**Education Resources**
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Dear Dr Johnston

**Local authority approaches to school education – South Lanarkshire Council**

Thank you for your letter of 7 October 2026 inviting an update on South Lanarkshire Council's approach to supporting school improvement and pupils experiencing persistent absence.

The Council welcomes the Committee's consideration of these important and closely connected areas. Our response is set out below under the two headings contained in the Committee's letter.

**1. Supporting school improvement, inspection and self-evaluation**

South Lanarkshire Council welcomed the findings of HMIE's national thematic inspection of local authority approaches to supporting school improvement and used the authority-specific feedback as both external validation and a clear basis for further improvement. The review confirmed important strengths in South Lanarkshire's arrangements. Inspectors found that the strategic improvement plan was clear and aligned well with national priorities; that school improvement guidance provided clear and effective information; and that schools valued the culture of collaboration and empowerment underpinning the Council's quality assurance approaches.

The review also recognised mutually positive and supportive relationships between headteachers and central officers, an established culture of support and challenge, and the effective use of attainment data and school-level intelligence to inform professional dialogue and targeted support. South Lanarkshire's clear strategy for building capacity, broad professional learning offer and four improvement principles of being proportionate, empowering others, building capacity and ensuring sustainability were identified as significant strengths.

The Council viewed this positive evaluation as a foundation for further improvement. A formal action plan was developed to address the improvement areas identified through the review. This included strengthening evaluative writing in Standards and Quality Reports; developing a strategic overview of improvement priorities; agreeing more consistent approaches to feedback on self-evaluation and improvement planning; monitoring the impact of the proportionate quality assurance model; ensuring that peer review provides reliable evidence about learning, teaching and assessment; extending leadership and professional learning opportunities; and clarifying universal and targeted support.

**Consistency and quality of support**

The Committee's concern about notable variability in the consistency and quality of support is recognised. South Lanarkshire's response has been to make the universal entitlement clearer, strengthen the evidence used to identify additional need and formalise how enhanced or tailored support is agreed, delivered and evaluated. The intention being to ensure a consistent standard of provision combined with a proportionate response to each establishment's strengths, circumstances and improvement needs.

The publication of South Lanarkshire Learns: Quality Improvement in September 2026 is a significant development arising from the thematic review. The guidance brings quality improvement, quality assurance, support and challenge arrangements together within one coherent framework. It sets out the respective responsibilities of Education Resources and establishment leaders while preserving the professional autonomy of Heads of Establishment to lead improvement within their own contexts.

The guidance is underpinned by the Working Together to IMPROVE model: Integrity, Mobilise, Partnership Working, Relationships, Outcomes for Learners, Values-Driven Approach and Empower. It translates the relational strengths identified by HMIE into clearer authority-wide expectations for professional dialogue, engagement and feedback. This is intended to create a culture in which leaders can share strengths, discuss challenges openly and receive support and challenge that are constructive, evidence-informed and focused on improved outcomes.

All establishments have access to a defined universal offer. This includes quality improvement visits by a named Quality Improvement Officer (QIO) or Locality Manager, monitoring of key performance indicators, peer or collaborative review, professional learning and periodic assurance relating to statutory duties. The QIO or Locality Manager also provides professional and pastoral support and acts as an accessible point of contact for the establishment in our refreshed 3-18 structure across Education Resources.

Within this universal offer, engagement is planned around three connected strands: attainment and performance; learning, teaching and assessment; and improvement planning. Depending on sector and context, this may include review of ACEL, Statistical Summary Report, Early Level or other establishment performance data; learning walks, peer review or collaborative improvement activity; and professional dialogue on improvement priorities, progress, impact and next steps. For early learning and childcare settings, collaborative assessment can also be used to identify the nature and level of ongoing support required. Visits may be sequenced differently or combined where this provides a more coherent and proportionate response—for example, considering attainment and performance alongside learning, teaching and assessment within the same engagement. The precise pattern is agreed through collaborative discussion with the Head of Establishment and is kept under review as evidence and circumstances change.

The named QIO or Locality Manager has a central role in securing the consistency and quality of this support. Working with the Head of Establishment, the QIO uses professional knowledge of the setting alongside performance information, self-evaluation, inspection evidence and local context to agree the appropriate tier of support and review it as circumstances change. Through planned quality improvement visits, the QIO provides constructive challenge and feedback, supports analysis of key performance indicators and improvement planning, helps leaders evaluate the impact of action, and coordinates additional expertise where enhanced or tailored support is required. QIOs also contribute to inspection preparation, learning community planning, leadership support and professional learning, while maintaining sufficient knowledge of each establishment to ensure that support is coherent, responsive and followed through.

Enhanced and tailored support can be added where the evidence demonstrates that further intervention would add value. Enhanced support provides time-limited, bespoke assistance in addition to the universal offer. Tailored support provides a more intensive response, including a focused action plan, regular visits and, where appropriate, a team around the establishment drawing on expertise beyond the central Education Resources team. Action plans identify a limited

number of priorities, actions, responsible personnel, timescales, intended outcomes and evidence of resolution. This strengthens accountability and connects additional support directly to measurable improvement.

Information about each establishment is now brought together within an Education Resources dashboard accessible to central staff. This provides managers with a comprehensive overview of the support in place, enables emerging gaps or inconsistencies to be identified and informs decisions about any further intervention required. The establishment support model is also a standing item at central team meetings, providing regular oversight and shared accountability for the consistency and quality of provision.

The quality improvement framework also provides for end-of-year evaluation of the impact of support by Heads of Establishment and Education Resources staff. This will allow the Council to assess not simply whether support has been provided, but whether it has been consistent, proportionate and effective. Feedback will inform Education Resources self-evaluation and subsequent improvement activity.

**Self-evaluation, improvement planning and professional challenge**

Robust, evidence-based self-evaluation remains central to South Lanarkshire's approach. Following the thematic review, sampling of Standards and Quality Reports and School Improvement Plans informed revisions to templates, guidance and professional learning. Schools have strengthened the evaluative statements supporting their annual judgements, with a clearer focus on the difference made for learners. Annual planning is structured around three questions: what difference do we want to make; what will we do; and how will we measure success. Schools are also expected to include high-level evaluative statements for the relevant quality indicators relating to leadership of change; learning, teaching and assessment; wellbeing, equality and inclusion; and raising attainment and achievement. Equivalent expectations apply to early learning and childcare settings using the national quality improvement framework.

Quality improvement visits are now aligned more closely with the cycle for planning, monitoring and evaluating priorities. Professional dialogue therefore considers current evidence, progress with planned activity, impact and next steps. In primary schools, attainment data visits support discussion about attainment, progress, equity and the use of evidence when selecting improvement priorities. In secondary schools, revised Statistical Summary Report processes provide structured challenge around attainment, tracking and longer-term trends.

Secondary improvement-planning guidance, templates and supporting resources were refreshed collaboratively with headteachers during 2025-2026. A tracking and monitoring self-evaluation toolkit was also developed with school leaders for use from S1 to S6.

This intelligence is directing further professional learning, development of authority data tools and opportunities to share effective practice.

**Evidence of progress and impact**

Inspection evidence provides strong independent assurance about the overall effectiveness of the improvement system. During 2025-2026, 85.5% of the quality indicators inspected in South Lanarkshire schools were evaluated as good, very good or excellent. This was higher than the reported percentages for our comparator authorities

This followed a particularly strong inspection profile in 2024-2025, when 95.3% of quality indicators were evaluated as good, very good or excellent demonstrating a sustained positive external inspection profile.

Several of our establishments continue to be recognised as having practice worthy of sharing nationally. Recognised strengths included collaborative leadership, diversity and inclusion, wellbeing, attendance, equity, tracking and monitoring, parental partnership and strategic

approaches to raising attainment. In almost all school inspections no follow-up activity was required.

Early learning and childcare outcomes were also consistently positive. Four reports were published during 2025/26 and all establishments received good or better outcomes for every quality indicator. Establishments inspected during the year also evaluated the central inspection support arrangements as excellent, with a 100% positive evaluation.

There is also a strong alignment between establishments' own self-evaluations and subsequent inspection evaluations. This provides assurance that professional judgement is robust, while the continued improvement work seeks to increase consistency further.

**Progress since the previous thematic review headteacher survey**

The South Lanarkshire Council 2025/26 headteacher survey attracted 91 responses, compared with 82 responses to the HMIE 2024/25 questionnaire as part of the thematic review. Nevertheless, the results show that the central strengths identified by HMIE have been sustained and that headteacher confidence is high across several key aspects of the improvement system.

In 2025/26, almost all headteachers considered that there was a shared understanding between headteachers and authority staff about the purpose of quality assurance activity. Almost all agreed that the authority adopted a systematic approach to quality assurance, while most considered that quality assurance activity was making a positive difference to education in their school and that the authority had helped them to develop a systematic approach to self-evaluation.

Confidence in the strategic use of data was particularly strong. All headteachers agreed that the authority promoted and supported the effective use of data to evaluate impact and outcomes. Almost all considered that data was used effectively to demonstrate their school’s progress in raising attainment and achievement and in closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

The survey also affirmed the strength of support and professional collaboration. Almost all headteachers agreed that they could contact a named authority officer linked to their school and had opportunities to work collaboratively with other school leaders. Almost all considered that they could exercise autonomy over key decisions relating to school improvement and education quality, while most agreed that the authority supported them to lead effectively. Qualitative comments recognised the value of Quality Improvement Officer support, data clinics, mentoring, coaching, headteacher induction, collaborative networks and Peer School Review.

The Council recognises that experiences remain inconsistent in some areas. Only a majority of headteachers considered that they received constructive feedback on their improvement plan and Standards and Quality Report. Similarly, a majority agreed that they received constructive feedback on self-evaluation processes. Some respondents also highlighted the importance of continuity in link-officer relationships and of officers having sufficient opportunity to know the establishment and its context well.

These findings have directly informed the new quality improvement guidance. The new structured collaborative discussion, clearer visit model, agreed level of support, planned feedback and annual evaluation are intended to improve the consistency and visibility of professional challenge alongside a permanent QIO with oversight of the whole establishment. Future evaluation will test whether this is being experienced consistently across sectors and establishments.

**Leadership development**

South Lanarkshire recognises that sustained improvement depends on leadership capacity at all levels. The thematic review identified a clear strategy for building capacity and a broad professional learning offer. This has continued through headteacher induction and Headteacher Essentials, mentoring and coaching, senior and middle leadership development, sector networks, data clinics, improvement-planning support, inspection preparation and collaborative review.

The 2025/26 survey indicates broad reach. Almost all agreed that they participated in professional learning which developed their capacity to lead; almost all agreed that the rationale for headteacher professional learning was clear; and almost all agreed that the strategy drew on support from national organisations. Reported participation included conferences and seminars, information sessions, networks and communities of practice, observational visits, coaching and mentoring. The most frequently reported areas of authority-led learning were curriculum, attainment and performance measures, learning, teaching and assessment, data literacy and improvement planning.

The next stage is to develop a strategic overview of professional learning and a coherent leadership development strategy across all sectors. Further work is required to strengthen support for leaders in early years. The authority will continue to evaluate not only participation, but also the extent to which professional learning improves leadership practice, builds establishment capacity and contributes to better outcomes for learners. A new central evaluation process and a central platform for collating professional learning information have been established to support this work.

**Collaborative improvement and sharing effective practice**

Collaborative improvement is a key part of the authority's approach to increasing leadership capacity, improving the accuracy of self-evaluation and sharing effective practice. During 2025/26, 38 primary schools participated in the second year of Peer School Review, with learning, teaching and assessment as the central focus.  We are in the first year of peer review across our early years standalone establishments.

Guidance and support materials were updated in May 2026, and Quality Improvement Officers will prioritise review activity involving their link schools during 2026-2027, strengthening their direct knowledge of learning, teaching and assessment in those establishments.

Secondary Depute Headteacher networks have supported collaborative improvement across all secondary schools, with a whole school pilot collaborative improvement model planned for November 2026 in one secondary school.

A Quad development day for Quality Improvement Officers was held in June 2026, providing structured opportunities to share practice, strengthen professional dialogue and develop greater consistency in approaches to quality improvement across the participating authorities. A further Quad QIO day is planned for session 2026/27 to build on this work and support continued improvement. This was complemented by South Lanarkshire’s professional learning week for central Education Resources staff at the beginning of session 2026/27, which supports shared understanding, develops collective capacity and strengthens the quality and consistency of support provided to establishments.

Effective practice is shared through headteacher conferences and meetings, learning communities, sector and subject networks, professional learning programmes, digital resources and cross-sector thematic reviews. Beyond South Lanarkshire, the Council works with HMIE, Education Scotland, the West Partnership, ADES networks and other authorities. Local authority officers contribute to ADES networks, with several senior managers facilitating these groups and supporting national work through the Curriculum Improvement Cycle. These relationships support development work, professional learning and consideration of whether approaches can be adapted effectively to different contexts. Alongside this collaborative activity, HMI has provided online training for central officers on the use of self-evaluation materials and evaluative writing, supporting evidence-based evaluation and clearer judgements about impact.

Guidance on Quads for Round 3 in 2027 is encouraging robust professional challenge, informed by evidence and data. The revised How good is our education authority? (HGIOEA) provides us with a robust framework to identify strengths and areas of further development to ensure we are measuring impact.

The Council recognises that staff capacity, competing operational priorities and differences in

structure and context can limit cross-authority learning. Continued national facilitation of officer networks, peer review opportunities, shared improvement activity and access to consistent evidence and data sources would strengthen this work.

**Overall evaluation and next steps**

Overall, South Lanarkshire is well placed in relation to the thematic recommendations. HMIE identified a strong strategic foundation, effective use of data, supportive professional relationships, a culture of challenge and a clear commitment to leadership development. Since the review, the Council has strengthened improvement planning, extended collaborative review, increased strategic analysis of establishment evidence and introduced a coherent framework for universal, enhanced and tailored support. This has been reinforced through cross-authority collaboration, focused development and professional learning for central Education Resources staff, supporting greater consistency and collective capacity across the system.

The positive inspection profile and 2025/26 headteacher survey provide credible evidence that these arrangements are contributing to a strong and increasingly self-improving system, while also identifying priorities for the next phase. The Council will therefore embed the new guidance across primary, secondary and early learning and childcare establishments; evaluate the impact of each level of support; strengthen the consistency and visibility of feedback to establishments; ensure that Quality Improvement Officers know their establishments well; continue to develop leadership at all levels; and assess the impact of collaborative review and professional learning on the quality of education and outcomes for learners.

**2. Support for pupils experiencing persistent absence**

Over the past two years, South Lanarkshire Council has developed a comprehensive programme of attendance improvement activity aligned with the direction of the revised national guidance and Education Scotland's work on improving attendance.

The authority increasingly approaches attendance as an issue of equity, wellbeing and inclusion, rather than solely one of monitoring or compliance. This recognises the range of barriers which may affect attendance, including poverty, additional support needs, emotionally based school non-attendance and other vulnerabilities.

Education Scotland's national Evidence, Impact and Actions for Consideration 2024-26 report, published in May 2026, identifies six key actions for further improvement in attendance across Scotland. These provide a national reference point for South Lanarkshire's approach, connecting effective use of evidence with targeted, inclusive and person-centred support.

South Lanarkshire's attendance improvement activity aligns with these national actions as follows. The Attendance Data Tool, data clinics and work on SEEMiS coding and recording consistency support the national focus on strengthening data use, consistency and live monitoring by improving access to attendance information, analysis of patterns and early identification of need. The Primary Attendance Project, secondary attendance programme and BEAM reflect the action to target support and communication to learners and stages with greatest need, through targeted interventions and engagement with families. Leadership networks, professional learning and individual school support contribute to building sustainable capacity and strengthening professional learning, particularly in understanding barriers and developing appropriate responses.

The national action to deepen multi-agency collaboration for earlier, holistic support is reflected in Bespoke Attendance Support Plans and Joint Assessment Teams, alongside the developing family hubs and Connected Communities provision. Family engagement, nurture-informed practice and work to strengthen relationships and parental confidence align with the national emphasis on relational, non-judgemental engagement with families and communities. Transition-focused professional learning, learner voice and BEAM's motivational learning experiences contribute to the action to enhance curriculum relevance, flexibility and transitions to improve engagement.

Together, these approaches connect South Lanarkshire's local improvement programme with the national direction on attendance. Continuing evaluation will focus on consistency across schools, the effectiveness of support for identified learners and groups, and sustained improvements in attendance and engagement. Further detail is also added below.

**Strategic leadership and implementation**

Attendance has been embedded within Strategic Equity Fund planning and linked explicitly to equity and wellbeing. Attendance improvement is also reflected in school improvement planning and quality assurance activity, supported by regular engagement through headteacher conferences and leadership networks.

The authority has complemented this strategic focus with targeted work across the primary and secondary sectors, leadership development, strengthened attendance recording, and practical support to help schools use attendance data more effectively.

**Early identification and the use of data**

A key development has been the implementation of the South Lanarkshire Attendance Data Tool. This provides schools with accessible attendance information and supports analysis by learner group, cohort, school, day and session. It is intended to help schools identify pupils at risk of persistent absence earlier, recognise emerging patterns and monitor attendance gaps and targeted interventions.

The introduction of the tool has been supported through professional learning, data clinics, guidance and individual support. This has strengthened schools' capacity to interpret attendance information and to use it as the basis for earlier and more targeted action.

The authority has also focused on the consistency and reliability of the underlying data. Work has included:

- development of SEEMiS coding guidance;
- professional learning on attendance recording;
- monitoring of attendance code usage;
- review of attendance letters and procedures; and
- promotion of more consistent recording practice across schools.

Together, these measures are intended to ensure that schools can identify pupils requiring support, monitor attendance accurately and assess the effectiveness of their interventions.

**Primary and secondary improvement activity**

The Primary Attendance Project has involved more than 50 primary schools, with a particular focus on schools serving communities experiencing higher levels of deprivation. It has supported headteachers and senior leaders to use attendance data, develop targeted interventions and share practice with other schools.

Professional learning has covered attendance barriers, equity, early identification, emotionally based school non-attendance, transition, family engagement and targeted intervention. Participating schools have reported stronger tracking arrangements, clearer improvement aims and a better understanding of the interventions being used to support attendance and engagement.

A dedicated secondary attendance programme has also been established. This includes a Principal Teacher Pupil Support Attendance Network, professional learning, reviews with depute headteachers, school visits and support to strengthen monitoring and intervention systems.

The initial work identified variation in how secondary schools used attendance information, including differing awareness of attendance patterns and afternoon absence. The programme has therefore focused on strengthening leadership understanding, promoting earlier intervention and

improving the use of data to inform support for individual pupils.

**Understanding and responding to barriers**

The authority's professional learning and school support have focused on helping practitioners understand the factors contributing to persistent absence. Areas considered include poverty, additional support needs, emotionally based school non-attendance, trauma-informed practice, restorative approaches, family engagement, and learner engagement and motivation.

This supports a move beyond identifying that a pupil is absent towards understanding the particular barriers affecting that child or young person. The response can then be tailored to the pupil's circumstances and developed with the pupil, their family and relevant services.

**Targeted support for pupils and families**

The Building Engagement, Attendance and Motivation programme, known as BEAM, was developed as a targeted equity intervention for vulnerable learners and families. Its focus includes learners affected by poverty, pupils living in SIMD 1 and SIMD 2 communities, pupils eligible for free school meals and those requiring additional engagement support.

BEAM brings together attendance analysis, family engagement, nurture-informed practice, learner voice, motivational learning experiences and school-specific intervention planning. Evidence reported by participating schools includes improved attendance for targeted groups, increased engagement, stronger relationships with families and increased parental confidence.

More broadly, individual responses to persistent absence may involve coordinated work between schools, families and relevant partner services.

**Multi-agency support for pupils and families**

Multi-agency working is an important part of South Lanarkshire's approach to supporting children and young people experiencing persistent absence, particularly where the underlying barriers are complex or extend beyond the school. Bespoke Attendance Support Plans provide a framework for identifying individual barriers to attendance and agreeing appropriate actions with the child or young person, their family and relevant services. Where wider support is required, Joint Assessment Teams (JATs) provide an established pathway for schools and families to access and coordinate multi-agency support around the needs of the individual child.

This approach is being strengthened through the Council's developing model of locality-based family hubs and Connected Communities provision, linked to the wider Marmot approach. Together, these developments are intended to provide families with more accessible, joined-up support within their communities and to strengthen coordination between education and partner services. The Council sees this increasingly integrated, locality-based approach as an important part of addressing the wider social, family and wellbeing factors that can contribute to persistent absence.

**Sharing effective practice**

Practice is shared locally through the primary and secondary attendance projects, leadership networks and professional learning. Schools are supported to learn from one another and to consider how effective approaches may be adapted to their own contexts.

South Lanarkshire has also participated in attendance-focused ADES Quad activity. This has included collaborative action planning, quality assurance, comparison of approaches, sharing practice and consideration of common challenges and emerging solutions.

The Attendance Data Tool and related practice have also been shared through Education Scotland forums. These local, regional and national connections help the authority remain informed by

developing evidence and the experience of other councils.

**Evaluation and next steps**

The programme has strengthened the authority's focus on early identification, effective use of data, leadership development, targeted intervention and the removal of barriers to attendance.

The Council will continue to evaluate this work, including the consistency of implementation across schools and the effect of targeted approaches on identified pupils and groups. Further development will focus on:

- maintaining consistent and accurate attendance recording;
- strengthening evaluation of the impact of interventions;
- embedding effective approaches across all schools;
- continuing to build leadership and practitioner capacity;
- supporting coordinated work with families and partner services; and
- reducing variation in the use of attendance information and the support available to pupils.

The National Attendance Network provides a further forum for sharing practice and supporting work on data use, professional learning and evaluation.

The Council welcomes the revised national guidance and the continued focus on supportive, person-centred and evidence-informed approaches to improving attendance.

I hope this information is helpful to the Committee.

Yours sincerely



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