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

by email to:
educationandgaelic.committee@parliament.scot

Dear Dr Johnston

Further to your email and letter dated 7 October, please find our response below:

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.

The findings from the Thematic Inspection align closely with areas already identified through Stirling Council's own self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. As a result, our approach to school improvement continues to evolve to ensure that all children and young people experience high-quality learning, teaching and support, regardless of the school they attend.

Stirling Council recognises that variation can arise from differing local contexts and school improvement needs. As a local authority serving both urban and rural communities, flexibility is required in the way support is delivered to schools. However, we are clear that local circumstances should not result in inequitable experiences or outcomes for learners.

To strengthen consistency across the authority, Stirling Council has established a clear school improvement framework with shared expectations for self-evaluation, improvement planning, and standards and quality reporting. Annual Attainment Reviews involving Headteachers and Collaborative Improvement Officers provide a structured approach to analysing attainment, wellbeing, attendance and destination data, evaluating the impact of improvement activity and agreeing next steps.

The revised *How Good Is Our Education Authority?* (HGIOEA) framework provides a robust and consistent national framework through which local authorities can identify strengths, evaluate areas for development and determine appropriate support and intervention. Looking ahead, the introduction of the collaborative Phase 3 model in 2027 will provide an enhanced opportunity for Stirling Council to work directly together on identified improvement priorities, further strengthening sector-led improvement and shared learning.

Quality assurance arrangements have been strengthened through regular professional dialogue, termly school visits and ongoing engagement with schools. A differentiated model of support ensures that challenge and intervention are proportionate to need and informed by performance data, self-evaluation evidence and professional judgement. As a result, schools benefit from greater consistency in improvement approaches, stronger self-evaluation practices and more effective targeting of support to improve outcomes for children and young people.

Stirling Council has also strengthened its use of data and evidence to inform decision-making and improvement activity. This includes the systematic analysis of attainment, attendance, exclusion, wellbeing and post-school destination data to identify trends, inform planning, evaluate impact and support early intervention. Schools are increasingly using data to identify gaps in outcomes, target support more effectively and measure the impact of interventions. This has contributed to more focused improvement planning, enhanced professional dialogue and greater accountability for demonstrating improved outcomes for learners.

Stirling Council recognises the central role of leadership in driving continuous improvement and improving outcomes for children and young people. In response to HMIE's recommendations, the Council has continued to strengthen leadership development across all levels of the education system through a strategic and coherent approach to professional learning.

All Headteachers have engaged in Education Scotland's Curriculum Improvement Cycle professional learning, supporting leadership of curriculum review and reform within schools. Professional learning opportunities have also been enhanced to strengthen leadership of learning, teaching, curriculum development and school improvement. Collaborative leadership is promoted through Headteacher and Depute Headteacher networks, providing opportunities for professional dialogue, professional enquiry and the sharing of effective practice. Practitioners are encouraged to undertake leadership roles through participation in authority-wide working groups, curriculum development activity and improvement projects. Targeted support for middle leaders, including professional learning and coaching, has further strengthened leadership capacity within schools.

Through these developments, Stirling Council is building sustainable leadership capacity across the education system, reducing reliance on individual leaders and ensuring that improvement activity is collaborative, embedded and capable of being sustained over time. This supports the development of a strong pipeline of educational leaders and promotes collective responsibility for improvement across all establishments.

Collaboration is a key element of Stirling Council's approach to reducing variability and strengthening improvement across the system. The Council actively engages in national and regional networks, including ADES, Education Scotland programmes, curriculum reform activity and networks focused on attainment, inclusion, wellbeing and learner pathways. Stirling also works closely with Scottish Borders, Highland and Midlothian Councils through the Quality Improvement Quad, as well as with partners across Forth Valley.

Within Stirling, effective practice is shared through Headteacher networks, learning communities, curriculum leadership groups, professional learning communities, Working Together meetings and annual Attainment Reviews. These structures enable schools to learn from one another, disseminate successful approaches and build collective capacity for continuous improvement. This has supported increased collaboration across schools and the wider adoption of effective practice in areas such as literacy, numeracy, play pedagogy, curriculum development and approaches to raising attainment.

In response to the HMIE finding regarding variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, Stirling has strengthened its quality improvement approach through annual Attainment Reviews, regular Collaborative Improvement Officer engagement and a clear framework of support and challenge. Schools now make more consistent use of attainment, achievement, attendance, exclusion and wellbeing data to identify priorities and evaluate progress. As a result, there is greater consistency in how schools analyse performance, identify areas for improvement and evidence the impact of interventions through improvement planning and standards and quality reporting.

To address HMIE's recommendation regarding self-evaluation, Stirling has embedded a stronger focus on evidence-informed decision-making and continuous improvement. The increased use of attainment, equity and follow-up leaver destination data is enabling schools to identify trends earlier, target interventions more effectively and evaluate their impact more rigorously. This has resulted in more robust self-evaluation processes, more focused improvement priorities and greater confidence in demonstrating the difference that interventions are making for learners.

In addition, partnership working through the Quality Improvement Quad has supported the development of evaluative practice across participating authorities. Joint professional learning opportunities involving central officers and school leaders, including HM Inspector-led sessions on self-evaluation methodologies and evaluative writing, have strengthened confidence and consistency in applying national self-evaluation frameworks and evidencing impact.

Overall, Stirling Council considers the HMIE thematic findings to be closely aligned with its own improvement priorities. In response, the authority has strengthened the consistency of support provided to schools through a clear improvement framework, enhanced quality assurance arrangements, more robust self-evaluation processes and a strategic approach to leadership development. Collaboration within Stirling and across local authority partnerships continues to support the sharing of effective practice, professional challenge and collective capacity building. While workforce capacity, workload pressures and financial constraints remain ongoing challenges, Stirling Council remains committed to reducing unnecessary variability, strengthening system-wide improvement and ensuring equitable, high-quality experiences and outcomes for all children and young people.

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. How the guidance is being implemented in practice and whether it is leading to improvements in local approaches.

Stirling Council has embedded the principles of *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1 (IEI1)* and Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) within its strategic approach to attendance, inclusion and learner engagement. This has supported the development of a consistent, evidence-informed framework across all schools, ensuring attendance is understood as both an educational and wellbeing issue requiring early intervention and partnership working.

This approach is contributing to strong outcomes for children and young people. Attendance rates in Stirling remain consistently above national averages, with the authority ranked joint third in Scotland for primary attendance (94.3%) and fourth for secondary attendance (90.4%).

Attendance practice across all establishments is underpinned by Stirling's Attendance Guidance (2023), which is informed by the three-tiered *Response to Intervention* model developed by Kearney and Graczyk (2014). This framework provides a graduated approach that enables schools to respond proportionately to attendance concerns through prevention, early intervention and targeted support.

- Tier 1 (Universal - 85%+ attendance): Promoting positive relationships, inclusive learning environments and a culture where attendance and engagement are everyone's responsibility.
- Tier 2 (Targeted - 50-85% attendance): Early identification of emerging concerns through robust tracking, alongside targeted interventions to prevent further disengagement.
- Tier 3 (Intensive - Below 50% attendance): Individualised assessment, planning and intervention through multi-agency support and specialist outreach delivered by the Engaging Learners Service (ELS).

The impact of this approach is evidenced through improved outcomes for young people. By June 2026, the Engaging Learners Service had supported 137 children and young people across all seven secondary schools and 15 primary schools, achieving an average attendance improvement of 18.1%.

A key aspect of implementation has been investment in professional learning. The Educational Psychology Service and Engaging Learners Service have jointly developed and delivered specialist Continuing Professional Learning (CLPL) focused on assessment and intervention for attendance concerns.

Pilot programmes were delivered during session 2025/2026 for both primary and secondary practitioners, combining research-informed approaches with practical application. Participants were supported to undertake assessments with individual learners, reflect on findings and implement evidence-based interventions within their own settings.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates a significant increase in practitioner knowledge, confidence and capability. Participants reported high levels of satisfaction, strongly agreeing that the training was relevant, well delivered and immediately applicable to practice. Schools also reported positive outcomes for individual learners, including improved attendance and engagement.

In partnership with the Education Scotland Attainment Advisor, the Engaging Learners Service has supported four learning communities to undertake self-evaluation focused on attendance and inclusion. Through the use of self-evaluation toolkits, schools have strengthened both universal and targeted approaches, enabling more effective identification of barriers to attendance and supporting continuous improvement across establishments.

A significant development has been the introduction of bespoke attendance dashboards for all 47 Stirling schools, including primary, secondary and specialist settings. These tools enable senior leaders to analyse attendance trends across key equity measures, including Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) quintiles, Free Meal Entitlement, Additional Support Needs, gender and care experience.

This enhanced access to data has strengthened schools' ability to identify emerging attendance concerns, evaluate interventions and target resources where they are most needed.

A particular focus has been placed on improving attendance coding accuracy. Analysis identified inconsistencies in recording practices across settings, leading to targeted training and support. As a result, the quality and reliability of attendance data have improved, providing a stronger evidence base for decision-making and intervention planning.

In line with the expectations set out in Appendix 4 of IEI1, Stirling Council has introduced revised guidance and a dedicated monitoring framework for children and young people accessing reduced learning hours.

This has established a more consistent and robust approach across schools, improving data quality, strengthening strategic oversight and ensuring that decisions are underpinned by the principles of inclusion, safeguarding and children's rights. A clear focus is maintained on supporting learners to return to full-time education at the earliest appropriate opportunity.

Targeted funding streams, including the Strategic Equity Fund, Care Experienced Children and Young People funding, Community Mental Health Funding and the Child Poverty Action Fund (CPAF), have been aligned to support attendance, engagement and inclusion priorities.

Through CPAF investment, a dedicated Family Engagement Worker was appointed to extend intensive attendance support to younger learners. Attendance data identified 424 children and young people from P1 to S3 with attendance below 80%, enabling resources to be directed towards those most at risk of disengagement.

Alongside direct family support, schools have been supported to strengthen their own capacity and confidence in responding to attendance concerns. CPAF-funded interventions have worked with 15 families through over 100 engagement sessions, achieving an average attendance increase of 20.1% for participating learners while also supporting wider family wellbeing and income maximisation.

Overall, the implementation of national attendance guidance has resulted in a more coherent, preventative and evidence-informed approach across Stirling. Improved attendance outcomes strengthened professional capacity, enhanced use of data and effective multi-agency collaboration demonstrate the positive impact of the guidance on local practice and on the experiences of children, young people and their families.

Stirling Council employs a robust, data-informed and graduated approach to identifying and responding to persistent absence. This approach combines real-time monitoring, targeted intervention and multi-agency collaboration to ensure that children and young people receive the right support at the earliest possible stage.

Attendance dashboards are provided to Headteachers, Depute Headteachers and Support Coordinators, enabling schools to monitor attendance patterns in real time and identify emerging concerns quickly. Dedicated dashboards have also been developed for ASN specialist provisions, allowing Principal Teachers and Headteachers to track trends, analyse patterns and implement timely interventions within specialist settings.

Attendance data is collated and analysed monthly at authority level, with findings reported to the Schools, Learning and Education Senior Leadership Team. This enables the identification of authority-wide trends, supports the targeting of resources, and ensures that attendance remains a key strategic priority. Regular analysis also allows the impact of interventions to be monitored and evaluated over time.

Where data identifies schools, cohorts or groups of learners experiencing higher levels of persistent absence, bespoke support is provided. This includes attendance-focused discussions, analysis of local trends, planning support and access to specialist services. This targeted approach ensures that resources are directed where they can have the greatest impact.

The Engaging Learners Service operates as a key component of Stirling's tiered attendance framework. Using attendance and wellbeing data to inform intervention, the service provides intensive support for children and young people at greatest risk of disengagement from education. Through personalised planning, outreach provision and multi-agency collaboration, the service works to remove barriers to attendance and support successful re-engagement with learning.

Multi-agency collaboration is central to Stirling's approach to improving attendance and addressing the complex factors that can contribute to disengagement from education. By bringing together professional expertise from across services, children, young people and families receive coordinated, holistic and strengths-based support.

Children and young people whose attendance falls below 50% over a sustained period are referred to the monthly Engaging Learners Service Multi-Agency Screening Group. Chaired by the Lead Officer, the group brings together colleagues from Educational Psychology, Social Work, the Virtual Head Team, ASL Inclusion, Family Wellbeing, Youth Participation, the Inclusion Support Service, and Learning and Employability.

Since its establishment in October 2024, the group has coordinated support for 277 children and young people across all seven secondary schools and 15 primary schools, ensuring a timely and joined-up response for those with the most significant attendance concerns.

Multi-agency approaches support a deeper understanding of the underlying factors contributing to persistent absence. Analysis of referrals has shown that approximately 80% of attendance challenges are linked to four key themes: family circumstances, additional support needs, anxiety and mental health concerns.

Through collaborative assessment and planning, support is tailored to address the root causes of absence rather than attendance alone. This ensures that interventions are meaningful, sustainable and focused on improving both wellbeing and educational engagement.

The impact of this integrated approach is demonstrated through positive outcomes for learners and families:

- Attendance Improvement: Young people supported through the Engaging Learners Service achieved an average attendance increase of 18.1%.
- Attainment and Achievement: Senior Phase learners supported through outreach provision achieved 128 SQA Unit Awards across 2024/2025 and 2025/2026, equivalent to approximately 60 full SQA course awards.
- Positive Destinations: 100% of school leavers supported by the service moved on to a positive destination, including further education, employment or training.
- Stakeholder Confidence: 92% of referring staff reported that support had a positive impact on the young person referred, while 100% of surveyed children, young people and parents/carers agreed that the service had supported both wellbeing and re-engagement with learning.

Recognising the important role families play in supporting attendance, staff from Educational Psychology and the Parent and Family Support Team have been trained to deliver the *Fear-Less Triple P* programme. This evidence-based intervention supports parents and carers of children aged 6-14 who are experiencing moderate to severe anxiety, including anxiety associated with school attendance.

The programme helps parents and carers to better understand anxious behaviours and develop effective strategies to support their child. During session 2025/2026, four programmes were delivered involving 31 parents and carers. Evaluation findings demonstrated increased parental confidence in supporting their child's emotional wellbeing and managing anxiety-related behaviours. Capacity to deliver the programme is continuing to expand to meet increasing demand.

To further strengthen support for families, the Educational Psychology Service is currently leading a research project exploring the experiences of parents and carers whose children have experienced attendance difficulties. Through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the project will gather valuable insights into the barriers families face and the support they find most effective. The findings will inform future service planning, policy development and the design of targeted interventions to improve attendance and engagement outcomes across Stirling.

Stirling Council recognises that sustainable improvement in attendance requires the systematic sharing of effective practice, learning and evidence across schools and partner agencies. A structured approach has been developed to build professional capacity, promote consistency of practice and support continuous improvement at local, regional and national levels.

Effective attendance strategies, emerging practice and evidence-based interventions are regularly shared through Headteacher meetings, Safeguarding Networks and wider education leadership forums. These opportunities enable school leaders to learn from one another, reflect on successful approaches and adapt proven interventions within their own settings.

Professional learning programmes delivered by the Educational Psychology Service and Engaging Learners Service have also created opportunities for collaborative learning. Participants are encouraged to share case studies, intervention approaches and implementation experiences, strengthening professional networks and supporting the spread of effective practice across establishments. To further enhance accessibility and sustainability, examples of effective practice are currently being captured and incorporated into online learning resources that will be available to staff across the authority.

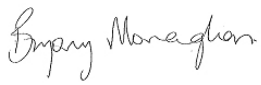
Stirling has placed significant emphasis on joint learning across services. Initiatives such as *Working Better Together*, a multi-agency audit and improvement programme undertaken during 2024/2025, have brought together colleagues from education, health, social work and community services to examine attendance challenges collectively. This collaborative approach has supported shared problem-solving, strengthened professional understanding of attendance barriers and promoted greater consistency in how services respond to vulnerable children and young people.

Stirling actively contributes to regional and national networks to both learn from and share effective practice. Engagement with these partnerships ensures local approaches remain aligned with national policy developments while enabling innovative practice from Stirling to influence wider system improvement.

Examples of this include presentations and contributions to the Forth Valley Child Poverty Action Group, Scottish Government Child Poverty Accelerator Learning Events and Education Scotland's National Attendance Network. Staff from Schools, Learning and Education also participate in a range of local, regional and national working groups focused on attendance, inclusion, child poverty and family support.

This commitment to knowledge exchange has strengthened practitioner confidence, promoted greater consistency in attendance practice across schools and ensured that emerging evidence and national learning can be translated quickly into local practice. By fostering a culture of collaboration, reflection and continuous improvement, Stirling is supporting a more coherent and effective system-wide response to improving attendance, engagement and inclusion for all children and young people.

Yours sincerely



Bryony Monaghan
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