North Ayrshire Council: introduction

North Ayrshire Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Education and Gaelic Committee's request for information on local authority approaches to supporting school improvement and persistent absence.

The Council recognises the findings of the HMIE thematic inspection of local authority approaches to supporting school improvement, including the challenges identified nationally around consistency of support, rigorous self-evaluation and leadership development. These themes align closely with North Ayrshire's own self-evaluation and have informed the development of our new Education Service Improvement Plan 2026-29 - Cabinet 20260901. The Plan is structured around three priorities: improving learning outcomes for all; supporting needs, wellbeing, equality and inclusion; and building a self-improving service.

1. Response to the HMIE thematic inspection

Consistency and quality of support for schools

North Ayrshire recognises the national finding that there can be variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities. Our approach is based on the principle that consistency does not necessarily mean identical levels of intervention for every school. Rather, establishments should experience consistently high expectations and access to support, with the *intensity and nature* of that support proportionate to need.
Our Quality Improvement Framework provides the structure through which schools are supported, challenged and evaluated. The long-established Framework has been updated this year to formalise existing custom and practice around how we tailor our approach to the differing needs of individual establishments. The updated framework incorporates a three-tier approach, ensuring that the intensity and nature of support and oversight are proportionate to each establishment's circumstances, performance and identified needs.

Tier allocation is agreed through collaborative assessment with the link Senior Education Manager, informed by evidence, professional judgement and dialogue, and remains flexible so that establishments can move between tiers as circumstances change. Tier 1 provides baseline support, with one or two quality improvement visits annually to monitor progress, identify further improvements and share effective practice. Tier 2 provides enhanced support through three or four visits annually, with additional input where required to address emerging concerns and strengthen systems and consistency. Tier 3 provides the most intensive support through a bespoke programme of visits and ongoing engagement, focused on implementing and monitoring a detailed improvement action plan. These arrangements sit alongside

establishment reviews and central service evaluation, including a programme of approximately 15 standard establishment reviews annually and additional thematic or targeted reviews.

This approach is complemented by the strategic targeting of central resources, with support deliberately differentiated according to establishments' needs rather than spread evenly across the Service. Establishments requiring enhanced or intensive support can draw on peers and senior officers beyond their link Senior Education Manager, with the nature and extent of this input aligned to their improvement priorities. The NAC Professional Learning Academy provides a further mechanism for intensive capacity building, including an "in-residence" model which allows staff to work alongside practitioners for sustained periods. Throughout, the emphasis is on supportive engagement, building capacity and securing sustained improvement at establishment level.

The incorporation of the tiered model into the Quality Improvement Framework takes forward the commitment in our Education Service Improvement Plan 2026–29 to make support and challenge more explicit and proportionate to need. Our continuing focus is on embedding the approach consistently, alongside further development of reviews and networks, improved performance dashboards and stronger service-wide self-evaluation. Together, these developments are intended to strengthen the connection between evidence, identified need, targeted support and the evaluation of impact.

Self-evaluation and use of evidence

North Ayrshire places considerable emphasis on self-evaluation as the basis for improvement. Our current authority self-evaluation identifies an established programme of evaluation and review at key points throughout the year, with performance benchmarked against previous local performance, agreed targets and comparator authorities.

At establishment level, improvement planning is expected to be based on rigorous self-evaluation and analysis of performance evidence. Progress is then considered through quality improvement visits and wider authority planning and reporting arrangements.

We have also been strengthening data literacy. During 2025-26, more than 100 staff from over 55 schools and Early Years centres attended data clinics designed to improve confidence in using performance information. Schools update attainment information at defined points, allowing establishments to review progress and the central team to identify authority-wide patterns requiring further action.

We recognise, however, that further work is required to bring our datasets together more coherently and ensure evidence is consistently translated into improvement. Our most recent self-evaluation therefore identified the development of a Quality Improvement Team dashboard and enhanced central performance management and analytical capacity as next steps.

The 2026-29 Improvement Plan embeds this approach further by establishing a more consistent framework for improvement planning, self-evaluation and performance monitoring, with progress reported annually through the statutory Standards and Quality Report.

Leadership and professional learning

Leadership development is viewed as central to building a sustainable, self-improving education system. North Ayrshire uses a combination of formal leadership programmes and collaborative approaches. These include Into Headship and Excellence in Headship, networks for depute headteachers, coordinators and middle leaders, peer mentoring for new headteachers, improvement trios and Heads Together events. Headteachers are also encouraged to contribute beyond their own establishments, including through establishment reviews, authority working groups and the sharing of learning following inspection.

The North Ayrshire Professional Learning Academy (PLA) provides a central hub for professional learning for teachers and associated education staff across the authority. Based at Auchenharvie Academy and funded through the Scottish Attainment Challenge, its functions include developing and delivering research-informed professional learning, modelling effective classroom practice, supporting curriculum and assessment development, building leadership capacity and facilitating the sharing of effective practice. Its work is aligned to improving outcomes for children and young people and reducing the poverty-related attainment gap.

The Academy combines an authority-wide programme of twilight and in-service learning with bespoke support responsive to individual establishment improvement priorities. Its literacy and numeracy teams work alongside practitioners through an “in-residence” model, enabling approaches introduced through professional learning to be modelled, practised and embedded in classrooms. Targeted blocks of support are informed by attainment evidence and agreed with headteachers, linking professional learning directly to identified learner needs. The Academy also provides spaces for collaborative learning and professional dialogue. During 2025–26, it worked with 17 primary schools through six literacy and 11 numeracy interventions.

The Academy’s work programme for 2026–27 includes implementing North Ayrshire Reads, informed by the science of reading; supporting the implementation and

expansion of the CYPIC National Writing Programme; developing mathematics through STEM SPACE and Building Thinking Classrooms; and further developing numeracy frameworks and assessment resources to support planning, teaching and the identification of gaps in learning. Its priorities also include CALM theory and physical intervention training. The wider professional learning calendar is shaped by school and service improvement plans, participation data and practitioner feedback, with provision for bespoke sessions responding to establishments' needs.

This approach deliberately creates opportunities for leadership at different levels rather than locating improvement solely within the central authority team. The Academy contributes to this through its Middle Leaders Leading Change programme, which engaged 71 middle leaders across four secondary schools in a pilot of this programme during 2025–26.

We also recognise that further development is required, particularly in strengthening the pipeline of future senior leaders. Our self-evaluation has therefore identified a greater focus on middle leadership and additional professional learning as priorities for 2026–27.

This is reflected in the 2026–29 Improvement Plan, in which leadership development, professional learning, reflection and staff support form part of the strategic priority of building a self-improving service.

Sharing effective practice within and beyond North Ayrshire

Collaborative improvement is central to North Ayrshire's approach.

Within the authority, effective practice is shared through Head Teacher networks, Service Improvement Groups, professional learning networks, improvement trios, establishment reviews, collaborative improvement sessions and professional learning activity.

There are practical examples of this approach. During 2025-26, schools shared approaches to learning, teaching, tracking and the use of data at Head Teacher meetings. North Ayrshire also delivered cross-sector moderation activity and established networks to support establishments preparing for inspection.

The Service also learns from and contributes to practice beyond North Ayrshire. Officers engage with Education Scotland and other authorities, including through national networks and collaborative professional learning. The Curriculum Improvement Cycle work, for example, has involved staff working with Education Scotland and colleagues from other local authorities, while senior officers have contributed through Education Scotland and ADES discussions.

There remain some practical barriers to systematic sharing across authorities, including differing local contexts and priorities, competing operational pressures and the capacity required to identify, evaluate and transfer practice effectively. Nevertheless, close working relationships across the three Ayrshire Councils are well-established and are being built on every year. This includes not only the sharing of good practice but also collaborative approaches to aspects of our shared improvement priorities.

2. Support for pupils experiencing persistent absence

North Ayrshire welcomes the renewed national focus on attendance. We recognise that attendance has not returned to pre-pandemic levels and that persistent absence remains a substantial local challenge.

In 2024-25, North Ayrshire's overall attendance rate was 89.6%, compared with 89.1% the previous year. Persistent absence, defined as missing more than 10% of possible attendances, reduced from 37.9% in 2023-24 to 35.6% in 2024-25. While the direction of travel on persistent absence was positive, the 35.6% figure remained substantially above the Scotland-wide figure of 28.5%.

We therefore do not underestimate the scale of the challenge.

Implementation of attendance guidance and local improvement activity

North Ayrshire's approach reflects the principles emphasised nationally around early intervention, person-centred assessment, effective use of data and coordinated support.

Attendance improvement activity has been organised around four workstreams:

- universal supports;
- policies, processes and data;
- targeted interventions and support for vulnerable groups; and
- partnership working.

A local positive-attendance campaign has also been developed with input from parents/carers and children and young people.

Importantly, attendance remains embedded in our strategic improvement planning. The 2026-29 Improvement Plan places improving attendance and engagement within our wider priority of supporting needs, wellbeing, equality and inclusion, alongside strengthening relationships, behaviour, health, wellbeing and safeguarding.

Identification and monitoring of persistent absence

A central focus has been improving how establishments use attendance data to identify concerns earlier and respond consistently.

North Ayrshire has developed an attendance tracking and monitoring approach to identify patterns, assess barriers, record interventions and evaluate their impact. During its development, the tool was piloted across two clusters before wider implementation.

The 2025-26 Education Service Standards and Quality Report 2025-26 - Cabinet 01092026 records that the new tracking and monitoring tool had been implemented to support earlier identification of attendance concerns, clearer assessment of barriers, improved recording of interventions and more consistent analysis across establishments.

This is important because headline attendance percentages alone do not adequately explain why a child is absent. More detailed analysis has identified patterns requiring further investigation, including repeated periods of sickness, recurring absence on particular days and term-time family holidays.

The intention is therefore to use data as the starting point for understanding barriers and targeting support, rather than simply as a retrospective measure of absence.

Early intervention and targeted support

Our approach recognises that persistent absence can arise from a range of educational, health, social, emotional and family circumstances. A uniform response is therefore unlikely to address the needs of all children and young people.

Professional learning has been developed to help staff explore the reasons for non-attendance and identify appropriate support, including support for emotionally based school non-attendance.

North Ayrshire has also participated actively in Education Scotland's attendance quality improvement work. Five establishments participated in an initial programme, using improvement methodology to test local approaches. In one example, an outdoor-learning intervention for an identified group produced a three percentage point attendance improvement over a short test period. A further intervention with learners whose attendance was between 80% and 90% used reflective tools and dialogue to identify barriers and reinforced the importance of early intervention and consistent communication with children and families.

This work has subsequently expanded, with additional establishments identified for participation in further quality improvement activity.

Multi-agency working

Persistent absence cannot be addressed by schools alone. Multi-agency working is therefore a central element of our approach.

A partnership working group has brought together Education and other services to develop and evaluate support. Earlier activity included collaboration with HSCP

colleagues, CAMHS, third-sector partners and Connected Communities to identify local gaps and needs.

This approach is consistent with our broader Education Service model, where school improvement is supported through partnerships with families, learners, health and social care colleagues, Police Scotland, NHS services, third-sector organisations and community partners.

Our aim is to ensure that intervention is based on the needs and circumstances of the individual child or young person and their family, with relevant services contributing where barriers extend beyond the school environment.

Impact and continuing challenge

There is evidence that targeted local approaches can make a difference.
For example, Ardrossan Academy recorded a four percentage point improvement in its overall attendance rate following a holistic approach to monitoring, tracking and intervention. Glebe Primary's rigorous monitoring and tracking process informed development of the authority's attendance tool, and the school recorded a two percentage point improvement, reaching 94.2% attendance in 2024-25. Both examples were identified for sharing through Education Scotland.

However, North Ayrshire does not consider the issue resolved. The most recent Standards and Quality reporting recorded overall attendance of 89.4% in 2025-26, a 0.3 percentage point reduction, and confirmed attendance as a continuing significant priority.

We therefore see the correct response as one of sustained improvement rather than a short-term attendance initiative. Work on attendance is being integrated with our approaches to wellbeing, additional support needs, relationships, attainment and family support, with increasingly sophisticated use of data to understand the circumstances behind absence.

3. Sharing learning and next steps

North Ayrshire's approach is to combine strong local knowledge of establishments with increased opportunities for collaboration, challenge and learning across the system. Our Education Service Improvement Plan 2026-29 - Cabinet 20260901 deliberately strengthens this through the priority of building a self-improving service, including refreshed quality improvement arrangements, a tiered approach to support and challenge, performance dashboards, enhanced self-evaluation, leadership development and professional learning.
For attendance specifically, next steps include continuing detailed analysis of absence and its causes, strengthening use of the attendance tracking approach, maintaining professional learning and targeted intervention, developing work with partners and retaining attendance as a regular focus of Head Teacher meetings and quality improvement activity.

North Ayrshire also remains committed to learning from other authorities and national partners and to contributing its own effective practice. We consider networks involving Education Scotland, ADES and other local authorities particularly important in reducing unnecessary duplication and enabling practice with demonstrable impact to be adapted appropriately to different local contexts. Our existing curriculum work demonstrates this approach, with staff engaging directly with Education Scotland and colleagues from other authorities to share practice and learn from national developments.