Highland Council Response to HMIE National Thematic Inspection: Local Authority Approaches to Supporting School Improvement

The findings of HMIE's national thematic inspection align closely with the direction of travel already established through Highland Council's Highland Raising Attainment and Achievement Strategy (RAAS) and Education and Learning Improvement Plan (ELIP). These frameworks provide a coherent strategic approach to raising attainment, improving outcomes for children and young people and strengthening the quality of educational provision across Highland.

Strategic Leadership and Improvement

Highland has strengthened its leadership infrastructure through the implementation of the ELIP, the establishment of Strategic Improvement Workstreams (SIW) and the creation of forums including the Raising Attainment Board, Raising Attainment Reference Group, Headteacher Strategic Meetings, Primary Headteacher Strategic Meetings, Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Leader Meetings and Area Meetings. These structures have strengthened collaboration between the central team and school leaders, supported consistent communication around expected practice, policy developments and guidance, and created valuable opportunities for leaders to share effective practice and learn from one another. Feedback from Headteachers highlights the value of collaborative learning through spotlights on effective practice, alongside the use of practical tools, case studies and professional learning resources.

Strategic Improvement Workstreams, each supported by an Area Quality Improvement Manager and led by a Headteacher, have promoted distributed leadership and collaboration across the system. These workstreams are driving improvement activity aligned to ELIP priorities, sharing expertise and developing key policy and guidance documents, including the new Learning and Teaching Policy which will be implemented in session 2026/27.

Self-Evaluation and Data-Informed Improvement

The HMIE report highlights the importance of robust self-evaluation and effective use of data. Highland has invested significantly in developing structures that support a data-rich culture, including the implementation of refreshed Tracking and Monitoring Guidance, annual school data packs, enhanced dashboard reporting and strengthened use of SEEMIS Progress and Achievement data. Regular Tracking and Monitoring meetings between Area Quality Improvement Managers, Education Support Officers and Headteachers, alongside moderation and validation activities, have strengthened the consistency, accuracy and reliability of assessment and attainment data across schools.

The establishment of the Raising Attainment Board has further strengthened strategic oversight of attainment improvement. Through this work, Highland has

developed ambitious Stretch Aims, completed a comprehensive survey of school tracking and monitoring processes, and developed a Data Dashboard that will be available to all schools from August 2026. Headteachers have responded positively to the dashboard, recognising its value in supporting rigorous analysis of performance data, strengthening self-evaluation and informing improvement planning.

Highland has also strengthened its Quality Improvement Framework (previously named Collaborative Improvement Framework) through clearer guidance, improved documentation and the successful pilot of revised quality improvement processes. From session 2026/27 all schools will participate in Quality Improvement Visits on a three-to-five-year cycle, providing proportionate support and challenge and resulting in a report to the school community outlining strengths, key findings and areas for development.

To support school self-evaluation, a suite of staff, parent, learner and young person surveys aligned to those used by HMIE has been introduced. Schools are expected to undertake these surveys every two years and as part of the Quality Improvement Visit cycle. Prior to full implementation, 121 schools voluntarily participated, recognising the value of the surveys in supporting reflective practice and improvement planning.

Professional Learning and Leadership Development

The national inspection identifies leadership development and professional learning as critical factors in sustainable school improvement. Highland continues to invest in professional learning opportunities aligned to improvement priorities and GTCS standards. This includes the Inclusive Practice Programme, Quality Improvement programmes for senior leaders, participation in national Education Scotland programmes, and the development of a comprehensive professional learning offer for all staff aligned to the ELIP.

Recognising the findings of the national report, Highland will continue to strengthen leadership development at all levels, with a particular focus on supporting school leaders to confidently lead self-evaluation, curriculum improvement and data-informed decision making.

The new Primary Headteacher Strategic Meetings, ELC Leader Meetings and Strategic Improvement Workstreams have also contributed to leadership development by creating opportunities for professional dialogue, collaborative enquiry and peer learning. These approaches are helping to build leadership capacity and strengthen collective responsibility for improvement across the authority.

Equity, Inclusion and Raising Attainment

Highland's strategic priorities remain firmly focused on achieving excellence and equity for every learner, particularly those affected by poverty. Through careful monitoring of Pupil Equity Funding, strong partnership working with the Education Scotland Attainment Advisor and targeted improvement activity, attainment outcomes continue to improve. Highland has reduced the gap between local and national performance measures in literacy and numeracy, while positive destinations remain strong. The development of Stretch Aims, supported by enhanced tracking, monitoring and data analysis processes, provides a clearer framework for accelerating progress and raising attainment for all learners, particularly those most affected by poverty and disadvantage. This is beginning to impact on effective practice.

Inclusive practice remains a foundational principle within the ELIP and is being strengthened through professional learning, refreshed ASN guidance and multi-agency approaches to meeting children's needs. This area requires further work.

Partnership Working

The inspection highlights the value of collaborative working across local authorities, schools and partners. Highland benefits from extensive partnership working through the Integrated Children's Services Plan, Poverty and Equality Commission, Highland Parent Council Partnership, Early Years Improvement Networks and the UNCRC Equalities Forum. These partnerships support improvement activity and help ensure that the voices of children, young people, families and communities influence service development.

As part of our ongoing improvement journey, we recognise the need to further align partnership activity with core education improvement priorities and strengthen the contribution of partners to improving outcomes for learners.

Highland Central Team work closely with Northern Alliance colleagues and our QUAD. Quality Improvement Managers are members of QUAD workstreams and work on identified improvement themes with colleagues form Scottish Borders, Stirling and Midlothian.

Addressing Highland's Unique Context

The HMIE report recognises the particular challenges associated with rural and remote authorities, including recruitment, retention and geographical barriers. Highland's scale and geography continue to require innovative approaches to service delivery, staffing and professional collaboration. We are developing strategies to address workforce challenges, strengthen recruitment and retention and enhance leadership capacity across the authority.

Moving Forward

We are strengthening our capacity to deliver consistent, evidence-informed improvement across all schools and settings.

Our focus moving forward will be on:

- Ensuring consistent application of improvement frameworks and guidance across all schools.
- Strengthening self-evaluation and improvement planning processes.
- Developing leadership capacity at all levels.
- Building confidence and capability in data analysis and evidence-informed decision making.
- Strengthening partnership working and learner participation.
- Continuing to improve outcomes, attendance, achievement and equity for all children and young people across Highland.

This work will ensure that Highland continues to build a culture of continuous improvement, collaboration and high ambition for every learner.

Highland Council Response to the Revised National Attendance Guidance (March 2026)

Highland Council has already established many of the approaches reflected within the revised Scottish Government Attendance Guidance (March 2026), with a strong emphasis on prevention, early intervention, relationships, inclusion and the removal of barriers to attendance. The revised guidance has provided an opportunity to further strengthen and align Highland's approach through policy refresh, enhanced data use and targeted support for children, young people and families.

Strengthening Policy and Practice

During 2025/26 Highland refreshed its Secondary Attendance Guidance to improve consistency in monitoring, intervention and support across schools. A revised Primary Attendance Guidance has also been developed through consultation and will be implemented during Term 1 of session 2026/27. These developments will now be brought together through the implementation of a refreshed 3-18 Attendance Policy, ensuring a coherent and consistent approach across all sectors.

Developing Strategic and Targeted Attendance Support

To further strengthen attendance improvement activity, Highland Council has clarified the role of Education Support Officers (ESOs) and Inclusion Support Officers (ISOs) in supporting schools to implement the refreshed attendance guidance. These roles provide a balance of quality assurance, challenge, support and targeted intervention.

Education Support Officers support the strategic improvement of attendance through attendance reviews, data analysis and quality assurance processes. This includes supporting consistent implementation of the refreshed 3-18 Attendance Policy, analysing attendance data at Associated School Group and area level, identifying trends and vulnerable groups, contributing to attendance review meetings and ensuring attendance is routinely considered within school improvement and attainment discussions.

Inclusion Support Officers provide targeted support for children and young people experiencing barriers to attendance, particularly those with additional support needs, emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), wellbeing concerns and challenges linked to poverty or family circumstances. Their role includes supporting personalised attendance and reintegration plans, facilitating family engagement, coordinating multi-agency support and monitoring attendance among priority groups, including care-experienced learners, ASN learners, EAL learners and children affected by poverty.

Both ESOs and ISOs contribute to professional learning, the sharing of effective practice and the implementation of evidence-informed approaches to improving attendance.

Building Capacity Through National Improvement Programmes

Highland has actively engaged with the National Improving Attendance Programme, with five additional schools participating in Cohort 3. This has strengthened staff confidence and capability in analysing attendance data, identifying barriers to attendance and implementing evidence-informed interventions. Highland will continue this work through participation in Cohort 4, with a specific focus on improving attendance for S3 learners and care-experienced children and young people.

Early Intervention and Addressing Barriers

In line with the national guidance, Highland's approach recognises that attendance concerns often reflect underlying wellbeing, family or social issues rather than simply pupil choice. A number of initiatives support this preventative approach, including:

- Development of an Educational Psychology Service resource hub on Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), supporting schools and families to identify issues early and implement effective interventions.
- Family Support Workers, funded through the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, who work alongside schools, health services and community partners to provide relationship-based support to children, young people and families. Their work helps families access support earlier, strengthens resilience, improves engagement with services and reduces the likelihood of difficulties escalating to crisis.
- Continued focus on addressing poverty-related barriers through implementation of recommendations arising from *Call to Action: Tackling Poverty in the Highlands*.

Using Data to Drive Improvement

Highland has strengthened attendance monitoring through the introduction of an enhanced School Dashboard. This provides schools with access to attendance, exclusions, pupil characteristic, equalities and wellbeing information, enabling more effective identification of attendance patterns and vulnerable groups. Headteachers are increasingly using this data to target support, evaluate interventions and measure impact.

Targeted Support for Vulnerable Learners

Schools continue to develop tailored interventions for children and young people experiencing attendance difficulties. For example, Inclusion Support Workers funded through Pupil Equity Funding provide home visits, family engagement, attendance reviews, literacy and numeracy support and interpreter services. This targeted approach has contributed to significant improvements in attendance among identified EAL learners and pupils with ASN.

Current Position and Next Steps

Overall attendance across Highland currently stands at 89.8%. Through implementation of the revised national guidance and Highland's 2026-27 improvement activities, the authority aims to increase attendance towards its stretch aims of 95% in primary schools and 90% in secondary schools.

Key actions for 2026-27 include:

- Implementation of the refreshed 3-18 Attendance Policy.
- Embedding attendance frameworks, guidance and resources across all schools.
- Strengthening the role of Education Support Officers and Inclusion Support Officers in attendance monitoring, intervention planning and quality assurance.
- Delivering professional learning for Head Teachers, Depute Head Teachers and Attendance Leads to support consistent implementation of attendance policy and effective intervention strategies.
- Supporting children and young people to overcome barriers to attendance.
- Strengthening schools' use of attendance data to identify need and monitor impact.
- Expanding evidence-based attendance interventions.
- Continuing participation in the National Attendance Improvement Programme.
- Addressing poverty-related factors affecting attendance through partnership working.

Overall, Highland's response to the revised national attendance guidance is characterised by a preventative, relationship-based approach that combines robust data analysis, early intervention, family support and targeted action to improve attendance and ensure all children and young people are able to engage fully in learning.