Dr James Johnston
Clerk to the Education and Gaelic Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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Dear Dr Johnston

Local Authority Approaches to School Education
Thank you for your letter of 7 October 2026 seeking information on Dundee City Council's response to the recommendations arising from HMIE's thematic inspection of local authority approaches to supporting school improvement, and on our approach to supporting children and young people experiencing persistent absence.

Our approach to improvement is underpinned by Every Dundee Learner Matters (EDLM), our collaborative improvement strategy, which focuses on improving the Presence, Participation and Progress of all children and young people through identifying and addressing contextual barriers to learning.

Local authority approaches to supporting school improvement
Dundee welcomed the outcome of HMIE's national thematic inspection of local authority approaches to supporting school improvement, in which the Council participated directly in October 2024. The inspection considered how Dundee supports schools to improve the quality of education through effective improvement planning and standards and quality reporting; self-evaluation and quality assurance; professional learning; and universal and targeted support and challenge.

We recognise the national finding highlighted by the Committee regarding notable variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities. Dundee's approach has been to use the thematic findings and our own self-evaluation to strengthen the consistency, proportionality and impact of support and challenge across the city.

Our most recent self-evaluation identifies clear strengths, including a strong culture of professional enquiry, self-evaluation and continuous improvement; effective quality assurance arrangements providing support and challenge; increasing alignment between local authority evaluations and external inspection evidence; and strong partnership working across schools, services and agencies. It also identifies areas for further development, including improving the consistency of collaborative improvement approaches across establishments, strengthening evaluation of impact and further improving consistency in outcomes across schools and settings.

Strengthening the School Improvement Framework and support and challenge
Following the thematic inspection, the Council reviewed its School Improvement Framework, involving central education officers and Head Teachers, with a particular focus on strengthening consistency while streamlining quality improvement processes and associated documentation. The framework provides a coherent basis for school and local authority self-evaluation, improvement planning, quality assurance and support and challenge. The current framework explicitly seeks to

streamline quality improvement processes and associated documentation while maintaining the Council's responsibility for securing improvement.

This has been accompanied by a more systematic approach through EDLM, School Improvement Partnerships, collaborative improvement, Learning Together activity and Quality Improvement Education Officer (QIEO) support and challenge.

A proportionate programme of school improvement engagement has been developed, comprising universal, targeted and intensive support. The universal offer provides a more consistent agenda for school improvement activity and clearer expectations around feedback from QIEOs. Targeted and intensive approaches enable the level of support and challenge to respond proportionately to evidence of need.

Collaborative Improvement Visits (CIVs) have also been introduced as a structured element of quality assurance and school improvement. These provide a clearly defined process while retaining the flexibility to respond to the context, self-evaluation and improvement priorities of individual schools, with a focus on outcomes and impact. A three-year cycle is planned to secure coverage of all schools through either HMIE inspection or local authority improvement visits. Collaborative Improvement Visits form part of Dundee's strengthened quality assurance arrangements alongside the School Improvement Framework.

Alongside these structural developments, professional capacity has been strengthened. QIEOs have undertaken professional learning with Education Scotland relating to school improvement and evaluative writing. This complements wider opportunities for local authority staff to strengthen professional knowledge of school improvement and effective support and challenge, including opportunities for officers to work alongside HM Inspectors.

Leadership and professional learning

Leadership development remains central to Dundee's response to the thematic findings. Our Leadership and Professional Learning Strategic Delivery Group has strengthened the leadership programmes available across the authority and increased scrutiny around participation to support the effective targeting of professional learning.

This sits alongside an established professional learning offer which includes Head Teacher Learning Together events, School Inquiry Groups, moderation activity, professional learning through the Pedagogy Team, and leadership development for Head Teachers, Depute Head Teachers and middle leaders.

EDLM itself is explicitly based on the principle of distributed leadership. Its ambition is to develop a self-improving system increasingly driven collectively by school leaders, with practitioners taking responsibility not only for improvement within their own establishments but contributing to improvement across the wider education system.

School Improvement Partnerships are central to this. They provide structures through which school leaders can learn from one another, offer collegiate support

and challenge and share responsibility for addressing common improvement priorities. This reflects the wider EDLM approach of developing self-improving schools through inquiry-based improvement and strengthening partnerships between establishments.

We are also making more systematic use of external inspection evidence to inform authority-level improvement. Analysis of inspection evidence from Dundee establishments during session 2025/26 identifies recurring strengths in nurturing relationships, inclusive practice and leadership for improvement. It also identifies areas requiring further development, particularly consistency in learning, teaching and assessment, effective use of data and evaluation of the impact of interventions. These themes are being used to inform professional dialogue, support and improvement priorities across the authority.

Sharing effective practice within and across local authorities

Sharing effective practice is an important feature of Dundee's improvement approach. EDLM seeks to ensure that learning is transferred between practitioners and establishments rather than remaining within individual schools.

Head Teachers have regular opportunities to contribute beyond their own establishments through School Improvement Partnerships, geographical clusters, strategic working groups and Learning Together activity. Dundee's self-evaluation has identified that these opportunities support school leaders to share practice and learn from one another.

Collaboration also extends beyond Dundee. The Council works with neighbouring authorities across Tayside and participates in regional and national professional networks. A Tayside Quality Improvement Working Group provides a further mechanism for sharing practice and learning from different local authority approaches.

Dundee also participates in the ADES collaborative Quads work. This provides opportunities for collaborative self-evaluation between local authorities. Current national work is developing the next round of Quads alongside a revised How Good is Our Education Authority framework and updated collaborative improvement guidance.

We recognise, however, that sharing practice does not in itself secure improvement. The important challenge is to identify effective practice rigorously, understand the difference it is making for learners and determine how learning can be transferred successfully between different contexts. Our focus is therefore increasingly on sharing evidence of impact alongside examples of practice.

Dundee's response to the thematic findings is consequently one of continued improvement. We have strengthened the structures through which establishments receive support and challenge and through which leaders learn from one another, while recognising the need to continue improving consistency and impact across the system.

Support for pupils with persistent absence
Improving attendance remains a significant priority for Dundee.

Within EDLM, attendance is positioned within Presence, alongside Participation and Progress. Dundee has established a multi-agency Attendance Strategy Group to review and strengthen policy and practice. Schools have also been supported to develop attendance-focused inquiry questions, enabling practitioners to use data to identify barriers to attendance and test targeted interventions.

Our Promoting Presence approach places particular emphasis on prevention and early intervention. The guidance recognises that the number of days missed is only one consideration when determining an appropriate response. Frequency and patterns of absence, individual vulnerabilities and risk factors are also taken into account. Where an absence raises concern because of a learner's circumstances, history or emerging pattern, the expectation is that this should be followed up at the earliest opportunity rather than waiting until a numerical threshold has been reached.

The approach identifies groups of children and young people who may experience lower attendance or be particularly vulnerable when absent, including learners with additional support needs, care-experienced children and young people, young carers, those at risk of exclusion, those experiencing physical or mental health and wellbeing issues and children subject to child protection concerns.

A staged intervention model supports schools to develop increasingly targeted responses according to the needs and circumstances of the individual child or young person. This progresses from universal support through targeted and specialist support and sits alongside Dundee's GIRFEC arrangements. The guidance emphasises understanding the factors contributing to absence, sensitive communication with parents and carers and early intervention to prevent absence becoming chronic or entrenched.

The revised approach was launched through Dundee's Promoting Presence Summit in November 2025. Schools were subsequently asked to develop, review or update their own attendance strategies. These will support the Council to monitor and evaluate implementation, identify effective practice and areas requiring further support, assess progress against attendance outcomes and promote greater consistency in attendance improvement planning across schools.

Impact and continuing challenge
There are encouraging indications of improvement. Overall attendance in Dundee increased from **88.6% in 2022/23 to 88.9% in 2023/24 and 89.6% in 2024/25**.

We are, however, clear that the attendance challenge is not resolved. Our Standards and Quality reporting recognises that attendance remains below Dundee's stretch aim and that significant differences remain between groups of learners. In particular, attendance data for children and young people with additional support needs and those who are care experienced demonstrate that improvement is not yet sufficiently equitable, particularly within the secondary sector. This reinforces the need for increasingly targeted, data-informed intervention alongside the universal Promoting Presence approach.

The Council is therefore seeking both to improve attendance overall and to understand variation between groups and establishments so that support can be directed towards children, families and school communities experiencing the greatest barriers.

Multi-agency working
Persistent absence can reflect complex circumstances which cannot be addressed by schools acting alone. Dundee's approach therefore connects attendance improvement with wider children's services planning and GIRFEC arrangements.

The Dundee Children's Services Partnership Plan has been developed jointly by Dundee City Council, NHS Tayside, Police Scotland, Dundee Health and Social Care Partnership, Dundee Voluntary Action and wider statutory and third-sector partners. Presence, Progress and Participation in Learning is one of the Partnership Plan's five priority areas.

The Promoting Presence framework similarly anticipates partner-agency involvement where barriers to attendance are complex and provides for increasingly intensive multi-agency planning within the staged approach.

The purpose is to ensure persistent absence is considered within the wider circumstances of the individual child and family and that the appropriate combination of educational and wider agency support can be brought together where required.

Sharing effective practice in attendance
The same principles of collaborative improvement applied to wider school improvement are applied to attendance. School-level attendance strategies, inquiry activity, the Attendance Strategy Group and professional learning provide mechanisms through which emerging approaches can be reviewed and shared.

Dundee schools have also participated in Education Scotland's national Improving Attendance Programme, enabling local practice to benefit from wider national learning.

In addition, learning from School Inquiry Groups is shared across the city through Dundee's EDLM celebration event. This provides a structured opportunity for schools to showcase the approaches they have tested in relation to attendance and persistent absence, share evidence of impact, and learn from practice in other establishments. It also supports the spread of effective practice by enabling school leaders and practitioners to consider how successful approaches can be adapted to their own contexts.

Our next phase is therefore not simply about introducing further initiatives. It is about evaluating more consistently which interventions are making a measurable difference, for which children and young people and in which contexts, and using that evidence to inform practice across the system.

Conclusion
Dundee recognises that improving the consistency of support to schools and addressing persistent absence are long-term, system-wide challenges. Our

approach through Every Dundee Learner Matters connects these agendas through a common focus on Presence, Participation and Progress, collaborative professional learning, rigorous self-evaluation and the use of evidence to inform improvement.

Since the thematic inspection, we have strengthened our School Improvement Framework, developed a more proportionate approach to support and challenge, introduced Collaborative Improvement Visits, strengthened professional learning and leadership development and increased opportunities for school and system leaders to learn collaboratively. These developments sit alongside our continuing work to strengthen quality assurance and improve the consistency of outcomes across Dundee.

We have also established a more consistent, relational and preventative approach to attendance. While the overall attendance trajectory is improving, we recognise that persistent absence and unequal outcomes for some groups of learners remain significant challenges.

Our priority is therefore to build on what is working, evaluate impact with increasing rigour and ensure that effective practice translates into sustained improvement in the experiences and outcomes of children and young people across all Dundee schools.

We welcome the Committee’s continued interest in these important areas.

Yours sincerely