Scottish Borders COUNCIL

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

Please ask for: *David Robertson*
Our Ref: *DR/FC*
Your Ref:
E-Mail: *David.Robertson@scotborders.gov.uk*
Date: *3 November 2026*

Dear Dr Johnston

Local Authority Approaches to School Education

Thank you for your letter of 7 October 2026 seeking an update on Scottish Borders Council's response to the recommendations arising from HM Inspectorate of Education's (HMIE) thematic review of local authority approaches to supporting school improvement, and on the implementation of the revised national attendance guidance.

Scottish Borders Council welcomes the opportunity to update the Committee on the progress made, the impact of our approach and the priorities we have identified for further improvement.

Supporting school improvement

Scottish Borders Council recognises the challenges highlighted by HMIE nationally, particularly variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, the rigour of self-evaluation and the development of leadership at all levels. Our response has focused on strengthening collaborative leadership, improving the use of evidence and data, and developing a coherent, self-improving education system in which schools and partners share responsibility for outcomes.

The effectiveness of this approach was examined through HMIE's Trial Local Authority Inspection of Scottish Borders Council, undertaken between 22 and 29 June 2026. Inspectors recognised significant progress towards our ambition of becoming a self- improving education system, highlighting the successful development of our #OneTeam vision and the Team Around the Cluster (TAC) and Cluster Action Group (CAG) models.

Inspectors identified strong collaborative relationships, increasingly distributed leadership and a growing collective responsibility for improving outcomes for children and young people. They also recognised that further work is required to ensure consistency of practice and to evaluate more systematically the impact of improvement activity.

Consistency of support and reducing variability

The Council serves a diverse, largely rural area in which schools operate in different geographical, social and economic circumstances. We do not consider consistency to mean providing identical support to every school. Rather, it means maintaining common expectations and standards while

ensuring that support, challenge and resources are responsive to the needs of individual schools and their communities.

Our TAC model is central to achieving this. It brings together school leaders and partners from education, health, social work and other services to identify local needs, agree priorities and coordinate support. Inspectors described the model as “a highly effective model for collaborative partnership working across a range of services within Scottish Borders Council”.

The model is helping clusters develop from traditional groupings of schools into active improvement partnerships. Local data and professional knowledge are used alongside wider authority information to identify challenges, including those associated with poverty, rural isolation, wellbeing and engagement. This enables responses to be tailored to local circumstances while contributing to shared authority wide priorities.

It also enables expertise and resources to be deployed more strategically across clusters, with partners working collectively to align support with local priorities and the needs of children, young people and families. The inspection recognised how resources and expertise are deployed strategically to meet need, and how devolved decision making on Strategic Equity Funding and other funding streams is strengthening collaboration and improving outcomes.

Leadership development

We recognise that a self-improving system depends on leadership capacity throughout the education system, rather than responsibility resting solely with senior officers or individual headteachers.

HMIE found increasing evidence of school leaders contributing beyond their own establishments, leading improvement across clusters and participating in authority wide planning. The TAC approach supports this through distributed leadership, shared decision making and collective responsibility for agreed priorities.

Leadership development is supported through leadership seminars, coaching and mentoring, headteacher engagement days, cluster leadership networks, aspiring leadership pathways and participation in national programmes.

We will continue to develop opportunities for leaders at different stages of their careers to exercise leadership beyond their own establishments, strengthen professional enquiry and learn from colleagues across the authority. Succession planning will be particularly important in sustaining cluster leadership and ensuring that effective approaches remain embedded when leadership roles change.

Self-evaluation and quality improvement

The Council agrees with HMIE that rigorous self-evaluation is fundamental to sustained improvement. Our approach combines central support and challenge with increasing responsibility at cluster level, recognising the importance of shared standards and the Council’s continuing responsibilities for quality assurance.

Inspectors found that school leaders understood the Council’s approach to quality assurance and self-evaluation well. They recognised the value of the blended model and described the pace and management of change as thoughtful and well judged.

Quality improvement is supported through school reviews, thematic reviews, headteacher engagement, moderation and regular analysis of attainment, attendance, wellbeing and inclusion

data. The #SBC Way also provides a shared reference point for expectations around inclusion, learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum planning.

An important contribution has been the Council's targeted Attendance Quality Improvement Programme in 2025/26. Initially involving all nine secondary schools and subsequently extended to nine targeted primary schools, the programme provided a structured approach to strengthening attendance improvement through collaborative enquiry, professional learning, data analysis and targeted intervention. It supported schools to identify barriers to attendance, review their approaches and develop responses informed by evidence and local circumstances. The programme also helped strengthen a shared responsibility for improving attendance across schools and clusters, with learning contributing to wider authority improvement activity.

Our priority is to ensure that evaluation leads to action and demonstrable improvements for children and young people. We will continue to strengthen the consistency of evaluative practice, the use of evidence to identify underlying causes of variation, and the links between improvement activity and measurable outcomes. This includes further developing the Council’s quality improvement arrangements in response to the inspection findings.

Sharing effective practice across the education system

Effective practice is shared through school clusters, communities of practice, leadership networks, professional learning and thematic improvement groups. The Council also works with the ADES QUAD partners, Education Scotland and national professional networks, enabling officers and school leaders to learn from practice elsewhere and contribute Scottish Borders experience to wider improvement activity.

HMIE identified highly effective practice within Scottish Borders Council that it intends to share more widely. This provides an important opportunity to contribute to national learning, particularly in relation to collaborative leadership, multi-agency working and targeted support for vulnerable learners.

There are, nevertheless, barriers to transferring effective practice between authorities. These include geographical and workforce challenges, differences in local context and the increasing complexity of need. An approach that works well in one community cannot necessarily be replicated unchanged elsewhere.

We therefore consider effective knowledge sharing to require more than disseminating examples of practice. It also requires understanding why an approach works, evaluating its impact and adapting it appropriately to different circumstances. We will continue to work with regional and national partners to support this process.

Support for pupils with persistent absence

Improving attendance and reducing persistent absence remain key priorities for Scottish Borders Council.

Attendance has improved significantly since the pandemic. Primary attendance increased from 91.0% in 2021 to 93.9% in 2026, while secondary attendance increased from 88.6% to 89.5%. Over the same period, overall persistent absence reduced from 28.7% to 26.1%.

During 2024/25, persistent absence reduced by approximately three percentage points, equating to around 400 additional children and young people attending school for more than 90% of the academic year. Secondary persistent absence reduced by four percentage points. Attendance also improved among learners with additional support needs, care-experienced learners and

learners affected by poverty, while the poverty-related attendance gap narrowed in both primary and secondary schools.

These improvements are encouraging, although we recognise that overall progress must be accompanied by sustained improvement for groups of learners who continue to experience barriers to regular attendance.

Implementing the revised national attendance guidance

The revised Scottish Government attendance guidance has been incorporated into local procedures, professional learning and quality assurance arrangements.

Our approach reflects the guidance's emphasis on early identification and intervention, effective use of attendance data, understanding the reasons for absence, person centred planning, engagement with families and coordinated multi agency support.

Attendance is monitored at school, cluster and authority levels so that emerging concerns can be identified and addressed before patterns become entrenched. Schools are encouraged to understand the circumstances underlying absence and to work with children, young people and their families to identify appropriate responses.

This approach recognises that persistent absence can arise from a range of interconnected factors and that effective intervention depends on understanding individual circumstances rather than relying on a single response.

Multi-agency working and targeted support

The TAC and CAG arrangements are central to supporting children and young people experiencing attendance difficulties. They enable schools and partners to share relevant information, identify underlying needs and coordinate interventions.

HMIE found clear evidence that these arrangements were supporting earlier intervention and more coordinated responses for vulnerable learners and families. Inspectors highlighted the contribution of the Attendance Community of Practice, describing it as a "very strong example" of collaborative enquiry. They concluded that the resulting authority wide work had demonstrably improved attendance among targeted persistent absentees.

The inspection also highlighted the Ready to Learn programme as an example of partnership working that has improved engagement and attendance for learners and families.

At Hawick High School, inspectors reviewed targeted support for 150 young people. Most had improved their attendance, and almost all achieved a positive destination on leaving school. Across the authority, at least 84 children and young people received targeted TAC interventions during 2024/25.

These examples demonstrate the value of coordinated person centred support. They also reinforce the importance of involving families and drawing on the expertise of education, health, social work, community partners and third-sector organisations to address barriers that cannot be resolved by schools acting alone.

Priorities for further improvement

Despite the improvement in attendance, unauthorised absence remains higher than pre pandemic levels and continues to affect some groups disproportionately, including learners affected by poverty, additional support needs and care experience.

Our next phase of work will focus on:

- reducing unauthorised absence through timely and appropriate intervention;
- strengthening the consistency of attendance analysis across schools and clusters;
- evaluating interventions more systematically to establish what works best, for whom and in which circumstances;
- improving outcomes for vulnerable groups and reducing inequalities; and
- strengthening the evidence linking improvement activity to measurable changes in attendance, engagement and wider learner outcomes.

We will continue to embed the revised national guidance through professional learning, quality assurance and collaborative working, with an emphasis on ensuring that effective practice is applied consistently while remaining responsive to individual needs.

Conclusion

Scottish Borders Council recognises the challenges identified nationally in relation to consistency of support, leadership development and self-evaluation. We also recognise that improving attendance and reducing inequalities in outcomes remain significant priorities.

HMIE's June 2026 Trial Local Authority Inspection provides independent evidence of substantial progress towards our ambition of becoming a self-improving education system. The inspection recognised strengths in collaborative leadership, partnership working, quality improvement and support for vulnerable children and families. It also identified areas where greater consistency, more rigorous evaluation and wider sharing of effective practice are required.

We have accepted the inspection findings in full and are using them to inform our next phase of improvement. Our focus will be on reducing variability between clusters, strengthening leadership and quality assurance, improving the evaluation of interventions and ensuring that effective practice translates into sustained, measurable improvements for children and young people across the Scottish Borders.

As HMIE concluded:

"We are confident that Scottish Borders Council has the capacity to continue to improve, and we will make no further visits as a result of this inspection. We have identified highly effective practice that we will work with the local authority to share more widely."

Yours sincerely



DAVID ROBERTSON
CHIEF EXECUTIVE