Greg Welsh
Interim Depute Chief Executive (Education, Planning, Economic Development and Regeneration)
West Lothian Civic Centre
Howden South Road
LIVINGSTON
West Lothian
EH54 6FF

Sent by email - EducationAndGaelic.committee@parliament.scot

Dr James Johnston
Clerk to the Committee

2 November 2026

Dear Dr Johnston

Local Authority Approaches to School Education

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the Education and Gaelic Committee.

I have outlined below West Lothian Council's response to the committee on the matters requested:

Progress in West Lothian Council following HMIe thematic report:
Following the recommendations from the HMIe Thematic Report on West Lothian's approaches to supporting school improvement, I am pleased to outline the following information for the committee's attention.

The following key strengths were identified in the initial report, outlining the highly effective practice and performance by central teams and schools:

- West Lothian education service has effective arrangements to support schools with self-evaluation, improvement planning and standards and quality (S&Q) reporting.
- The central team provides primary and secondary school staff with a wealth of robust quantitative and qualitative performance data for school improvement.
- Senior leaders' clear strategic vision for school improvement is embedded within schools' S&Q reporting.
- Well-defined governance arrangements and the central team support, challenge and validate individual establishment's school improvement plans (SIPs) and S&Q.
- The three yearly formalised validated self-evaluation (VSE) approach to support school improvement. Validated self-evaluation is a collaborative evaluative process led by central team officers, practising headteachers and senior leaders.
- Senior leaders oversee and implement a continuous cycle of improvement approach very well. The systematic processes and outcomes are continuously refined and improved with a focus on outcomes for young people.
- Senior leaders are confident that their moderation processes are effective and secure improvements. The recently introduced online form completed by each of the central team during school visits records and organises information in a helpful overview about each visit for analysis. The analysis identifies patterns, themes, strengths and areas for improvement across all the schools.

- Education Service senior leaders compare their progress with school performance using national measures such as HM inspection reports across Scotland. This wealth of data ensures that reporting mechanisms are accurately informed. There is clear evidence from primary inspections of schools now graded as 'good' or above. There is also increased concordance between the education service VSE approaches and external HM Inspector findings.
- The central team provides high quality professional learning sessions for school staff to become more confident in interpreting and using their data.
- Data availability is a strength of the work of the education service. Local authority officers work collaboratively with schools to identify and provide worthwhile professional learning opportunities that help to improve outcomes for children and young people.
- The Education Service offers well-designed, collaborative packages of support to all schools to support improvement. The central team's strategy for universal support ensures that school and local authority improvement targets are embedded within SIPs.
- Schools who are soon to have a national HMI inspection also receive bespoke, intensive support specific to this form of external scrutiny.
- The central team offers a wide range of targeted supports for specific schools. Areas for targeted support to schools are often the result of robust, well-recorded quality improvement dialogue between central officers and school teams, who welcome this approach.
- Central Officers also work in collaboration with schools through inclusion support plans by taking a system's change approach to improving Inclusion outcomes. This input enables school staff to improve the quality and monitoring of children and young people with additional support needs.

Progress in the 3 areas agreed is as follows:

1. *There is a need, as planned, to continue to improve the consistency of gathering and embedding stakeholder views meaningfully within school improvement approaches*

Refined school improvement planning guidance places stakeholder engagement at the heart of the improvement cycle. It requires schools to engage meaningfully with children and young people, parents and carers, staff, partners and the wider community throughout self-evaluation, planning and reporting processes. Stakeholder views are used to inform priorities, evaluate progress and measure impact, ensuring improvement planning reflects local needs and promotes shared ownership of school improvement.

Through the Young Leaders of Learning Programme, children and young people report increased confidence and a better understanding of how to improve their learning. They work more confidently and collaboratively with others and make effective contributions to school improvement. The further development and piloting of the Lundy Model/Youth Voice Charter and Toolkit supports a more consistent and authentic approach to pupil voice and participation across educational settings and strategic groups, helping to strengthen consultation and engagement with children and young people.

2. *There is a need, as planned, for the Education Service to evaluate the use of data to improve further:*

(i) Attendance:

Attendance Progress to Date – including persistent absence:

Use of Data to Improve Attendance

West Lothian Education Services has successfully developed and implemented Power BI dashboards enabling local authority officers, school leaders and designated staff to access and analyse attendance data more effectively. The platform provides a clear overview of attendance trends while allowing users to examine data through a range of lenses, including Free School Meal

entitlement, gender, Additional Support Needs (ASN), stage and day of the week.

Impact

- Increased confidence among senior leaders in the use of data to inform attendance improvement activity.
- Improved identification of priority groups and emerging trends through real-time data analysis.
- Enhanced ability to target interventions and monitor progress at both school and authority level.

Challenges and Next Steps

The next phase of development will focus on embedding consistent use of Power BI across all schools and ensuring new users receive appropriate training.
For targeted group improvement, there needs to be a level of monitoring that sits alongside Power BI. Schools still need to support ensuring accurate monitoring and impact of interventions.

QUAD Attendance Improvement Activity

West Lothian has worked collaboratively with QUAD partners over the past year to improve consistency in attendance systems, data analysis and practice. Initial collaborative activity focused on strengthening the use of attendance data to support improvement planning. This has led to a more robust and consistent approach to data analysis across partner authorities.
In addition, school staff and local authority leads have benefited from participation in the Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) network, which provided opportunities to share practice, discuss common challenges and develop solution-focused approaches to supporting children and young people.

Impact

- Improved consistency in attendance recording and monitoring practices.
- Further development of data analysis systems to improve attendance.
- Enhanced staff understanding of the barriers and strategies associated with attendance difficulties, particularly EBSNA.

Challenges and Next Steps

Despite progress, attendance-related barriers remain complex and require continued multi-agency responses. During the coming year, QUAD partners will focus on the implementation of *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Promoting and Understanding Attendance*, with a particular emphasis on the use of adapted and reduced timetables to support inclusion and improve engagement.

West Lothian also has a lead officer who attends all National Attendance Networks and works collaboratively with authorities across Scotland to work through challenges, share effective practice and improve attendance.

Attendance Policy and Guidance

The West Lothian revised Attendance and Engagement in Schools Policy and Operational Guidance was launched in October 2025. The implementation of the policy has supported a significant shift in practice, moving away from approaches primarily focused on compliance, systems and enforcement towards a relational, child-centred approach that places the needs of children, young people and families at the heart of decision-making.

This development aligned closely with the relaunch of the Positive Relationships Policy and was supported by a refresh of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) assessment and planning processes. These developments have promoted a greater focus on identifying barriers to attendance and ensuring support plans are responsive to individual needs.

Impact

- Greater consistency in the application of relational and strengths-based practice across schools.
- Increased focus on understanding and addressing the underlying causes of attendance difficulties.
- Improved partnership working with children, young people and families.
- More inclusive and equitable approaches to supporting attendance and engagement.

Challenges (early Intervention)

Persistent absence continues to present a significant challenge. While the policy clarifies expectations for staged intervention and support, many schools report difficulties in responding to the high number of children and young people whose attendance falls below 90%. Schools have identified capacity constraints as a barrier to implementing early intervention at scale, particularly where attendance concerns are widespread.

Response and Next Steps

To address this challenge, schools are being supported to strengthen universal approaches to attendance improvement and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of frontline staff in promoting attendance. This includes developing confidence among a wider range of staff to engage in supportive conversations with children and families at an earlier stage, reducing reliance on specialist interventions and promoting timely support.

Multi-Agency and Partnership Support

West Lothian has strengthened its staged intervention framework for supporting children and young people experiencing attendance difficulties, aligning provision more closely with the principles of GIRFEC and a preventative, needs-led approach.

As part of this framework, West Lothian continues to provide an early intervention Social Policy service for children and families where attendance is typically between 50% and 70%. This support is available across all schools; however, evidence indicates that the impact on attendance and engagement outcomes has been variable. Social Policy are currently reviewing this approach.

At Stage 2 of the Continuum of Support (CoS), schools can currently access a range of targeted services, including mental health and wellbeing supports, parental support services and early years interventions all led by Social Policy. This has strengthened the ability of schools to respond to emerging attendance concerns through a more coordinated approach at an earlier stage.

A significant development within the revised attendance framework has been the replacement of the traditional Area Attendance Committee with the Inclusion, Support and Review Group (ISRG) at Level 3 of the Continuum of Support. This change represents a shift from a monitoring function towards a more solution-focused and multi-agency model. The inclusion of Social Policy and other key partners within the ISRG has improved oversight of complex cases and strengthened consideration of a wider range of interventions. Early evidence indicates that this approach supports the strategic coordination and accountability for children and young people experiencing the most significant barriers to engagement and attendance.

The Inspire programme forms a key element of this revised multiagency pathway and sits within the remit of the ISRG. As part of West Lothian's wider multi-agency approach to inclusion, Inspire provides highly tailored and individualised support for young people whose needs cannot be effectively met through universal or targeted interventions alone. The programme's therapeutic and relationship-based approach has shown promise in re-engaging some of the most vulnerable learners, particularly those experiencing complex emotional, wellbeing or attendance-related challenges. However, as provision continues to develop, further evaluation will be required to fully assess its impact on sustained attendance, engagement, and attainment outcomes. The Inspire programme is supported by the Whole Family Well Being fund and SAC programme.

Overall, West Lothian has established a more integrated and graduated model of support for attendance. While these developments represent positive progress towards a more inclusive and responsive system, they remain at an early stage of implementation. Ongoing monitoring, quality assurance and analysis of impact data will be essential to determine the effectiveness of individual interventions and their contribution to improving attendance and wellbeing outcomes across the authority.

(ii) Senior Phase:

Since the inspection, Senior Phase attainment has continued to improve across West Lothian. In session 2025/26, all secondary schools were set attainment targets for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications. While the authority achieved its National 5 target, attainment at both Higher and Advanced Higher also improved, reflecting continued positive progress.

The use of data to drive improvement has strengthened significantly. Power BI is now widely used across schools and the central team, providing detailed attainment analysis down to component and question level. This has enabled schools and departments to identify specific strengths and areas for improvement, leading to increasingly targeted interventions and data-informed faculty action plans. Professional dialogue around data is now more embedded, supporting teacher self-evaluation, improvement planning and enhanced learning and teaching.

Following a Freedom of Information request to Qualifications Scotland for targeted subject data, officers worked directly with selected schools to support detailed analysis of question-level performance. This helped schools identify immediate improvement opportunities while also informing longer-term developments in pedagogy, learning and teaching, and curriculum resources. The data was also used to identify and connect with schools demonstrating particularly strong performance. The authority welcome the inclusion of this data within the new Qualifications Scotland application and are preparing professional learning sessions to support staff in using these tools to develop data-informed action plans for the coming session.

The Senior Phase offer has also expanded since the inspection, with a greater range of Skills for Work courses now available across schools. These pathways are providing more learners with opportunities to achieve success at SCQF Level 5, build confidence and develop the skills and qualifications needed to progress to higher levels of learning, training and employment.

For session 2026/27, the local authority is actively exploring opportunities to establish centrally coordinated Foundation Apprenticeships. A working group comprising central officers and a secondary headteacher has been established to lead this work, with plans to pilot two or three apprenticeship frameworks during session 2027/28. The aim is to further strengthen the Senior Phase offer, broaden learner pathways and increase access to high-quality vocational and skills-based opportunities.

(iii) Positive Destinations:

Through the ADES Local Authority Collaborative Improvement model, West Lothian Council engaged in discussions to identify and explore improvements that could support a greater number of young people in achieving and sustaining positive destinations. A key recommendation from the collaboration was to undertake a more detailed analysis of data relating to learners who were not progressing into positive destinations, with the aim of developing a clearer profile of these young people, their needs, and the support they required.

West Lothian Council created a Positive Destinations Improvement Group of relevant partners and focused specifically on learners with identified Additional Support Needs (ASN), those from the Q1 SIMD cohort, and Care Experienced young people, as positive destination outcomes for these groups were below national performance levels. Findings from this data-led review informed the development of targeted support for both schools and learners, addressing gaps identified within existing provision.

Over a two-year period, these interventions have contributed to improved outcomes across all targeted cohorts. The proportion of learners with an identified ASN achieving a positive destination increased from 89.5% to 93.1%. Positive destination rates for learners from a Q1 background improved from 88.6% to 92.6%, while outcomes for Looked After and Care Experienced young people increased from 71.4% to 80.0%.

3. *Moving forward, and as planned, there is a need to continue to moderate the effectiveness of support provided by the Quality Improvement team.*

The annual activity plan for the Quality Improvement Team incorporates a range of moderation approaches across core aspects of its work, including support and challenge meetings, attainment analysis, and the scrutiny of the impact of school documentation. In addition, Quality Improvement Officers undertake Validated Self-Evaluation visits collaboratively, enabling the moderation of evidence, strengthening consistency of approach, and supporting the reliability of evaluative judgements.

The Quality Improvement Team provides comprehensive support throughout the inspection and Validated Self-Evaluation process, from initial preparation to post-inspection follow-up. This support continues to be highly valued by senior leaders, with 100% of schools rating it as very good or excellent.

Survey feedback from all headteachers shows that 100% of respondents rated the overall quality of the service as good or excellent over the past three years.

A. West Lothian Council Perspective on the "notable variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities."

From a West Lothian perspective, we recognise the concern regarding variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools nationally, which is evident in the varying outcomes in terms of national qualifications, progress in CfE levels and inspection outcomes. While there is significant effective practice across the system, the challenge is ensuring that this is shared, adapted and implemented consistently so that all schools benefit from high-quality support, regardless of location or circumstance.

As noted in the outcome of HIMe's thematic inspection variability within West Lothian is minimised through a well-established and highly consistent framework for improvement, quality assurance and support. Schools operate within clear guidance and shared expectations for self-evaluation, improvement planning and standards and quality reporting, supported by regular engagement with

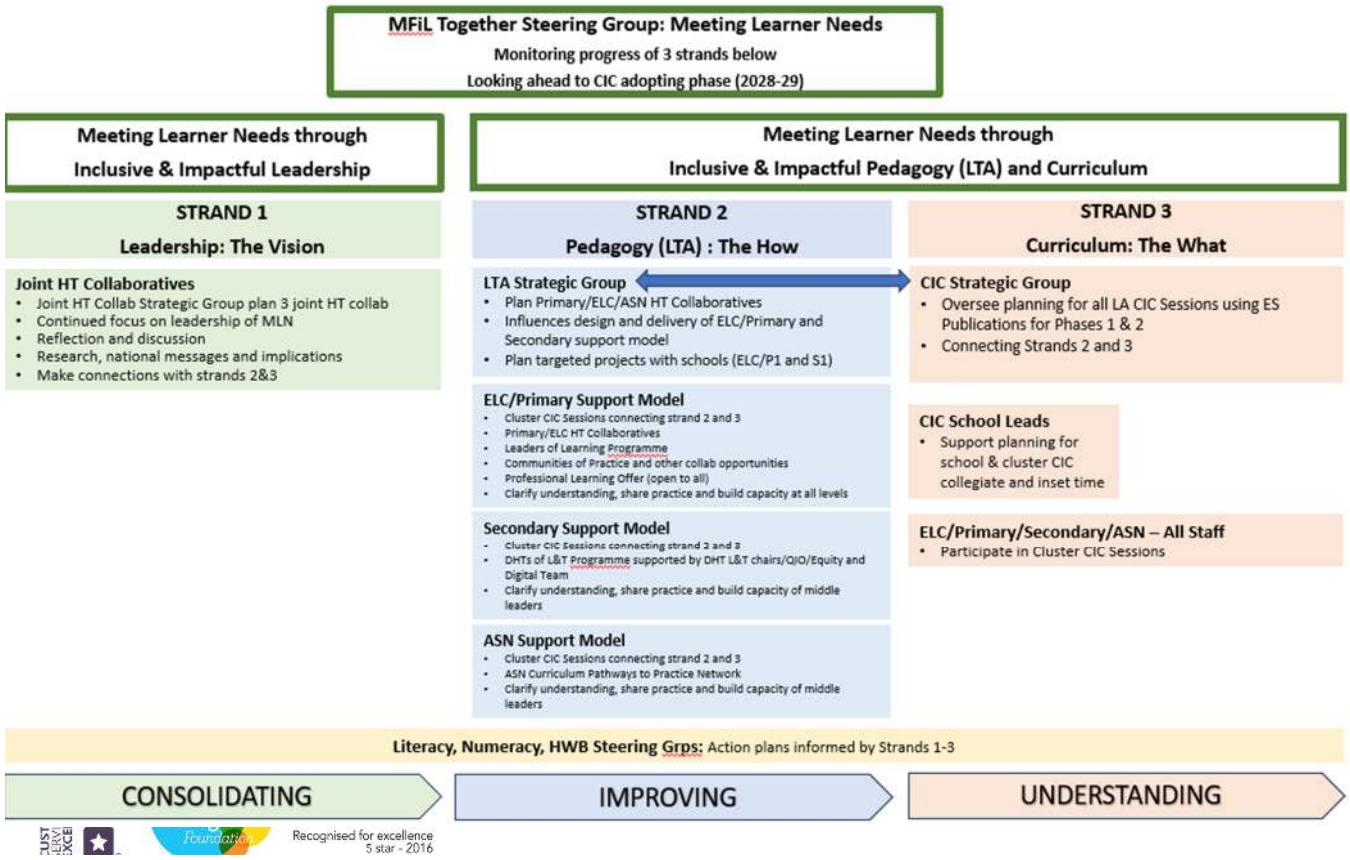
Quality Improvement Officers, structured attainment reviews and a three-yearly validated self-evaluation process. Regular, collaborative review of the self-evaluation cycle supports Headteachers to lead continuous improvement confidently, while ensuring that local authority support is responsive to the unique context, strengths and priorities of each school.

The service's matrix model, whereby officers hold both school link and strategic responsibilities, provides a strong overview of strengths and areas for development across the authority, while common data sets, moderation processes, network activity and the sharing of effective practice help ensure consistency of approach. As highlighted above, the thematic inspection recognised the effectiveness of these arrangements, noting clear governance, robust quality assurance processes, strong collaboration between schools and central teams, and a 100% satisfaction rate from headteachers regarding the support provided by the central team.

An example of our in-authority collaborative work:
"Moving Forward in Learning … Together"

West Lothian Council Education Services is committed to improving outcomes for all children and young people through Moving Forward in Learning (MFiL). This centres on collaboration and networking to achieve effective school improvement and raise attainment, supporting the principle of improvement as a shared responsibility. Our focus on 'togetherness' reflects the ambition we have to work in partnership to secure the best outcomes for all of our children and young people. Our specific framework for driving this next session delivers an absolute commitment to meeting learner needs through the lenses of leadership, learning and teaching, and the curriculum, embracing national and local change and improvement in these areas. Time has been protected for staff to explore and reflect upon these lenses, led by central staff and working groups. This connectivity will allow staff to move forward together in understanding, confidence and application of these key areas.

The image below represents that connectivity of all parts of the education system in West Lothian working together to achieve our goals under the umbrella of the West Lothian Raising Educational Attainment Strategy and National Improvement Framework principles and aspirations.



In terms of cross authority collaboration, we believe that effective practice is best shared through a range of collaborative opportunities including ADES networks, Education Scotland networks, quad working arrangements, peer review and validated self-evaluation activity, learning visits, leadership development programmes, subject and curriculum networks, SAC networks and other professional learning communities. These mechanisms provide valuable opportunities for practitioners and leaders to learn from one another, share evidence-informed approaches and consider how successful practice can be adapted within different local contexts.

An example of our cross-authority collaborative work:
"Quad Improvement Collaborative"

The initial areas agreed upon as a focus for Collaborative Improvement are as follows. Positive progress has been made in each of the 3 areas:

a. Improving approaches to support attendance at school (outlined earlier in this response)
b. Current approaches to use of data and collective agreement on future requirements to support improvements
c. Strengthening capacity across schools to meet the needs of all children and young people

However, a number of barriers can limit the spread of effective practice. These include capacity and resource pressures, differing local contexts, and the challenge of systematically capturing and evaluating what works well. Geographic distance can also present a practical barrier, making it more difficult for staff to participate regularly in face-to-face collaborative activity across authorities. In some cases, effective practice can remain concentrated within individual schools, teams or authorities rather than being shared more widely across the system. In addition, further strains of the system with new national policies, guidance and significant changes such as ASN, Curriculum, RCCT, HGIOS review etc – all at the same time, along with significant resource pressures, results in reduced capacity to fully support all of these changes and collaborate effectively. In some cases, it would be helpful for a clearer identification of priorities to be worked on collaboratively across the authorities, supported by national bodies, so that all fully benefit from collaboration from the outset. This also requires national bodies to be cognisant of each other's work and pressure on schools and local authorities.

For West Lothian, this reinforces the importance of maintaining strong collaborative relationships, investing in opportunities for professional dialogue and strengthening processes for evaluating and sharing effective practice. The council's focus is on ensuring that support is equitable, evidence-informed and consistently high quality, while recognising that successful approaches may require adaptation to meet the specific needs of different school communities.

Yours sincerely

Greg Welsh
Interim Depute Chief Executive (Education, Planning, Economic Development and Regeneration)