Shetland Islands Council

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Date: 03 November 2026

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Our Ref: FR/kk/D70/Cor/2026/011
Your Ref:

Dear Clerk

Thank you for your letter seeking an update on Shetland Islands Council's response to the findings of HM Inspectorate of Education's thematic inspection of local authority approaches to supporting school improvement, and on our approach to supporting children and young people experiencing persistent absence.

Local Authority Approaches to School Education

Shetland Islands Council welcomed the HMIE thematic inspection report and recognises the importance of the recommendations in strengthening educational improvement at both local and national levels.

As a small island authority, we are acutely aware of the benefits and challenges associated with our geographical context. Our size enables strong relationships between schools, central officers and partner agencies, allowing for highly responsive support. At the same time, the dispersed nature of our island communities can present challenges in ensuring consistency across all settings.

We have undertaken a number of actions that align with the recommendations within the HMIE report:

Consistency and Quality of Support

In Shetland, our aim is to ensure that all schools receive a proportionate and equitable level of challenge and support, whilst also recognising the differing contexts of individual establishments in a unique island context.

Key measures include:

- A strengthened quality improvement framework which provides a consistent approach to school improvement across all sectors e.g. improvement visits proportionate to size of setting where possible.

- Regular engagement between schools and Quality Improvement Officers through professional dialogue, attainment reviews and improvement planning discussions. Increasing confidence in the use of data and handling of this.
- Greater use of shared self-evaluation activities and peer review approaches to support consistency in practice.
- Increased opportunities for collaborative working between schools to share effective approaches and reduce variability e.g. sharing of experience at Head Teacher Development Days of HMIE inspections.

Particularly given the size of our authority, it is possible to maintain a close understanding of individual school contexts and tailor support accordingly.

Self-Evaluation

Our schools continue to use national self-evaluation frameworks, including *How Good Is Our School?*, to inform change and improvement. Strengthening self-evaluation is sought through:

- Increased use of attainment and achievement data to inform professional dialogue.
- Professional learning opportunities focused on evidence-informed improvement methodology.
- Enhanced support and challenge from central officers during annual improvement planning and reporting cycles.

A culture where self-evaluation is viewed as an ongoing improvement process rather than a periodic exercise is pursued.

Leadership Development

Leadership development remains a significant priority and the need to build capacity is a focus given location, demographics, workforce availability etc. It is recognised that strong leadership at all levels is essential to sustaining improvement and ensuring capacity across the system. In response:

- Continued to support participation in national leadership programmes.
- Developed local leadership opportunities for aspiring and established leaders.
- Strengthened mentoring and coaching approaches.
- Growing emphasis on distributed leadership that empowers staff to lead improvement activity within and across schools.

Given the relatively small scale of our education service, succession planning is particularly important and remains an ongoing area of concern. The existing professional standards and utilisation of the professional review and development review programme is key to supporting this.

Sharing Good Practice Across Local Authorities

Shetland benefits from active participation in regional and national education networks. Good practice is shared through:

- Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) QUAD networks.
- Former Northern Alliance collaborative activity.
- Education Scotland programmes and professional learning opportunities. It should be noted that the change of direction of Education Scotland to be the curriculum agency for Scotland means that at present there is a need to navigate this evolved offer.
- National thematic groups and practitioner networks.

These arrangements provide valuable opportunities to learn from the practice of other authorities and to contribute examples of effective practice from Shetland. In the past few years, Shetland is able to demonstrate incremental improvement in school inspection and care inspectorate grades for settings. It is identified that our secondary schools are an area of attention and close partnership working with Qualifications Scotland for example, is enabling this development.

However, barriers remain. These include capacity pressures, workforce recruitment challenges, varying local contexts and the practical demands associated with geography and travel. While digital platforms have significantly improved collaboration, meaningful improvement activity still requires sufficient time and capacity for practitioners and leaders to engage fully. Policy and statutory requirements do not always take cognisance of the complicated landscape that Shetland serves.

Support for Pupils with Persistent Absence

Improving attendance remains a key priority for Shetland Islands Council.
Attendance levels continue to be an area of priority. Aspirational targets have been set and key pieces of work such as scrutinising the use of part-time timetables are ongoing. Sustained improvement requires a preventative, relationship-based and multi-agency approach.

The revised Scottish Government attendance guidance has aligned with existing local practice and has been incorporated into our ongoing attendance improvement work.

Implementation of Attendance Guidance

Schools have been supported to:

- Monitor attendance closely through the use of attendance data and regular analysis. Until recently this was well supported by an attainment advisor but again due to a change of focus for Education Scotland and reduction in workforce, there is not the same capacity for partnership working as had been.
- Identify patterns of concern at an early stage.
- Engage proactively with children, young people and families where attendance begins to decline.
- Adopt a supportive and solution-focused approach that seeks to understand underlying causes.

The emphasis on early intervention and understanding barriers to attendance has been particularly valuable in reinforcing practice across our schools.

Identifying and Responding to Persistent Absence

Schools use attendance data alongside professional knowledge of individual pupils to identify those at risk of persistent absence.

Responses are proportionate to circumstances and may include:

- Early discussions with families.
- Individual attendance plans.
- Pastoral support within school.
- Additional support for learning interventions.
- Referrals to wider services where appropriate.

Experience demonstrates that attendance issues are often linked to a range of factors including wellbeing, mental health, additional support needs, family circumstances and transitions. Consequently, responses must be tailored to the needs of individual learners.

Multi-Agency Working

Multi-agency collaboration is a particular strength within Shetland.
Schools work closely with:

- Educational Psychology.
- Children's Social Work.
- Wider Health services.
- Youth & Employability.
- Third-sector partners.

Challenges with travel can mean that attendance is a greater obstacle for island communities e.g. cost of getting off island or prolonged periods of time required out of school for competitions on the Scottish mainland.

Sharing Effective Practice

Attendance remains a regular focus within school leadership discussions and quality improvement activity.

Effective practice is shared through:

- Headteacher networks.
- Professional learning opportunities.
- Quality improvement visits and professional dialogue.
- Local authority and national collaborative forums.

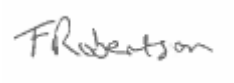
Schools are encouraged to learn from one another's approaches and to consider emerging evidence regarding successful interventions.

Conclusion

Shetland Islands Council remains committed to securing continuous improvement in educational outcomes for all children and young people. It recognises the importance of maintaining consistent support for schools, developing leadership at all levels, strengthening self-evaluation and working collaboratively across the system.

Similarly, there exists a commitment to improving attendance through stretch targets, early intervention, strong relationships, effective use of data and coordinated multi-agency support. It is anticipated that these approaches provide the best foundation for ensuring that all children and young people can engage fully in their education and achieve their potential.

Yours sincerely



Fiona Robertson
Chief Education Officer
Shetland Islands Council