HMIE
Optima
58 Robertson Street
Glasgow
G2 8DU
educationinspectorate.gov.scot

Dr James Johnston
Clerk to the Education and Gaelic Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

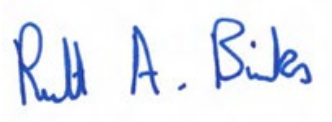
Dear Dr Johnston,

The Chief Inspector's initial reflections and plans for reporting

Please find enclosed with this letter a document which sets out my intentions regarding reporting by HMIE in accordance with the Education (Scotland) Act 2025. This document, too, sets out my initial reflections having now been in post for a little over six months.

I trust this will be of interest to the Committee. A copy has also been shared with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic. A copy will shortly be shared with Directors of Education and other individuals and organisations with an interest in the work of HMIE on 26 November 2026. The document will also be published on the HMIE website in due course.

Yours sincerely,



Ruth Binks
HM Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland

The Chief Inspector's initial reflections and plans for reporting
This paper sets out my proposed timetable for publishing plans and reports under the Education (Scotland) Act 2025, followed by my initial reflections on the priorities emerging from inspection evidence.

The Education (Scotland) Act 2025 places a number of important responsibilities on me as His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland. These include:

- preparing an inspection plan
- publishing an annual report on the Chief Inspector's activities during that financial year
- publishing an annual report on the Chief Inspector's assessment of the performance of the Scottish education system

The inspection plan will provide a longer-term framework for inspection in Scotland. I intend to publish the first plan during 2027, and it will cover an initial period of three years. In developing it, I will take account of the minimum frequency of inspection to be set by Scottish Ministers, alongside the advice of the newly established Advisory Council.

The first annual report on the Chief Inspector's activities will be published as soon as practicable after the end of the 2026/27 financial year.

My first full annual report assessing the performance of the Scottish education system will be published in 2027. This annual assessment will build on the published 2024/25 evidence reports and draw on inspections undertaken during the 2025/26 academic year.

Published and forthcoming reports since HMIE became independent
Since April 2026, HMIE has published the following reports, including findings from inspection activity and an update on its Gaelic Language Plan:

Published reports
- Secondary School Inspection Findings 2024/25 – 28 May 2026
- Early Learning and Childcare Inspection Findings 2024/25 – 28 May 2026
- Primary School Inspection Findings 2024/25 – 4 June 2026
- Special School Inspection Findings 2024/25 –4 June 2026
- Gaelic Language Plan: Progress Report –4 June 2026
- Additional Support Needs Inspection Findings 2024/25 – 23 June 2026
- Relationships and Behaviour Inspection Findings 2024/25 – 10 September 2026
- Attendance Inspection Findings 2024/25 – 17 September 2026
- Play Pedagogy Inspection Findings 2024/25 – 8 October 2026
- Modern Apprenticeships Inspection Findings 2023-2026 – 20 October 2026
- Health and Nutrition Inspection Findings 2024/25 – 21 October 2026

Forthcoming reports
The following reports will also be published in 2026, with publication dates to be confirmed in due course: –

- Play Pedagogy for the Gaelic Sector
- National Thematic Inspection on the Primary Curriculum

Taken together, the 2024/25 reports provide rich and substantial evidence of Scotland's education system. Each of these reports includes a summary of findings from inspection to support improvement. They are intended to inform professional dialogue and improvement work across all parts of our education system. If you have not already done so, please read them and use them as a focus for professional development sessions and to support self-evaluation.

The key messages from our publications are:

- Scotland's education system has strong foundations in relationships, inclusion, wellbeing and partnership working. These strengths must be sustained.
- The central national challenge is reducing unacceptable variability. All learners must experience consistently high-quality provision and their full curriculum entitlement.
- Improvement must focus more sharply on the quality of learning and teaching, the curriculum, assessment, tracking and the use of data.
- Additional support needs (ASN) provision, Gaelic education, health and nutrition, and relationships and behaviour show improvements that are affecting learners. These areas must be underpinned by greater coherence, greater consistency and sustained support.
- The next phase of improvement must translate positive culture and activity into measurable impact on learning, attainment, achievement, wellbeing, safety, participation, equity and post-school outcomes.

The work needed to establish the independent HMIE earlier this year affected the publication timetable for our 2024/25 sector reports, which were published later than anticipated. The evidence gathered during the 2025/26 academic year will now be collated and analysed to inform my first full annual assessment. Ahead of that publication, I am sharing my initial reflections on Scottish education, drawing on the evidence gathered by HM Inspectors over recent years.

The Chief Inspector's reflections after six months in post

Scottish education is not short of reports or recommendations. The challenge, increasingly, is one of **focus**. When those working within the system are faced with a large number of priorities, each individually important, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine where attention and effort will make the greatest difference. **If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.** Rather than attempting to capture every finding or reproduce every recommendation in these reflections, I have looked across the evidence to identify a few key priorities with the greatest potential to improve learners' experiences and outcomes. Areas not identified here may still require attention. However, our evidence indicates that a sharper collective focus on these priorities can make the greatest difference.

My reflections focus on sustaining strong relationships and on three priorities for improvement: high-quality learning and teaching, greater consistency in assessment, and developing leadership at every level.

High-quality relationships must remain a national strength
Scotland's strong foundation in relationships, inclusion, wellbeing and partnership working is very much to its credit. Across the country, staff work increasingly effectively to create caring, purposeful and inclusive environments in which learners feel valued and supported. Our inspection evidence frequently highlights learners who are proud of their establishments and who contribute actively to ensuring that others are respected and included. This is evident from the early years of education through to the senior phase and Modern Apprenticeships.

These strengths must be sustained. Making a lasting difference to learners, building relationships with them and supporting their growing confidence and capability remain central to education in Scotland.

These positive aspects can be overshadowed by discussion of the challenges facing education. At a time when attracting and retaining teachers and support staff is increasingly difficult, the education system has a responsibility to speak more confidently about the positive and rewarding aspects of working with children and young people. We should also recognise the significant contributions children and young people make to their communities through their achievements.

As we rightly focus on improving outcomes for learners, we must not lose sight of the positive cultures that many schools, establishments and training providers work hard to create. These relationships and cultures are not separate from improving outcomes. They provide an important foundation on which improvement can be built.

We should always focus on high-quality learning and teaching
High-quality learning and teaching are fundamental to an improving education system. In the very best establishments, we see a sustained focus on what matters most: the quality of learners' day-to-day experiences. These establishments have coherent approaches to pedagogy that are understood by all staff, underpinned by rigorous self-evaluation, high-quality professional learning and strong leadership of learning at every level. This creates greater consistency in ensuring the quality of learning and teaching and a shared ambition for every learner. When the quality of learning and teaching are consistently strong, it supports high-quality outcomes for learners.

However, learners' experiences across Scotland remain too variable, with implications for their achievement and future opportunities. Too often, the pace and challenge of learning are not sufficiently well matched to learners' needs and abilities, and progression through the curriculum is not consistently understood or secured. As a result, not all learners experience the sustained challenge, support and progression they need to achieve their full potential.

There must, therefore, be a relentless focus on ensuring the quality of learning and teaching at every level of the education system. All of Scotland's teachers should receive high-quality initial teacher education, followed throughout their careers by purposeful professional learning, collaboration with peers, effective leadership and regular, constructive feedback.

Across the education system, we need a shared understanding of what high-quality learning and teaching looks like in practice, alongside a professional culture in which educators are supported and expected to reflect on, develop and continually improve their practice.

Greater clarity about progression through learning pathways is equally important. The Curriculum Improvement Cycle provides an important opportunity to strengthen knowledge and understanding of what learners need to know, do and understand as they progress. That clarity must support educators in designing learning that builds coherently on what has come before, provides appropriate pace and challenge, and enables every learner to make the strongest possible progress.

Ultimately, improvement will depend not simply on changes to the curriculum, but on what learners experience every day. The quality of the education system will be determined by the quality of learning and teaching in every setting, and by our collective determination to make excellent practice a consistent experience for every learner.

Assessment in the broad general education (BGE) phase must give us greater confidence in standards and progression

At the classroom level, effective assessment is an integral part of high-quality teaching. Skilled educators continually assess learners' understanding, using this information to adapt teaching, provide additional support and ensure appropriate pace and challenge. Inspection evidence, nevertheless, indicates that assessment is not yet used systematically in all classrooms and that tracking, moderation and the use of data remain important areas for improvement. Our secondary inspection evidence, for example, identifies significant variation in the way schools track progress through the BGE and inconsistency in moderation.

As His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, I am concerned that Scotland does not yet have a sufficiently coherent approach to assessment across the BGE. Assessment serves differing but complementary purposes. It should help educators understand what a learner knows, understands and can do, identify appropriate next steps in learning, provide confidence that learners are progressing appropriately, and contribute reliable information about the performance of the education system.

Scotland places considerable emphasis on teacher professional judgement supported by moderation. Moderation has an important role in developing a shared understanding of national standards. However, we do not currently have the right balance between professional judgement, moderation, national exemplification and standardised assessment.

A stronger national approach should support, rather than replace, teacher professional judgement.

Scotland already has national standardised assessments in literacy and numeracy. Their stated purpose includes providing diagnostic information to support teachers' professional judgement and objective, comparable information about learners' progress. Yet our inspection evidence does not routinely show how information from these assessments is

used to adapt teaching and support learners' progress. This should prompt us to consider whether we are securing sufficient educational value from the assessment information we already collect. This is not an argument for a high-stakes testing regime, nor for using assessment to rank schools or categorise children and young people. It is an argument for greater clarity, consistency and confidence in approaches to assessment.

There is a related challenge at the system level. Scotland needs high-quality information about learners' progress so that teachers, schools, local authorities and national bodies can determine whether learners are progressing as well as they should be. The original rationale for the National Improvement Framework recognised the value of robust, consistent and transparent data in understanding what works and driving improvement. More than 10 years after its introduction, we still have more to do to achieve this.

As the Curriculum Improvement Cycle develops, we have an opportunity to establish a clearer assessment strategy alongside it. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment must be designed as a coherent whole. Educators need clarity about the standards learners are expected to achieve, as well as assessment approaches to help them make dependable judgements about progress without creating unnecessary workloads.

High-quality national exemplification, including exemplar assessment materials for different stages, could provide clearer reference points against which teachers can confirm their professional judgements. We also need to be clearer about what information is needed at classroom, school, local and national levels, with a defined purpose for each part of the assessment system.

The question is not whether Scotland should have more testing. It is whether our approach to assessment gives teachers, learners, parents and the education system sufficient confidence that standards are understood consistently, progress is identified accurately and every learner is being enabled to achieve as well as they can.

We must cultivate the leaders of the future

Strong leadership underpins the best practice we observe through inspection. Scotland must continue to cultivate leadership at every level and develop the next generation of educational leaders. We need senior leaders who have the skills, confidence and ambition to drive improvement, seek out what works and share the strongest practice across the system. We must also create the conditions in which talented people want to step forward and lead. The next generation of leaders will be less likely to take on these demanding roles if they see a system crowded with competing priorities and weighed down by unnecessary bureaucracy. I fully acknowledge that HMIE has a key role to play in providing clarity of message and enabling the prioritisation of improvement activity. As HMIE develops its inspection approaches, I will take measured decisions about changes, listening to stakeholders and fully involving the newly established Advisory Council.

Leadership and accountability also matter at the system level, and I include my own role and that of HMIE firmly within this. Scotland is fortunate to have passionate and committed leaders across education who care deeply about securing the best possible outcomes for learners. With that commitment comes a collective responsibility, and sometimes a

collective frustration, when we know that we can do better. System leaders need to work together, rather than in isolation, to find creative solutions to the issues we face.

We will not always agree on everything, nor should we expect to. But we can put aside organisational and institutional differences, be clear about what we value, and be disciplined about what we prioritise. If we can do that and create the conditions in which leaders at every level can lead with confidence, then we give ourselves the best possible chance of turning our shared ambition for Scotland's learners into reality through sustained improvement.

I look forward to working with partners across Scottish education to sustain our strengths and focus improvement on what makes the greatest difference to learners.

Ruth Binks
HM Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland