaggeration to say that responding to this challenge has transformed all of education in our council."

Robert Quigley, ICT in Learning, Pedagogy and Curriculum for Highland Council



The signs of change and equity, large and small, are everywhere in Highland Council schools:



Students at all schools can work at their own pace and their own time. If pupils' parents were working at home, the pupils could shift their work to a later time of day, since everything they need is in Google Classroom. "Pupils were empowered to have self-management of their learning," Robert says.



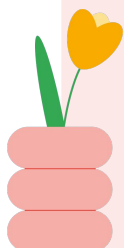
Events that were difficult for pupils and parents to attend could happen remotely, which invited greater participation. Muirtown Primary School recently had its annual "Muirtown's Got Talent" show, which usually would take place at school with parents in attendance, along with in-person voting. The performances were instead recorded and placed on the school's Google Site, with parents voting via Google Forms. "That was so powerful, because it showed us that things don't have to stop because of the pandemic," Robert says. "The head teacher told me they got more responses than if the show was face to face, because it didn't suit everyone to come and watch on a Tuesday night."



Google Classroom has become the standard for every school. "It's the go-to tool for organising and learning," Robert says. "Even though schools are back face to face, they're still using Google Classroom, because it's just a good organisational tool. It makes teachers better prepared." When teachers are more prepared, Robert adds, they can create more engaging lessons, which helps children become better learners.



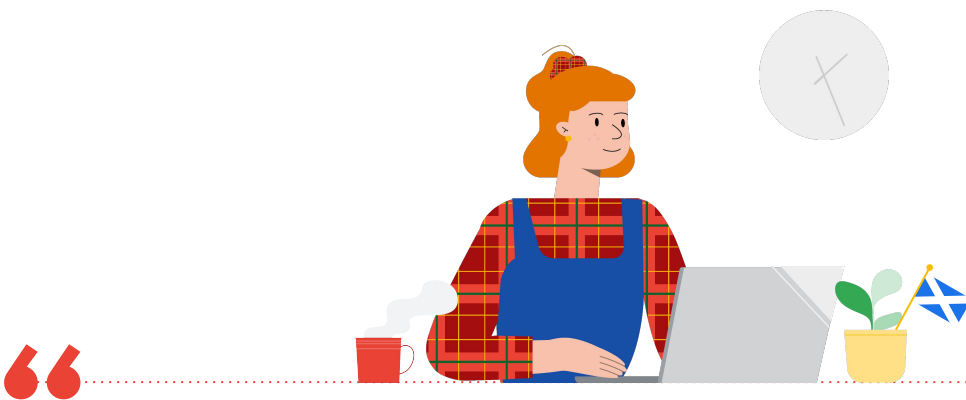
All pupils have greater access to learning resources, no matter where pupils and teachers live. High Life Highland's Countryside Rangers, who travel to schools to offer lessons on wildlife and heritage of the Scottish Highlands, now use Classroom and Meet to connect with pupils and share livestreams on YouTube.



Achieving goals, setting new ones

“So now, a year and some after the pandemic, we’ve made great progress,” says Tania. “You might even say that digital is fully embedded in our schools.” Going forward, the Highland ICT team is hoping to make digital skills a more central part of the curriculum. “We have this dream of moving all of our support, even device repair, in house, and having students do the work,” says Robert.

The wealth of digital knowledge that pupils will gain during their time in Highland Council schools will serve them well in the future and also benefit communities.



In a remote rural authority like Highland, that’s going to enable people to stay, at a time when many of our islands have declining populations. We’re educating and empowering our pupils to work anywhere—but especially, here in their communities.”

Tania Mackie, ICT in Learning, Strategy and Improvement for Highland Council