Aberdeenshire COUNCIL

From mountain to sea

The Committee would welcome an update on how your Local Authority has responded to the recommendations of the HMIE thematic report on inspection of local authority approaches to supporting school improvement. This includes how your Local Authority views the "notable variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities." For example, the Committee is interested in how good practice is shared across local authorities and the barriers which may exist to this occurring.

Aberdeenshire Council welcomes the findings of the HMIE thematic report and recognises the importance of ensuring that all schools receive consistently high-quality and proportionate support and challenge. In response, we have implemented a Quality Improvement Framework which provides a common and agreed approach across the Education Service, bringing together Quality Improvement Visits (QIVs), Validated Self-Evaluation (VSE), Standards and Quality and Improvement Plan moderation and differentiated support. Our National Improvement Framework (NIF) identifies that the framework is already supporting greater consistency in support, challenge, self-evaluation and school improvement.

Importantly, we are beginning to see evidence of the impact of this approach rather than simply evidence of implementation. QIV, VSE, school self-evaluation and inspection findings are increasingly being considered together, giving officers and school leaders a more coherent evidence base from which to identify strengths, variation and priorities for improvement. Our NIF reports that self-evaluation is becoming more reliable, with increasing alignment between internal QIV/VSE evidence and external scrutiny. This provides encouraging evidence that a more consistent understanding of quality and national standards is developing across the system.

There are also tangible examples within external scrutiny. During 2025/26, seven of the eight schools inspected against QI 3.1 Wellbeing, Equality and Inclusion were evaluated as Good or Very Good, while 73% of schools inspected against QI 2.3 Learning, Teaching and Assessment were evaluated as Good. This also demonstrates why our continuing focus on consistency is important, as variation remains and informs where support and challenge should be targeted.

Our quality improvement approach is deliberately proportionate rather than uniform. Evidence from attainment, attendance, exclusions, inspection, QIV, VSE, stakeholder feedback and school self-evaluation is used collectively to determine priorities and inform the nature and intensity of support provided. This is increasingly enabling central teams to align their universal, targeted and intensive support to identified need rather than providing the same offer to every school.

We have also worked with school leaders to redesign approaches to self-evaluation and school improvement planning, with a much stronger emphasis on the question: *what difference has this made?* This same approach has informed the redesign of our NIF planning. Our

current NIF explicitly moves away from describing activity towards identifying what will change, who will benefit and how we will know whether improvement has occurred.

There is emerging evidence that this increased focus on impact is translating into improved outcomes. For example, combined P1, P4 and P7 literacy increased to 76%, meeting the authority Stretch Aim, while numeracy increased to 83%, exceeding the 81% Stretch Aim. At the same time, our evaluation identifies areas where outcomes remain less equitable, particularly writing and outcomes for learners entitled to Free School Meals and those living in SIMD Quintile 1. That analysis is being used to direct additional support rather than simply report performance.

Our approach to inclusion provides another example of how professional learning, quality improvement and evaluation are being connected. CIRCLE training has reached all schools, and evidence from our Self-Improving Schools Trios and Quads suggests it is influencing both culture and practice. Staff are increasingly considering learners' needs through barriers, adjustments and environmental factors rather than individual deficits. The Inclusive Classroom Scale has also resulted in observable changes including more consistent visual supports and routines, improved accessibility of resources and increased use of sensory or quiet spaces. We are appropriately cautious about claiming longer-term learner impact at this stage, and this will continue to be evaluated.

There are, however, encouraging longer-term indicators. The substantial reduction in exclusions has largely been sustained: exclusion incidents fell from 1,051 in 2023/24 to 723 in 2024/25 and were 749 in 2025/26, while the number of pupils excluded reduced from 1,030 to 688 over the same period. This supports our continued emphasis on preventative and relationship-based approaches, while recognising that further work is required where individual school or cohort rates remain high.

Leadership and building capacity

Alongside support and challenge, our strategic intention is to build the capacity of the system to improve itself. We have developed a broader and more coherent leadership offer encompassing aspiring leaders, middle leaders, Depute Head Teachers and Head Teachers, including induction, mentoring, Area Days and authority networks. Self-Improving Schools Trios and Quads, Area Collaboratives, Head Teacher forums and curriculum networks provide mechanisms through which leaders can learn from one another, undertake collaborative self-evaluation and share effective practice.

Our NIF identifies positive early evidence from leadership professional learning, including strong participant feedback and some participants progressing into promoted posts. We recognise, however, that progression and participant satisfaction are not sufficient measures of impact in themselves. Our next stage is therefore to evaluate more systematically how

leadership development changes leadership practice and, in turn, contributes to improved school and learner outcomes.

This is also why our Self-Improving Schools partnerships are important. They are increasingly being developed as vehicles for constructive professional challenge and collaborative self-evaluation, not simply opportunities to network.

Sharing practice across and beyond the authority

We also recognise the importance of learning beyond individual schools and beyond Aberdeenshire. Our Self-Improving Schools Trios and Quads, authority networks and ADES Quads provide mechanisms for sharing expertise and effective practice. The NIF identifies that ADES Quad activity is strengthening cross-authority collaboration and allowing senior leaders to learn from each other and co-develop approaches to quality improvement.

There remain barriers to achieving complete consistency both within and across authorities. These include differences in local context, scale, organisational structures and capacity, alongside the availability of leaders and officers to participate in sustained collaborative improvement activity. We therefore see value in continuing to strengthen structured opportunities for cross-authority collaboration, particularly where this involves joint professional learning, constructive challenge and evaluation of impact, rather than simply sharing practice.

Overall, our approach represents a deliberate shift from quality assurance as a series of separate processes towards an integrated model of quality improvement. The purpose of the Quality Improvement Framework is not simply to make processes more consistent. It is to enable us to identify variation earlier, target support more precisely, strengthen leadership and self-evaluation, and ultimately improve experiences and outcomes for children and young people.

Attendance

The Committee would welcome an update from your Local Authority on how the guidance is being implemented in practice and whether it is leading to improvements in local approaches. The Committee is also interested in how schools within your Local Authority identify and respond to persistent absence, how effective multi-agency working is in supporting individual pupils and their families, and how knowledge of effective practice is shared across the education system.

Improving attendance remains a key priority for Aberdeenshire. While overall attendance remains relatively stable, we recognise that the authority-wide position can mask important variation between groups of learners. Our NIF therefore places particular emphasis on persistent non-attendance and improving attendance for children and young people

experiencing poverty and disadvantage. NIF identifies attendance for priority cohorts as an area requiring continued focus.

In response, we have reviewed and strengthened our authority-wide approach to attendance, establishing updated guidance, procedures and expectations which are understood across our schools. This provides a consistent framework for identifying concerns, monitoring attendance and determining when additional intervention is required. Our Stretch Aim reporting confirms the introduction of updated guidance and procedures and the establishment of a working group involving school and central team colleagues to support implementation and further improvement.

We are increasingly using data to move beyond consideration of the overall attendance rate to understand which children and young people are not attending consistently, where patterns of persistent absence are emerging and where these intersect with disadvantage. This is enabling support to be more targeted and proportionate. Our approach to NIF monitoring reinforces this by identifying attendance and persistent absence as key measures and by disaggregating evidence by school, locality and priority cohorts, including Free School Meals, SIMD, ASN and care-experienced learners.

Our Stretch Aim data demonstrates the importance of this approach. In 2024/25, overall attendance was 93%, against a Stretch Aim of 94%. However, attendance for learners living in SIMD Quintile 1 was 88%, compared with 94% in Quintile 5, creating a six percentage point equity gap. Attendance for children and young people entitled to Free School Meals and for care-experienced learners was 87%.

Our subsequent Stretch Aims reflect our ambition to address this variation. For 2025/26, we aimed to increase overall attendance to 94.5%, increase attendance within SIMD Quintile 1 to 91%, reduce the Quintile 1 to Quintile 5 gap to **3**.5 percentage points, and improve attendance for pupils entitled to Free School Meals to 89.5% and for care-experienced learners to 91%.

Alongside the consistent universal approach across schools, we are therefore developing a more targeted response to persistent non-attendance. We initially piloted an enhanced approach across two clusters with a higher proportion of children and young people living within SIMD Quintiles 1 and 2. Our Stretch Aim reporting records the development of this evidence-based approach through Strategic Equity Funding and the initial pilot activity within the Fraserburgh Cluster.

Building on the learning from this work, we are now using Strategic Equity Funding to secure additional Pupil Support Worker capacity across our clusters, specifically to strengthen the response to persistent non-attendance. These posts will provide additional capacity to work alongside schools, children, young people and families where universal attendance approaches have not been sufficient. The intention is to provide earlier, more relational and

sustained intervention, particularly for those learners whose attendance is being affected by disadvantage or other barriers to engagement.

However, it should be noted that any reduction in Strategic Equity Funding would therefore directly undermine our ability to provide this additional support to schools. It would put at risk the additional Pupil Support Worker capacity being secured across clusters and limit the reach, timeliness and continuity of targeted work with children, young people and families experiencing persistent non-attendance. Schools would be left with less access to the capacity needed to complement universal attendance approaches with earlier, relational and sustained intervention. This would weaken our ability to respond consistently to identified need and place at risk our ambitions to reduce persistent absence and narrow the attendance gaps associated with poverty and disadvantage. Sustaining this funding is therefore important not simply to maintain activity, but to enable schools to access the additional support required to address barriers to attendance.

Importantly, we recognise that the creation of additional posts is not, in itself, evidence of impact. We will evaluate the success of this investment through improvements in attendance and reductions in persistent non-attendance amongst the children and young people being supported. This reflects the wider shift within our NIF towards evaluating what has changed for learners as a result of our actions, rather than simply describing the activity undertaken. Our developing NIF measures specifically identify the need to monitor persistent absence alongside implementation of interventions and to disaggregate outcomes for priority groups.

There is also external validation of the direction of travel. Previous Stretch Aim reporting records that Education Scotland recognised the authority's revised approach to monitoring attendance as robust, with the next step identified as securing consistent implementation across all schools. Our subsequent work to establish common authority guidance, processes and expectations has been designed specifically to address this.

Overall, our approach now combines consistent universal expectations across all schools, earlier identification through improved use of data, and targeted and intensive intervention where persistent non-attendance is identified. The use of Strategic Equity Funding provides additional capacity where the evidence indicates the greatest need.

Our measure of success will not simply be an improvement in Aberdeenshire's overall attendance percentage. It will be whether we can reduce persistent non-attendance, narrow the attendance gap associated with poverty and disadvantage, and ensure that those children and young people who are most at risk of disengagement are attending, participating and benefiting more consistently from their education.