For the attention of Dr James Johnston, Clerk to the Committee

Response from Falkirk Council on Local Authority Approaches to School Education and Support for Pupils with Persistent Absence

Sent on behalf of Kenneth Lawrie, Chief Executive

Local Authority Approaches to School Education

In Falkirk, our approach is focused on providing schools and nurseries with consistently high-quality support, appropriate challenge and access to effective practice. We refreshed our Quality Improvement Framework (QIF) to take account of the findings of the HMIE thematic review. The refresh was led by senior officers working with senior leaders through our Quality Improvement Strategic Reference Group.

The framework sets out the core quality assurance and improvement activity undertaken annually across our establishments and provides a consistent approach to the work of Quality Improvement Officers (QIOs), both through planned reviews and their ongoing work with link establishments. Engagement is planned and agreed through fortnightly Senior Quality Improvement Team meetings. Impact is reviewed regularly, with further support or intervention agreed where required.

This work gives officers a strong understanding of effective practice across our schools and nurseries, which is then used to support improvement more widely. Examples include locally organised professional learning, leadership conferences and regular opportunities to share practice across the Quality Improvement Service. This also helps ensure a consistent understanding of expectations and of how central policy and guidance are applied at establishment level.

We have also established strategic groups to take forward developments in Quality Improvement, Curriculum, Pedagogy, Leadership and Additional Support Needs. These groups draw on practice beyond Falkirk to inform and refine our own approaches. This has included research, learning from practice identified through the HMIE thematic review and direct engagement with Quality Improvement teams in other local authorities.

Falkirk is actively involved in collaborative improvement through our ADES Quad, wider ADES networks and national groups. The Quad has established workstreams around common areas of development, allowing authorities to share practice and learn from one another, including opportunities for officers to contribute to quality improvement activity across authority boundaries. We also have strong links with neighbouring local authorities which support local benchmarking and shared practice, particularly in Early Years and Additional Support Needs.

Our officers participate in, and in some cases lead, ADES networks and national groups. These connections help us understand approaches being

developed elsewhere, identify effective practice and share Falkirk's own experience. Officers also facilitate professional learning visits with other local authorities, providing opportunities to learn directly from practice elsewhere.

We also welcome the wider work being taken forward by ADES, HMIE and the ADES Performance and Improvement Network following the thematic report. This includes the ADES/HMI action plan, the revised *How Good Is Our Educational Authority?* framework, opportunities to learn from practice recognised positively through the thematic inspection and strengthened collaborative improvement arrangements planned for 2027. These arrangements provide further opportunities to use evidence and data to support self-evaluation and challenge, identify improvement priorities and share effective practice across authorities.

Leadership capacity at all levels is central to securing sustained improvement. Falkirk supports professional learning for Quality Improvement Officers and school leaders and continues to draw on relevant HMIE, ADES and Quad-based development opportunities.

One of the principal challenges to sustained improvement is not a lack of willingness to collaborate, but the increasingly crowded national improvement landscape within which local authorities and schools operate. The volume and pace of national initiatives and priorities can place considerable demands on finite leadership and officer capacity. This can limit the time and space available to embed change properly, evaluate its impact and collaborate meaningfully with others.

Greater national prioritisation and coherence, focused on fewer areas and sustained over sufficient time, would allow local authorities and schools to concentrate capacity where it can have greatest impact. A sustained focus on fewer, clearly prioritised areas is more likely to secure meaningful and lasting improvement than continuing to add to the range of expectations being managed across the system.

Support for Pupils with Persistent Absence

Falkirk Council has taken a number of steps to embed the *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1 (2026)* guidance in our approach to attendance. Our focus has been on consistent practice across establishments, better use of attendance data and earlier identification and support for children and young people where there are concerns about attendance.

A short-life working group has been established to develop updated local authority attendance policy and guidance aligned with the national guidance. We have also adopted the full range of attendance codes made available through SEEMiS in May 2026 and produced detailed guidance for establishments on their meaning and consistent use. This will remain a live resource which can be updated as practice develops.

We are also introducing central recording of children and young people who have flexible educational arrangements, including adapted timetables and flexi-schooling. This will give us a clearer authority-wide picture and help us better identify where support and resources are required.

Our approach to identifying and responding to persistent absence is increasingly informed by data. Falkirk has developed a Power BI Attendance Dashboard, refreshed daily from SEEMiS, which gives establishments and central officers an overview of attendance and absence alongside relevant contextual information. The data can also be examined at individual pupil level. Monthly analysis allows us to identify areas of improvement or decline and informs the work of the Quality Improvement Team with individual schools.

We are using more detailed analysis to improve our understanding of the factors affecting attendance. This includes looking at secondary pupil timetables and attendance to identify young people who may need more targeted support. We are also undertaking a longitudinal study of establishment-level attendance to better understand changes since before the COVID-19 pandemic and help us identify where further support may be required.

Schools are supported to recognise and accurately record factors that can affect attendance, including poverty, caring responsibilities and care experience. This is important in helping us understand what sits behind an individual's absence and target the right support.

Persistent absence cannot always be addressed by schools acting alone. For some children and young people, absence reflects wider circumstances affecting them or their family. Addressing these effectively requires services to work together and, importantly, to build trusted relationships with children, young people and families.

Our Family Inclusion Team, supported through Strategic Equity Funding, provides targeted support for children and young people affected by poverty or care experience. There is a particular focus on pupils with attendance of 75% or below who face poverty-related barriers to attendance and attainment.

Each school cluster has a minimum of one full-time equivalent Family Inclusion Worker. They work directly with pupils and families and alongside services including Social Work, Housing, Benefits and Revenues. The Family Inclusion Worker provides continuity and advocacy for the child or young person and helps families address some of the wider issues which can affect engagement with education.

This work has been extended through our newly created provision, The Bridge. It supports care-experienced children and young people and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds whose attendance has fallen below 75%. The Bridge provides a trauma-informed and nurturing

environment, with a focus on relationships, engagement, targeted learning and essential life skills.

There are separate programmes for primary and secondary pupils. For young people nearing the end of school, support includes post-16 transition planning, college readiness and employability. The Family Inclusion Team continues to work with these young people for six months after they leave school, providing continuity of support and helping them towards a sustained positive destination.

Our multi-agency approach is further supported through Family First Response, established with Child Poverty Accelerator Funding in the Falkirk North area. A weekly multi-agency panel brings together core services and partners to support families affected by poverty. The emphasis is on addressing the circumstances facing the family as a whole rather than treating attendance as an issue in isolation. Partners work together on areas including attendance and attainment, health inequalities, household income and living conditions.

Our Interrupted Learners Service (ILS) provides targeted support for young people whose education has been significantly interrupted, including where mental or physical health needs create barriers to engagement. Its focus is on minimising the impact of that interruption and helping young people re-engage with learning when they are ready and able to do so.

Where a return to a formal educational setting is appropriate, ILS helps the young person and school with that transition and works towards securing a positive destination. ILS is a support service rather than an alternative placement, and young people remain on their school roll while receiving support.

These developments are strengthening our authority-wide response to attendance by linking better information and earlier identification with targeted and multi-agency support. The work of the Quality Improvement Team and central Education Services also gives us a means of identifying practice that is working well and sharing that learning across our establishments.

As this work becomes further embedded, we will continue to evaluate its impact using attendance and contextual data alongside the experiences of schools, children, young people and families. This will help us identify what is making the greatest difference, share effective approaches across Falkirk and focus resources on support that is having the greatest impact.