Writing a Literacy Policy in Primary Schools

Introduction
The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to primary schools on the writing of a Literacy Policy or Strategy. It takes into account Education Scotland advice on Literacy as well as other theory on the development of Literacy across Learning. However this is not an academic document on the meaning of literacy¹. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to provide practical advice that will help schools to implement the Highland Literacy Strategy (2013).

Section 1: Principles and Practice

Essential Elements
The Highland Literacy Strategy identifies 41 essential elements for the development of a school Literacy Policy (based on the Journey to Excellence broad areas of excellence), the most critical of which are as follows²:

Vision and Leadership
- Establish a Literacy Group³
- Ensure that all staff⁴ have a clear understanding of the importance of literacy and their role in its development
- Ensure that clear systems are in place to track and monitor pupils’ literacy

Learning and Teaching
- Implementation of the Highland Council Learning Policy⁵ in lessons across the school
- Promote the importance of literacy to pupils
- Share standards in literacy
- Ensure that quality time is given to core literacy skills within the schools’ curriculum
- Ensure there is a balance in the development of literacy skills in reading, writing, listening and talking⁶
- Ensure that literacy activities build on prior learning

Culture and Ethos
- Promote a positive attitude to literacy amongst all staff, learners and parents/carers

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¹ There is much research on the nature of literacy. Useful materials on literacy can, of course, be found on the Education Scotland website, here, but there are other ways of approaching this area and staff should be encouraged to develop their own understanding of the nature of literacy.
² The complete list of essential elements can be consulted in the online version of the strategy here.
³ This should be an ongoing group (with membership varying over time) rather than a group with a limited timespan designed to satisfy the outcomes relating to a School Improvement Plan project. In some settings it may be more appropriate to work in conjunction with another school in the ASG.
⁴ This includes non-teaching staff such as Pupil Support Assistants.
⁵ Highland Learning Policy, 2013, previously issued to all teaching staff and available as a pdf download here.
⁶ The three modes themselves are considered Significant Aspects of Learning (SAL). More information can be found on the Education Scotland website here.
- Make literacy learning fun
- Ensure literacy has a high profile throughout the school
- Set and share appropriately high standards
- Give learners responsibility for their literacy learning

**People**
- Give clear consideration to each person’s role in leading literacy learning
- Provide high quality CPD for staff to improve competence and confidence
- Work with the ASG on sharing standards activities
- Encourage young people to reflect on their literacy learning
- Take account of the views of young people when devising literacy learning opportunities

**Partnership**
- Keep parents/carers informed of literacy developments
- Encourage parents/carers to take an active role in promoting literacy at home
- Engage all partners from outside agencies in dialogue to ensure activities and experiences are appropriate for learners
- Promote real-life contexts for learning through the involvement of community members and businesses

The template in Section 2 below takes these elements into account at the planning stage but of course continuing self-evaluation of the effectiveness of the Policy will be essential in ensuring that they remain a reality in its implementation.

**Overcoming barriers**
To ensure that the Literacy Policy remains an active document within the school it will be necessary to consider what factors might mitigate against its success. Below, six such barriers are identified and a recommendation made suggesting how they might be overcome. In each individual school further potential barriers may well be identified. It is recommended that during the implementation of the Policy a “pre-mortem” is carried out by those engaged in planning with the intention of identifying ways in which the Policy may fail. This will allow the school to prepare to dismantle these potential local barriers.

**Barrier 1 – Lack of staff engagement**
Where staff do not feel motivated to make the Policy work, it is very likely to fail, or to exist within the school as an agreed document with no real currency. Research suggests people feel more motivated when a) they have a degree of autonomy, b) when they feel an increasing sense of mastery and c) when there is a strong sense of engaging with others as part of a team to a specific end.

a) The development of the policy should place responsibility for identifying key literacy areas for study with stage partners or teams within CfE Levels, as opposed to the sole responsibility of the SMT or the school Literacy Group. If this happens individual teachers are more likely to feel that the Policy is there to assist them in their teaching rather than being an administrative imposition with no direct relevance. In particular, explicit discussion needs to take place about how the Literacy Policy will improve pupil attainment in all stages across the school.
b) CPD should be carefully planned to address the needs of staff in the school to help them to develop their skills in literacy teaching in such a way that they will be able to see how they are becoming increasingly skilled in the delivery of reading, writing, listening and talking. This will mean consulting with staff about their needs and using specialists from within and outwith the school to deliver CPD to meet these needs.

Data about pupil attainment (including assessment data) and attitudes of pupils, staff and parents/carers should be gathered. An assessment of progress towards whole school literacy targets will help staff to feel they are contributing to the larger picture. It is essential, therefore, that clear whole school targets are agreed (and “implementation of the school Literacy Policy” is not a suitable target).

The establishment of a Literacy Group within the school is part of the Highland Literacy Strategy, but the Strategy does not specify how such a group should be formed. It is recommended that the Literacy Group is comprised of volunteers rather than conscripts, but that individuals with an interest in or expertise in issues relating to literacy could be approached when the group is being built. The remit and role of the Literacy Group should be clearly shared with all staff, and the Group should be presented as representative of all staff (and therefore a critical part of the whole-school “team”), with systems in place to ensure good communication and an openness to the views, ideas and concerns of other staff within the school who are not on the Group.

**Barrier 2 – Disproportionate bureaucracy**

A common reason for staff not engaging with a Literacy Policy is a sense that developing the school’s curriculum, deemed by some as the responsibility of the SMT, is an imposition on teachers already dealing with a large and complex workload. Dealing with Barrier 1, above, should help with this issue but it is important that steps to minimise bureaucracy should be seen to be taken.

The following are suggested:

- The proposal in the original Highland Literacy Strategy that “there should be at least one literacy success criterion with learners for each learning activity and that feedback concentrates on that criterion” should be taken to refer to learning sequences rather than individual lessons.
- Tracking of literacy development should be based on SALs rather than Es and Os and the system in use in the school should be as streamlined as possible, minimising data entry for staff.
- The school should develop a system for gathering information about literacy progression across learning that does not require any double entry by staff, and key points regarding the impact of the Policy should be drawn together by SMT or personnel from the Literacy Group for dissemination to staff so that it is clear what value has been added by the Policy and by the planning and interventions of all staff.

**Barrier 3 – Lack of Confidence**

Staff lack of confidence is usually based on a self-perception (which may or may not be accurate) that individuals do not have the expertise to help pupils develop literacy skills required for the 21st century. With many changes to the approaches we use, staff may feel that they have not had the adequate training in new methodologies. Providing relevant CPD opportunities for staff, as outlined in Barrier 1, is fundamental in fostering the empowerment of practitioners in supporting all learners.
The SMT/Literacy Group would oversee the process of checking for a degree of consistency of approach across the school, though this does not necessarily involve a completely uniform approach in the learning and teaching strategies related to each individual SAL: where there needs to be consistency is in the message that literacy development is of the utmost importance and that literacy development at the individual level means challenging progression built on prior learning.

**Barrier 4 – Insufficient learner awareness**

There is a danger that pupils are not aware that literacy skills are being developed across all of their learning. Learning happens best when the Highland Learning Policy principles of Engagement, Participation, Dialogue and Thinking are realities in the learning environment. This means making the literacy work explicit, ensuring that young people take responsibility for their own learning.

Sampling of pupil views (for example through questionnaires and focus groups) could help to establish where further work needs to be done, both in developing Literacy SALs and in helping pupils to make the connection between literacy and all areas of the curriculum.

**Barrier 5 – Existing beliefs about literacy**

A difficult barrier to overcome can be existing beliefs about literacy, especially the belief that to be considered ‘literate’ the definitive criteria is to a) be able to read printed texts and b) be able to make beautifully crafted marks in a writing jotter.

Analysis with staff, parents/carers and pupils is integral in defining the wider definition of a) literacy, b) being ‘literate’ and c) a text.

Showcasing Literacy across Learning to parents/carers may alleviate concerns. Methodologies may have changed since they attended school. The school should engage with parents/carers to ensure that they feel confident in supporting their child at home.

**Barrier 6 – Insufficient knowledge about prior learning**

It is crucial that knowledge about pupils’ prior learning in literacy is shared with all staff. This includes, of course, the sharing of information at key transition points, such as the Nursery/Primary and Primary/Secondary transition.

For genuinely progressive programmes of literacy development to be built, there will have to be very clear systems in place to ensure that all staff really know what next steps in learning would be appropriate for the young people in their classes. Without these systems it would be impossible to build learning sequences that maximised the attainment of children and young people.

**The 4 Contexts for Learning**

In planning a Literacy Policy for the school, the 4 contexts for learning should be addressed.

- Curriculum Area and Subject-based learning will be addressed as described above.

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7 Highland Learning Policy, 2013, previously issued to all teaching staff and available as a pdf download [here](#).

8 Highland Literacy provides CPD which can be used to help address this within the Literacy Toolkit. The blog also contains links and resources which can be used to facilitate discussions with parents/carers.
• Opportunities for personal achievement: pupils should be encouraged to identify literacy learning opportunities through learning and wider achievement activities in which they participate, both within and outwith school. Such opportunities could form part of the pupil profile.

• Interdisciplinary Learning: Literacy development should feature in every IDL project, with the identification of one or more than one Literacy SAL (agreed by the staff involved in planning the IDL activity and shared with pupils in terms of Learning Intentions and Success Criteria).

• Ethos: the development of literacy is a matter of entitlement and empowerment, so the sharing of the Literacy Policy should contribute to ethos by explicitly emphasising the school’s commitment to these concepts and the role of literacy in their pursuit.

Sharing Standards
The school will already have in place systems for sharing standards both internally and across the ASG. This document is not the place to expand on these processes. It goes without saying that sharing standards will be an essential part of the process of developing Literacy across Learning. This process may be centred around exemplar material with commentaries shared at moderation events, or the engagement with The Highland Literacy Progression; details, however, will vary from school to school.

Conclusion
In some ways, the development of Literacy across Learning is not a complex concept, particularly since many teachers are already fully engaged with the process. The difficulties that do exist are the manifestations of genuine concerns about what such development means for individuals. The recommendation is that a systematic approach will help to alleviate these concerns, though it is important for schools to commit wholeheartedly and as part of an ongoing process. The emphasis on encouraging reflection and dialogue about literacy development, above, reflects the importance of collegiality and the concept of everybody involved in a school being learners (in line with the revised Learning Policy and the GTCS Standard for Career-long Professional Learning).

What follows is a template for the content of a Literacy Policy. This is not to say that a school’s Literacy Policy has to follow the template: indeed it is more important for the Policy to meet the needs of the individual school. The underlying principle, that development of literacy in the context of discrete subject-based learning and IDL opportunities will help pupils to raise their attainment, is more important than the specific shape of the school’s Literacy Policy. A paper Policy will have no currency (or indeed validity) unless all involved are genuine participants in its production and implementation, and the writing of a Policy is only an early step in the task of raising literacy standards.

James Cook
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9 The Highland Literacy Progression – Steps to Success can be found here.
10 The GTCS Standard for Career-long Professional Learning can be found here.
# Section 2: Literacy Policy Template

**NAME OF SCHOOL inserted here**

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**LITERACY POLICY**

Date inserted here

## Section 1 – Aims

In this section outline the school’s commitment to Literacy across Learning. This statement should be produced through consultation with staff (and possibly pupils and parents). The following paragraph is extracted from the Highland Council Literacy Strategy (2013):

> The Highland Literacy Strategy aims to raise standards in reading, writing, talking and listening. To equip our learners for life in the 21st century, it is vital that, as leaders of learning, teachers recognise the fundamental importance of literacy and its place in the curriculum. All teachers have a responsibility to promote and develop reading, writing, talking and listening skills.

This paragraph could form the first part of the Aims section of the school Policy, and would be followed by a more school-specific section. This section would include subsections on:

- Ways in which the importance of literacy has been shared with
  - Staff
  - Pupils
  - Parents
- The production of the Learning Policy (and how it is the result of collegiate processes)
- Ways in which literacy is given a high profile within the school
- Ways in which high expectations about literacy are set and maintained.
### Section 2 – Systems
In this section describe the various systems in place within the school designed to promote literacy as outlined in Section 1 of the Policy. This section will include subsections on:
- The school Literacy Group (its formation and functions)
- The role of stage partners and teams within CfE Levels in addressing Significant Aspects of Learning in literacy
- Methods by which knowledge about pupils’ abilities in literacy are shared at all transition points
- Systems to ensure that all pupils experience a suitable literacy skills progression, regardless of academic attainment, and taking into account all types of additional support needs
- Oversight of literacy development (for example ensuring full coverage of the Significant Aspects of Learning)
- Tracking and monitoring progress
- Assessing literacy (including helping pupils to identify next steps in their learning)
- Communicating with parents/carers regarding literacy development

### Section 3 – Structure of Literacy Programmes
This section would contain an overview and links to actual programmes of literacy work, e.g. Big Writing, Oxford Reading Tree etc. The progression of how these programmes are used would be highlighted here. This section would also cover the way challenging literacy targets are set for pupils across the school.

### Section 4 – Understanding Standards
In this section an account will be given of the various process in place within the school to ensure that there is consistency of approach in the delivery and assessment of literacy:
- Within the school
- Involving the ASG

### Section 5 – Supporting the Policy
In this section there will be a description of how the Policy is supported through:
- Consultation with staff, pupils and parents/carers
- Learning opportunities for staff (as part of the Career-long Professional Learning process)
- Surveying of views to ensure the Policy is delivered effectively

### Section 6 – The 4 Contexts for Learning
This section will outline how literacy is prioritised in the school in terms of
- Curriculum Area and Subject-based learning (a reference to Section 2, above).
- Opportunities for personal achievement
- Interdisciplinary Learning
- Ethos
**Section 7 – Evaluation and Improvement**

This section will outline how the school will evaluate the Policy’s effectiveness and amend it in line with feedback of various kinds and analysis of data. The processes involved here will echo self-evaluation processes already existing within the school. The emphasis here will be on how the school knows that the Policy is being implemented fully and is making a difference in terms of pupils’ literacy and through what agreed processes alterations to the Policy will be introduced as and when necessary.

Please direct any questions about this paper and the Template in the first instance to james.cook@highland.gov.uk.