Part 1:

Response to the Education and Gaelic Committee: Fife Council's Response to the HMIE Thematic Inspection on Local Authority Approaches to Supporting School Improvement

1. Key points

Fife Council Education Directorate welcomed the findings of the HMIE Thematic Inspection and views the report as largely validating the strengths already identified through its own self-evaluation processes.

The Thematic Inspection recognised Fife's well-established and evolving **Self-Improving, Networked Learning System (SINLS)** as a significant strength and highlighted the extensive support, challenge and collaborative improvement structures available to schools across the authority.

Key strengths outlined in the Thematic Inspection Feedback to Fife also recognised its “strong culture of professional agency and self-improvement” and “strong leadership development opportunities”.

Although Fife’s Self-Improving Networked Learning System (SINLS) and culture of self-improvement and leadership at all levels were highlighted as key strengths in Fife, Fife has continued to undertake rigorous strategic self-evaluation and has sought to identify and share good practice through its participation in collaborative improvement opportunities, such as its ADES Quad.

2. Fife’s processes: support for self-evaluation and improvement

The processes by which Fife provides support for self-evaluation and improvement are key to its response to the challenges:

There is notable variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities.

Self-evaluation processes are not always rigorous enough to maximise the progress of children and young people.

How Fife Supports School Improvement

Through an ongoing process of rigorous, strategic self-evaluation, Fife has developed a comprehensive and multi-layered system of support designed to improve outcomes for children and young people while ensuring schools receive both universal and targeted support. Central to this approach is the **Self-Improving, Networked Learning System (SINLS)**, which operates across school, cluster, locality and authority levels and promotes collective responsibility for improvement.

Key elements of Fife's approach include:

1. Universal Support and Challenge

All schools receive:

- Clear guidance and templates for School Improvement Planning (SIP) and Standards and Quality Reporting (SQR).
- Annual professional learning on improvement planning, self-evaluation and evaluative writing.
- Access to attainment, attendance and destination data through Power BI, Sequential Progress and other data tools.
- Link Education Managers and Quality Improvement Officers who provide ongoing support and challenge.
- Participation in cluster meetings, area groups, learning partnerships and headteacher collaboratives.
- Feedback and moderation of SIPs and SQRs to promote consistency and quality across schools.

HMIE noted that arrangements for self-evaluation, improvement planning and quality assurance are clear, well understood and valued by headteachers.

2. Learning Partnerships and Extended Learning Partnerships

A distinctive feature of Fife's approach is the use of:

- Learning Partnerships (LPs)
- Extended Learning Partnerships (ELPs)
- Subject Reviews (secondary)
- HGIOS4 Quality Indicator Reviews

These approaches bring together school leaders, peers and local authority officers to:

- Evaluate school performance.
- Triangulate evidence.
- Share effective practice.
- Provide professional challenge.
- Support improvement planning.

HMIE reported that headteachers regard these collaborative approaches as integral to school improvement and valued the support and challenge they provide.
Although this approach was recognised as a key strength of our system in Fife, we continue to ensure that this is reflective of the needs of our system and context.

3. Targeted Support

Where data or quality assurance activity identifies concern, schools receive bespoke support, including:

- Intensive officer involvement.
- Formal improvement action plans.
- Targeted professional learning.
- Additional peer support.
- Specialist support from central teams.
- Focused work on attainment, attendance, learning and teaching, leadership or self-evaluation.

Targeted support decisions are based on a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative evidence, including attainment data, attendance trends, SIPs, SQRs, learning partnership findings and inspection evidence.

Fife's Response to the Inspection Recommendations

Fife model of Self-Improving, Networked Learning System (SINLS) was developed over a number of years, in response to ongoing strategic self-evaluation, informed by dialogue and engagement with school leaders at all levels. Following the thematic inspection, Fife has continued to use – and further develop – its approach to strategic self-evaluation, and to use this as a basis for ongoing system-level improvement.

Following a review of the Directorate's structure in 2025/26, a new organisational structure has been developed to better support ongoing improvement, which is based on the three pillars.

1. Improving, Learning, Teaching and Assessment
2. Meeting Learners' Needs
3. Strengthening Our Curricular Pathways

Each "Pillar Group" is overseen by a Head of Service and a team of Education Managers and Quality Improvement Officers.

The Pillars were developed through the use of Quality Improvement (QI) methodology, drawing on QI work undertaken by a range of school leadership groups and networks over recent years. Over the coming year, the Education Directorate will seek to use the subject matter expertise and leadership from across our ELC and school settings to progress improvement actions within the three pillars and to further develop its approach to improvement.

As part of its improvement work, Fife has progressed several actions.

Strengthening Consistency of Feedback and Support

The authority continues to moderate feedback provided by officers to headteachers and has strengthened opportunities for officers to collaborate and share practice through leadership and area group. HMIE identified this as an area that should continue to be developed to ensure all schools receive consistently high-quality support and challenge and so we have further developed support materials to assist school leaders in their own quality assurance activity to strengthen their overall evaluations of school performance.

A group of school leaders and central officers will continue to further develop these supports along with developing professional learning to support headteachers to effectively self-evaluate school performance. This will include using Fife's HMIE Associate Assessors who have an expertise in self-evaluation for self-improvement to deliver professional learning for school leaders.

Supporting Evaluation Against Quality Indicators

All schools are using the following to support with quality assurance activity with our early years establishments currently developing this practice over the course of Session 26-27:

- Summary Self-Evaluation (SSE) approaches.
- Enhanced moderation activity.
- Professional learning focused on self-evaluation for self-improvement.
- Sector forums and steering groups supporting consistency.

Improving Stakeholder Communication

The authority acknowledged HMIE's recommendation regarding communication with parents and carers in the thematic inspection report and has developed Parent Forums which bring together Parent Council Chairs across Fife. These forums provide information for parents along with opportunities for them to be consulted on key areas within education and to gather their feedback. These continue into Session 26-27.

Our Parent's Charter was developed during Session 25-26 and shared with all parents/carers and this supports our communications strategy which is linked to the wider Children in Fife partnership work.

Fife's View on Variability in Support and School Improvement

Fife acknowledged the HMIE finding that there can be variability in the consistency and quality of school improvement support across and within local authorities nationally.

Fife's response has been to develop a system which reduces reliance on individual officers or isolated school-level capacity and instead builds collective accountability through structured networks, moderation and collaborative quality assurance processes. The Three Pillars Directorate structure will further strengthen this approach.

The authority's approach seeks to reduce variability through:

- Common improvement planning and reporting frameworks.
- Shared guidance and templates.
- Moderation of officer feedback.
- Learning Partnerships and Extended Learning Partnerships.
- Sector-based quality assurance approaches.
- Data-driven identification of support needs.
- Cross-authority and cross-school collaboration.
- Development of the Fife Self-Evaluation Toolkit for Schools and the Self-Evaluation Toolkit for Early Years.
- A well-developed approach to using Quality Improvement Methodologies to supporting practitioners at all levels to make informed and sustained change to bring about positive outcomes for our children and young people.

Sharing Good Practice Within and Beyond Fife

The thematic inspection identified as a strength the extensive mechanisms for sharing practice across schools with schools and officers routinely identifying effective practice through quality assurance activity and disseminating learning through these structures. HMIE reported that these collaborative arrangements are making a positive contribution to system improvement.

Beyond Fife, good practice is shared through:

- Associate Assessor work with Education Scotland.
- Engagement with national professional learning programmes.
- Collaborations with Education Scotland (Curriculum, Leadership & Equity).

In addition to the collaborative arrangements available to schools, the local authority has also played a leading role in developing the ADES Quad model of self-evaluation and system-level improvement. This has included Fife, and its partner authorities of: South Lanarkshire, West Lothian and Dumfries and Galloway:

- undertaking system-level improvement to strengthen approaches for three priority areas: Inclusion, Attendance, and the Effective Use of Data;
- working collaboratively as central officer teams to share learning with regards to different system-level models of support for school self-evaluation and improvement.

3. Fife's people: professional learning and leadership

The way in which Fife supports it people (leaders and staff) is key to its response to the challenge:

Leadership development at all levels remains uneven and this is essential for building capacity for continuous improvement.

Based on Theme 3 of How Good is Our Education Authority? used during the Thematic Inspection visit, the findings are overwhelmingly positive. The inspection highlights a mature and well-developed professional learning system that is closely aligned to school improvement priorities.

Fife has a substantial professional learning offer spanning probationer teacher through to senior leaders and local authority officers. Support is delivered through:

- Professional Learning Team
- Educational Psychology Service
- Supporting Learners Service
- Health and Wellbeing Team
- Leadership programmes
- Quality Improvement Methodology training
- Digital learning pathways
- Specialist networks and collaboratives
- Fife Music Service.

Professional learning is aligned to directorate priorities and national policy and includes opportunities for staff to engage in collaborative enquiry and improvement activity.

Key Strengths highlighted in the Fife Thematic Inspection of Local Authorities Report

1. Highly effective professional learning strategy aligned to improvement priorities.
2. Strong culture of professional agency and self-improvement.
3. High-quality professional learning in pedagogy, assessment, leadership and data use.
4. Extensive collaborative networks that drive system-wide improvement.
5. Strong leadership development opportunities including Associate Assessors.
6. Clear evidence that professional learning is improving practice and supporting school improvement.

Although leadership at all levels was highlighted as a key strength of the Self-Improving Networked Learning System (SINLS) in Fife, we have continued to use self-evaluation evidence to strengthen our professional learning offer in relation to leadership at all levels.

We have further developed our approaches to:

- Supporting middle leadership development within the secondary sector.
- Developing professional learning for those aspiring to leadership within the enhanced provision and special school sectors.
- Empowering our school leaders to lead approaches within schools and clusters to support the development of leadership at all levels.
- Strengthened approaches to support our school leaders to self-evaluate the quality of learner experience across the schools and to use this to identify strengths and next steps.
- Continued development of our Continuum of Professional Learning to ensure this is reflective of needs across all practitioners within the Education Directorate and ensured this is communicated effectively with all practitioners to engage with/access.
- Continued to work in partnership with national and local partners to strengthen leadership development professional learning across the Education Directorate to ensure that we are utilising a wide variety of leadership professional learning opportunities.

4. Overall Position

Fife Council believes the thematic inspection confirmed the effectiveness of its collaborative, networked approach to school improvement. The authority has established strong structures for support, challenge, professional learning and peer collaboration, and these were recognised by HMIE as examples of effective practice.

Fife is now building on this foundation by strengthening consistency, quality assurance, stakeholder engagement and impact evaluation to further reduce variability and ensure all schools benefit from high-quality support regardless of context. The Three Pillars model of improvement – and the Directorate structure aligned to this – will further strengthen this approach. Participation in its ADES Quad will provide Fife with the opportunity to triangulate – and further refine – its own approaches.

Further information can be found at:

Schools in Fife | Fife Council

Part 2:

Response to the Education and Gaelic Committee: Fife Council's Response to:

1. **How Local Authorities are implementing *Included, Engaged and Involved part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools* and whether it is leading to improvements in local approaches**
2. **Identifying and responding to persistent absence**
3. **How effective is multi agency working in supporting individual pupils and their families**
4. **How knowledge of effective practice is shared across the system**

1. Key points

Fife Council's Education Directorate had already updated our own guidance on engagement and attendance in October 2025, but have reflected on the 2026 Scottish Government guidance:

- Trauma Informed Practice and De-escalation training continues to be a fundamental component in our Core Approaches, across all schools and settings. This focus on understanding the barriers to attendance and in-school engagement, allow our staff to identify early indicators of attendance risks.
- Our Self-Improving, Networked Learning System (SINLS) reflects a commitment to have leadership focussing on whole school culture, which places children and young people at the centre. Leaders understand attendance improves where all 3 of the Directorate Plan pillars align and children and young people want to be in school because they feel safe, are valued and belong, are connected to the curriculum and connected and supported by their community.
- A commitment to the appropriateness and management of part-time timetables across the system, where we have effective and robust systems in place to track and monitor their use. Schools have access to a number of sources of support to assist them in decision making. All schools report termly on their part-time timetables (if Fife they are known as Agreed Reduced Attendance (ARAs))
- We have a high expectation of schools monitoring attendance for individuals and across their setting. In high schools, generally the 3.1 Depute will have oversight of attendance in their school, working with their guidance staff teams to ensure interventions are in place to support individual pupils. In primaries, this is generally the role for class teachers, but overseen by the Headteacher
- Coding advice to schools was recently updated and distributed, with agreed codes for use, to ensure we have consistency across all sectors going forward
- In terms of data, all schools have attendance stretch targets to ensure that regardless of progress made, we are always ambitious for improvement. Attendance data is core to the Power BI wellbeing dashboards that schools

have access to and is also a specific spotlight during learning partnership activity / quality assurance across the system.

- Our own guidance is written with clear sections, illustrations, flowcharts and concise language to support understanding in schools and ease of reference.
- Further to the 2026 guidance, we are building on systems and other approaches that are already in place, such as the Family Engagement Team, comprising family support workers and attendants support workers, who target specific attendance cases between P6 and S3, with an early intervention approach to catch attendance issues before it dips significantly and a pattern of chronic absence becomes entrenched.
- Fife is actively engaged in our ADES Quad attendance group, whereby the 2026 national attendance guidance has influenced the focus of the group's action plan for this year, being our responses to low levels of attendance and attendance as a result of social, emotional and behavioural needs, what is common to our Local Authorities and actions for improvement

2. Key points

To improve and respond to persistent absence:

- We adopt 2 approaches to data and trend analysis, firstly within schools and at Service level, predominately via SEEMIS:

  Schools themselves use intelligence gathered and recorded daily (via registration multiple times during the day in Secondary) to share with key staff to intervene where appropriate.

  At a service level, we look across attendance data in a number of ways e.g. spotting demographic trends, and for sectors, clusters and individual schools to use in a variety of ways e.g. for wider quality assurance purposes and in advance of school visits. This data is accessible to central officers.

  Both approaches allow us to see 'live' cases developing for schools to ensure that there is ongoing understanding of individual circumstances and there is appropriate parental/carer and child/young person engagement. This can be helpful to focus on specific year groups or vulnerable cohorts experiencing declining attendance.

- Schools have adapted practices and offers available to families to support lower levels of attendance, such as direct support to families through involvement with external and internal agencies and third sector partners, curriculum adaptions, access to community resources, bespoke support to vulnerable children and young people, underpinned by high levels of school staff engagement.

3. Key points

In Fife, multi agency working is supporting children and families though:

- Integrating support teams, where we have created formal links between Education services, social work, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and third-sector family support organisations to ensure a holistic approach to a child's wellbeing
- Strict oversight on reduced hours, where we have established strict monitoring systems at Service level to review the duration and reasons for any ARAs, with the involvement of partners as required. In line with the nation guidance, ensuring that part-time timetables are avoided for children on the Child Protection Register, and require Service level sign-off before they are applied to care-experienced learners, promoting engagement with associated services and other teams

- Engaging with families as equal partners through co-designing interventions and working in collaboration with them, having moved away from punitive dialogue to ensuring that the voices of children/young people and their parents/carers are heard, with proposals for solutions worked through and adapted over time. In addition, ensure all communications regarding attendance are accessible, free of jargon, and non-threatening, reinforcing a welcoming whole-school community culture. Providing them with a named and consistent point of contact in school, helps to build relationships and mutual trust.

4. Key points

Knowledge and good practice is cascaded through:

- Our self-Improving, Networked Learning System, includes a range of established Networks, including all secondary schools in the '3.1 Deputes Network', Enhanced Provisions and Special Schools Networks, Guidance staff, Curriculum leads etc. Attendance is a fundamental and recurring area of focus at these meetings for senior and middle leaders. There are opportunities to share practice and learning, as well to challenge approaches.
- School specific attendance data is available on the Power BI wellbeing dashboards for leaders in schools to monitor trends and to identify cohorts for further scrutiny. Service wide data is also available in this format.
- There is attendance and engagement input at every Cluster Chairs meeting, for sharing the key messages relating to attendance to be cascaded to all HTs at their cluster meetings, allowing for cluster level discussion and collaboration
- As noted above, there are professional learning and development opportunities for all school leaders, teachers, and support staff focused on trauma-informed and relational approaches, the course content being built on

emerging understanding of barriers to attendance and engagement. In addition, a variety of development opportunities exist relating to the understanding of root causes of underlying reasons for non-attendance, including neurodivergence, young carer responsibilities, or the impacts of poverty