Our Ref: GH
Date: 4 November 2026

West Dunbartonshire COUNCIL

Dear Dr Johnston

I am writing to provide the requested information from West Dunbartonshire Council in response to your letter of 7 October 2026, asking for an update on:

How our Local Authority has responded to the recommendations of the HMIE thematic report on inspection of local authority approaches to supporting school improvement, including how our Local Authority views the "notable variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities."

and

How the Scottish Government and Education Scotland guidance is being implemented in practice and whether it is leading to improvements in local approaches, and how schools within our Local Authority identify and respond to persistent absence, how effective multi-agency working is supporting individual pupils and their families, and how knowledge of effective practice is shared across the education system.

Question 1

West Dunbartonshire was identified within the HMIE thematic report as an example of strong practice in supporting school improvement. We welcomed this recognition, which reflected the strength of our collaborative approach, quality assurance processes and targeted support for schools.

We continue to strengthen our focus on quality, aspiring to our vision of 'Excellent Learning, Every Day in Every Classroom'. This is supported by a streamlined set of service priorities: Deliver Excellence, Grow Capacity, Shape the Future, and Strengthen Collaboration.

To translate this vision into measurable improvements in practice, we are currently reviewing our Improvement Framework to evaluate which approaches are having the greatest impact on the quality of leadership, learning, teaching and assessment, and to identify where further refinement is required. Consultation and engagement with head teachers have been central to this approach.

A key feature of our approach is a strong programme of collaborative quality improvement. Head teachers play an active role in evaluating and sharing standards and quality within their own schools, across local learning communities, and more

widely through improvement partnerships. This enables effective practice to be identified, shared and adopted across schools, whilst building leadership capacity and strengthening collective responsibility for improvement.

We are working collaboratively with other local authorities through the West Partnership and the ADES Collaborative Improvement Quads, providing valuable opportunities to share expertise, learning and effective practice, with a clear focus on improving the quality of education and outcomes for children and young people.

Through these partnerships, we contribute to and benefit from a range of collaborative improvement activities. For example, central officers participate in shared professional learning programmes, enabling the exchange of knowledge, research and innovative practice across authorities. In addition, our schools are actively involved in West Partnership programmes such as Improving Our Schools and Improving Our Classrooms, which support self-evaluation, strengthens leadership at all levels and promotes continuous improvement in learning, teaching and assessment.

These collaborative approaches help build capacity across the system, reduce variability in practice and support the sharing and adoption of effective approaches within and across local authorities.

It is important to also highlight current barriers and challenges to collaborative improvement across the system:

Firstly, the scale of national Education Reform, combined with ongoing financial uncertainty, presents significant challenges. Reduced resources impact both short- and long-term planning and constrain service ability to prepare effectively for forthcoming changes in curriculum, assessment and qualifications. This is leading to increased expectations from our workforce to streamline priorities and reduce the number of concurrent workstreams. Accommodating this is complex, given the breadth of national policy directives, external inspection requirements and the diverse needs of individual schools and ELC settings.

Secondly, responding to increase in Additional Support Needs (ASN). The educational context in Scotland is continually evolving, however, at the heart of this change remains the central importance of the relationship between teachers, the wider education workforce and the children and young people they support. Education services are facing increasing challenges, including a significant rise in the number of children with additional support needs (ASN). While investment in expanding the ASN estate has provided essential additional capacity, demand continues to rise. New national policy directives will require a review of current policy and practice, further increasing the scale of change initiatives and stakeholder expectations.

And thirdly, there is increasing demand on local authorities and education services to respond rapidly to service-user expectations and concerns, provide clear and effective communication, and deliver bespoke, individualised provision within short timescales. This is placing additional pressure on services to meet rising parental expectations, heightened communication needs and frequent requests for support, with a growing proportion of resources diverted towards reactive activity. This reactive workload is stretching the capacity of the service while it continues to

maintain its commitment to delivering high-quality outcomes monitored and reported through national agencies and benchmarked national frameworks.

Question 2

West Dunbartonshire Council recognises that school attendance levels have not yet fully returned to pre-pandemic levels and has prioritised improving attendance through a strategic, evidence-informed and collaborative approach. Our work is aligned with Scottish Government and Education Scotland guidance and is focused on ensuring consistency of practice, early intervention, robust monitoring, and effective multi-agency support for children, young people and their families.

To support implementation, the Council has established a strategic attendance action plan which reflects national guidance and places a strong emphasis on improving the quality, consistency and reliability of attendance recording and reporting across all schools. This has included developing shared expectations and approaches to attendance monitoring, intervention and escalation processes, ensuring that attendance data can be used effectively to identify trends, target support and evaluate impact.

A key feature of our approach is the establishment of a regular cycle of monitoring and analysis at both authority and school level. Attendance data is reviewed routinely across the whole authority and for specific cohorts of children and young people, including those with additional support needs, those affected by socio-economic disadvantages, care experienced children and young people, and groups identified through gender and stage analysis. This enables schools and services to identify emerging concerns at an early stage, understand patterns of absence, and implement targeted interventions where required.

The Council has also established regular attendance forums involving school leaders with responsibility for attendance monitoring. These forums provide opportunities to moderate practice, share effective approaches, discuss emerging challenges and ensure greater consistency in the application of attendance coding and recording procedures. The forums have strengthened professional dialogue and supported a more consistent authority-wide approach to attendance management.

Schools identify persistent absence through regular attendance tracking and data analysis processes. Where concerns are identified, interventions are proportionate and staged, with a clear focus on understanding the reasons behind non-attendance and addressing barriers to engagement. Schools recognise that attendance concerns are often complex and require personalised support rather than solely procedural responses.

Multi-agency working is a significant strength within West Dunbartonshire's approach. Schools work closely with a range of partners, including Educational Psychology, health services, social work, third sector organisations and community partners, to provide coordinated support for children, young people and families. Our approach is underpinned by a "Team Around the Family" model, ensuring that support plans are developed collaboratively and focus on improving engagement, reducing barriers and supporting positive attendance outcomes. Families are viewed as key partners in this work, and efforts are made to build trusting relationships that support sustainable re-engagement with education.

In response to cohorts identified as being harder to reach or experiencing more significant attendance challenges, schools and services have worked with partners, including Education Scotland and Educational Psychologists, to develop research-based approaches to professional learning. This has included strengthening nurturing approaches, trauma-informed practice and strategies that support belonging, engagement and successful return to school. Professional learning opportunities support staff to better understand and respond to the underlying factors affecting attendance and engagement.

Knowledge sharing is embedded across the authority through attendance forums, professional networks, quality improvement activities and collaborative engagement with national partners. Schools routinely share effective practice, learning from attendance interventions and successful approaches to re-engagement. This systematic sharing of practice supports continuous improvement and helps ensure that effective approaches are adopted more consistently across schools.

While attendance remains a key area of focus, West Dunbartonshire Council is seeing positive impacts from these approaches, including improved attendance, consistency in reporting and recording processes, stronger partnership working, enhanced use of attendance data to inform interventions, and increased capacity within schools to respond effectively to attendance concerns. The Council remains committed to continuous improvement and will continue to work alongside schools, families and partners to improve attendance outcomes for all children and young people.

Yours sincerely



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