ADES Submission to the Education and Gaelic Committee: Local Authority Approaches to School Education and Attendance

1. Response to HMIE Thematic Report on Local Authority Approaches to Supporting School Improvement

Local Authorities, individually and collectively, have engaged constructively with the findings of the HMIE thematic report and have taken forward a range of actions to strengthen consistency of support for schools within existing resources and budgets.

1.1 Addressing Variability in Support to Schools

ADES recognises HMIE's observation of "notable variability in the consistency and quality of support provided to schools, both within and across local authorities." It is important to note that across Scotland there is variation in the capacity of central school improvement teams; and likewise there is variation in the extent of access to and availability of corporate support teams/functions such as Performance and Improvement/Data Analysis functions for the central school improvement teams.

Notwithstanding such variations in capacity and availability of a range of resources and support functions, to seek address this recommendation ADES worked closely with colleagues in HMIE to better understand what sits behind the recommendations and to identify who is best placed to lead on any improvement activity, including how the impact of any work would then be evaluated. Some examples of work undertaken to date include the following. Local Authorities have:

- Embedded the ADES HGIOEA (How Good is our Education Authority) self-evaluation framework to provide a shared national approach to evaluating and improving support for schools.
- Worked collaboratively in Quads, enabling peer challenge, moderation of practice, and shared improvement planning. This has strengthened consistency and helped reduce some variation in the support offered to schools.
- Engaged with national networks, including the National Attendance Network and Education Scotland led sessions, to ensure alignment of practice and access to national expertise.

1.2 Sharing Good Practice Across Local Authorities

Local Authorities continue to prioritise sharing effective practice. Key mechanisms include:

- ES-led sessions on data use: Sessions led by colleagues supported Local Authorities to use attendance data more effectively and to identify targeted action plans.

- ADES Quad meetings, support and improvement sessions, peer challenge and collaborative improvement activities.
- Inputs on attendance networks and quad-level comparison data further strengthened shared learning.
- Sharing practice on coding, media campaigns and persistent low attendance: Local Authorities have contributed examples of effective practice, including improvements in SEEMiS coding, targeted communication campaigns, and approaches to persistent absence.

1.3 Barriers to Sharing Practice

While collaboration is strong, several barriers remain:

- Data format and comparability: The move to LGBF-grouped reporting has limited year-on-year comparison, making it harder for Local Authorities to use data for improvement. ADES has requested reinstatement of year-by-year comparison to support more effective analysis.
- Variability in local systems and processes: Differences in local reporting, coding practices and thresholds for intervention can make cross-authority comparison more challenging.

2. Implementation of National Attendance Guidance

2.1 Local Implementation and Impact

Local Authorities report that the national guidance is supporting more consistent approaches to attendance. Improvements include:

- Clearer identification of targeted groups through improved data analysis supported by ES and Attainment Advisors.
- Development of theory of change models within the National Attendance Network to guide future improvement activity.
- Increasingly targeted quad-level attendance networks, moving beyond coding and data to focus on family support, online learning and wider engagement strategies.
- National Attendance Network: Meeting three to four times per year, including a full in-person session in Glasgow attended by 22 Local Authorities. Inputs included:
    - Two headteacher Think Pieces on improving attendance
    - A presentation from South Ayrshire on attendance through an ASN lens and the use of data to drive improvement These will be published as a podcast and webinar later this session.

Professional learning resources on strategic and school-level use of attendance data are being developed and will be published later this year, further strengthening implementation.

3. Identification and Response to Persistent Absence

3.1 Local Authority Approaches

Local Authorities use a range of approaches to identify and respond to persistent absence, including:

- GIRFEC and staged intervention processes to assess needs and plan individualised support.
- Regular monitoring of attendance trends, supported by fortnightly data sets and ES analysis.
- Multi-agency collaboration involving education, social work, health and third-sector partners.

3.2 Effectiveness of Multi-Agency Working

Multi-agency working is generally effective, though there are challenges:

- Thresholds for social work involvement vary, affecting consistency of response.
- Referrals to SCRA can be complex and subject to differing local interpretations.
- Parent engagement remains a significant challenge, particularly where corroboration of reasons for absence is difficult.

4. Key Challenges in Reporting and Responding to Persistent Absence

Local Authorities highlight several system-level challenges:

- Definition of persistent absence: A lack of a fully aligned national definition creates inconsistency.
- Data and reporting differences: Variations between Scottish Government and Local Authority reporting approaches limit comparability and hinder improvement-focused analysis.
- Thresholds for intervention: Inconsistent criteria for escalating concerns to social work or SCRA.
- Parent engagement: Difficulties securing parental involvement and corroboration for non-attendance.

- Mental health and wellbeing: Increasing levels of anxiety, school avoidance and complex needs among children, young people and parents/carers significantly impact attendance.

5. Summary

Local Authorities, working collectively through ADES, have responded constructively to the HMIE thematic report and national attendance guidance. Significant progress has been made in strengthening consistency, improving data use, and sharing effective practice. However, national alignment on definitions, data reporting, and thresholds for intervention remains essential to further improve attendance and support school improvement across Scotland.