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Dear Dr Johnston,

Please find below our response to the two questions set out in your letter. I hope the information provided is helpful, and we would be very happy to discuss any aspect of our response further if this would be useful.

## Response to HMIE thematic report

***The Committee would welcome an update on how your Local Authority has responded to the recommendations of the HMIE thematic report on inspection of local authority approaches to supporting school improvement. This includes how your Local Authority views the "notable variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities." For example, the Committee is interested in how good practice is shared across local authorities and the barriers which may exist to this occurring.***

Prior to, and since the publication of the HMIE thematic report on local authority approaches to supporting school improvement, Inverclyde Council's Education Service has continued to develop its Framework for Improvement. The framework brings together the range of support and challenge provided by the Education Service to its establishments, ensuring that this is clearly articulated and proportionately responsive to the performance, circumstances and improvement needs of individual establishments. It includes a clearly defined annual calendar of support and challenge, alongside a range of quality assurance and improvement activities which have evolved over time.

Since publication of the thematic report, an important mechanism for further developing this approach has been Inverclyde's participation in the ADES/HMIE QUAD arrangements. Following the first cycle of shared self-evaluation in early 2025, the four authorities, Inverclyde, Western Isles, East Ayrshire and West Dunbartonshire, worked together to develop a shared plan for improvement. Our QUAD agreed to focus specifically on sharing, reviewing and developing our respective frameworks for improvement. This work was mapped against the recommendations and themes emerging from the thematic inspection and provided a structured opportunity to compare approaches, identify strengths and consider where practice could be strengthened.

Importantly, this work has moved beyond simply sharing documentation. Participating authorities have examined how their arrangements operate in practice and identified approaches from which others can learn. For example, the authorities compared the annual meetings through which education services support and challenge individual schools. Examining these approaches in detail allowed effective practice in one authority to inform developments in others.

Following the second cycle of shared self-evaluation in early 2026, the value of maintaining this professional exchange was recognised through the establishment of a network of quality improvement officers across the four authorities. This provides an ongoing opportunity to share emerging practice, consider how improvement frameworks are developing and explore common challenges. Current QUAD activity also includes cross-authority workstreams on Early Years, the Curriculum Improvement Cycle and Leadership.

This collaborative work has created a structured environment in which authorities can examine practice openly, provide professional challenge and learn from one another. It complements wider opportunities for collaborative improvement through regional arrangements, including the West Partnership, of which Inverclyde is part.

Within Inverclyde, the Framework for Improvement is designed not only to provide central support and challenge, but also to enable expertise and effective practice to be shared across the local education system. For example, every establishment has an annual achievement visit with the central Quality Improvement team, enhanced through the involvement of peer senior leaders from across the authority. This is further complemented by an officer-led peer review programme, through which headteachers and deputes participate in visits to other establishments and contribute to the validation of their self-evaluation. This provides professional challenge while enabling leaders to experience practice in different settings and apply that learning within their own establishments.

The Council therefore recognises the thematic report's observation regarding *"notable variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities."* Different authorities operate within different contexts and have developed different approaches to supporting improvement. Our experience through the QUAD demonstrates the value of moving beyond simply recognising these differences towards shared self-evaluation, evidence-based professional challenge and collaborative improvement.

Inverclyde is continuing to strengthen its service level self-evaluation through the use of *How Good Is Our Education Authority?*, connecting learning from the QUAD with improvement planning and strengthening how the Education Service evaluates and quality assures its overall offer. The Education Service has also sought opportunities to learn directly from developments elsewhere, including professional exchange concerning the emerging HMIE inspection approach.

Looking ahead to 2027, we will continue to develop the QUAD model, with an increasing emphasis on robust professional challenge underpinned by evidence and data. The revised *How Good Is Our Education Authority?* framework will provide a consistent structure for self-evaluation, helping authorities identify areas for improvement and enabling them to challenge, learn from and support one another more effectively.

Further opportunities for collaborative improvement are also being developed through ADES, including visits which will enable local authorities to review, support and challenge one another. These will provide external validation of each Education Service's self-evaluation, encouraging them to focus on areas requiring further development and draw on peer expertise to help identify appropriate approaches to taking improvement work forward.

We continue to work with the West Partnership, the former Regional Improvement Collaborative. The eight local authorities retain an agreed framework for collaboration, supported by a shared

plan and a contribution from each authority towards the staffing capacity required to deliver this work.

The Partnership continues to provide a number of ways for authorities to work collectively, creating additional capacity and supporting improvement in areas of common priority. This includes professional networks and opportunities to share practice across authority boundaries. For example, during 2026/27 a new programme will enable school leaders to participate in peer-review activity across the West Partnership, giving them experience of review teams beyond their own authority and wider exposure to practice across the region.

The West Partnership Directors' Forum also meets regularly and provides an important mechanism for both formal and informal sharing of practice. It enables directors to identify common challenges, establish networks where these can add value and draw on expertise and capacity across the eight authorities. Recent examples include establishing cross-authority networks to share practice and build capacity around common implementation priorities.

Over the last six to twelve months, there have been several schools nationally achieving evaluations of excellent through HMIE inspection who have subsequently shared their practice more widely, beyond their own local authority and at a national level. Whinhill Primary School in Inverclyde, which achieved an exceptional HMIE inspection outcome, with four quality indicators evaluated as excellent, is a good example of this. Following the inspection an immersive professional learning experience based within the school was developed and shared nationally. This enabled visitors to hear directly from the headteacher and leadership team and to undertake pupil led tours, providing first-hand insight into the approaches and practice that had contributed to the school's success. The level of interest was significant, with almost 200 visitors participating across three days in October 2026. This provides a practical example of how highly effective practice can be opened up to colleagues beyond the authority, supporting professional learning and wider system improvement.

While collaborative arrangements have strengthened significantly, barriers remain. These include differing local authority contexts, varying operating models and capacity constraints which can limit opportunities for sustained professional exchange. Geographic distance can also present challenges for some partners however online approaches are affective. In the case of our QUAD the geographic spread, including an Island authority, can make face to face and in person collaboration a challenge, largely due to cost. Collaborative structures such as the QUAD and wider ADES networks are helping to address these barriers by providing regular opportunities for professional dialogue, shared self-evaluation and peer challenge.

## Attendance

***The Committee would welcome an update from your Local Authority on how the guidance is being implemented in practice and whether it is leading to improvements in local approaches. The Committee is also interested in how schools within your Local Authority identify and respond to persistent absence, how effective multi-agency working is in supporting individual pupils and their families, and how knowledge of effective practice is shared across the education system.***

Inverclyde Council's Education Service has continued to implement the recommendations within the national attendance guidance through a strategic and operational focus on improving the use of attendance data, strengthening early intervention, enhancing multi-agency collaboration and building professional capacity across the education system. This work is supported through the authority's Attendance Strategy and Attendance Policy, which provide a consistent framework

for schools whilst promoting child-centred, relational and solution-focused approaches to improving attendance.

A key area of development has been strengthening the quality and consistency of attendance data. During session 2025-26, extensive work was undertaken with establishments to improve attendance coding accuracy, resulting in the establishment of a new attendance baseline against which future improvement can be measured. This work remains ongoing, with regular monitoring and quality assurance processes continuing across the authority. Schools utilise attendance tracking systems to monitor attendance and identify concerns at the earliest possible stage. Almost all establishments use the Education Service's attendance tracker, whilst a small number have developed systems tailored to their local context. Attendance information is also incorporated within attainment tracking arrangements to support a more holistic understanding of learner progress and wellbeing. Attendance is monitored regularly at both school and authority level, with weekly analysis undertaken centrally. This has strengthened understanding of live attendance data and improved the ability of schools and central officers to identify patterns of absence and emerging concerns more quickly than was previously possible.

Supporting schools to intervene earlier has been a significant feature of implementation. Professional learning on live data analysis has been delivered throughout session 2025-26 and continues to be embedded. Alongside the use of historic attendance trends, schools have been encouraged to recognise attendance concerns earlier through the identification of emerging patterns, including where learners experience two broken weeks of attendance within a six-week period. This has supported a shift towards preventative approaches, recognising that attendance difficulties are more effectively addressed before patterns become entrenched. Schools generally have strong relationships with pupils and families and a good understanding of the barriers affecting attendance. As a result, there continues to be a focus on ensuring that this knowledge is used to support timely intervention rather than inadvertently delaying support whilst concerns escalate.

Attendance analysis is also enabling support to be targeted more effectively towards the learners and groups experiencing the greatest challenges. Priority groups have been identified at both authority and establishment level, allowing interventions to be informed by local and strategic intelligence. While positive progress has been evident in several areas, attendance amongst Primary 7 learners and pupils in S2 and S3 remains a concern during the current session. Similarly, whilst attendance amongst care-experienced children and young people continues to be carefully monitored and supported, improvements within this group remain challenging due to the relatively small cohort size and the complex and often interrelated factors influencing attendance.

Building sustainable capacity across the workforce has been another important aspect of implementation. During session 2025-26, four establishments engaged with the Improving Attendance Quality Improvement Programme with Education Scotland, supporting schools to strengthen their systems, processes and approaches. The Strategic Attendance Lead and Educational Psychology Service have jointly delivered a broad programme of professional learning covering areas such as anxiety, emotionally based school avoidance and mental health. This has been complemented by parental workshops focused on supporting children to return successfully to school following holiday periods. Broader professional learning has also been provided across Education, Health and Social Care Partnership services and third sector organisations, including training on Signs of Safety and Healing, GIRFEC and trauma-informed practice. Whilst progress has been made, further opportunities for cross-sector learning and collaborative professional development have been identified as an area for continued development.

The guidance places significant emphasis on partnership working and early support, and this has been reflected in Inverclyde's ongoing development of collaborative support pathways.

All establishments have access to the Family Support Service, which provides an accessible first point of contact for family support. The service brings together professionals from Education, Educational Psychology, Social Work and third sector partners to jointly consider referrals and coordinate appropriate support. This model has been recognised through a local authority award and has contributed to a reduction in referrals to Social Work where families can access support at an earlier stage through preventative interventions. Alongside this, the Wellbeing Triage Hub provides a multi-agency approach to supporting children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties. The hub includes representation from School Health, CAMHS, Education, Social Work and a range of third sector organisations, helping ensure that young people receive support that is proportionate to their needs. These authority-wide services help ensure equitable access to support across all establishments, regardless of local funding arrangements. To support awareness and consistency, resources and referral pathways are shared through an accessible digital platform available to all staff. This service has recently won an Innovation award as part of the Council's "Pride of Inverclyde" staff awards.

Schools have also continued to develop curriculum pathways to strengthen engagement and promote attendance. Secondary establishments have expanded vocational and flexible learning pathways, creating a broader range of opportunities designed to increase learner engagement and strengthen the relevance of the curriculum. Within primary schools, this is supported through high-quality learning experiences and enhanced curricular opportunities that encourage regular attendance and participation. These developments are complemented by the Authority Screening Group, which provides equitable access to specialist complementary educational services and programmes across the authority. This includes enhanced nurture provision, targeted intervention programmes and flexible curriculum opportunities. Ongoing cluster working and peer collaboration are supporting schools to continue developing and evaluating these approaches.

Knowledge of effective practice is shared through a range of local authority mechanisms. Attendance remains a standing item within quality improvement and school leadership discussions, whilst professional learning events, network meetings and improvement activities provide opportunities for establishments to share successful approaches and learn from one another. Attendance data is routinely reviewed at establishment and authority level, allowing emerging practice to be identified, evaluated and disseminated more widely. This collaborative approach helps support consistency whilst recognising that schools may require different interventions depending on their context and learner population.

Underpinning all of this work is a commitment to relational, non-judgemental engagement with children, young people and families. The authority's attendance policy and strategy promote supportive communication, collaboration, meaningful family involvement and child-centred planning. The views of children and families are actively sought and contribute to the development of plans and interventions. Wider initiatives such as breakfast clubs, uniform hubs, extra-curricular activities including activities supported through the Child Poverty Fund, continue to reduce practical and financial barriers to attendance, whilst relationship-based approaches help address emotional barriers. Inverclyde's experience continues to demonstrate that strong relationships between schools, families and partner agencies remain fundamental to securing sustained improvements in attendance.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry and remain committed to learning from, and contributing to, improvement activity across Scotland in order to secure the best possible outcomes for children and young people.

Yours truly,

**Michael Roach**
**Interim Director of Education**