Barnardo's Scotland Written Evidence

Education and Gaelic Committee Inquiry on Support for Pupils with Persistent Absence

November 2026

Introduction

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Education and Gaelic Committee's short inquiry into support for pupils' persistent absence.

Barnardo's Scotland works directly with hundreds of schools across Scotland. We describe our work in schools in terms of a pyramid – with universal, targeted and specialist tiers.



At the base we provide universal activities that build a community of support for pupils and those around the school. Further up the pyramid, we deliver targeted support to individuals and groups around key themes such as attendance, anxiety, transitions and school avoidance. At the apex of the pyramid is intensive support for children and families that is bespoke to need – this could include trauma, bereavement and loss, child exploitation and neurodiversity (and is made possible by the breadth of experience and expertise of Barnardo's services). Underpinning the whole pyramid is workforce capacity and wellbeing.

About our services

Through Barnardo's work with children, young people and families across Scotland, we deliver a range of education, family support, mental health, employability, advocacy and rights-based services. Our services work directly with children and young people who experience attendance and/or engagement difficulties, including those with additional support needs (ASN), neurodivergent children and young

people, care-experienced children, young carers, children affected by trauma, and families facing poverty and disadvantage.

Drawing on evidence from frontline practitioners working across multiple local authority areas, our experience is that persistent pupil absence is not a new concern and is very rarely the primary issue. Instead, it is often a symptom of wider unmet need, including inadequate support for additional support needs, declining access to early intervention services, poor mental health , experiences of trauma, and other increasing pressures on schools and families.

We believe improving attendance requires a greater focus on understanding and addressing the underlying causes of disengagement from education rather than attendance as the key issue.

In Inverclyde, Barnardo's delivers an attendance-focused service funded through the Pupil Equity Fund**.** The service works closely with schools and attendance officers to identify children with emerging or persistent attendance concerns and provide targeted support to families. This includes direct work with children, engagement with parents, home visits where appropriate, and support to address practical and emotional barriers to attendance. The service has been particularly effective in intervening early when attendance patterns first begin to decline, helping prevent difficulties from becoming entrenched.

Barnardo's Northern Star service in Aberdeen provides an example of how embedded early intervention can support engagement with education. Funded through the Pupil Equity Fund, Northern Star has been based within partner primary schools since 2018, with workers embedded full-time in school communities. The service provides one-to-one and group-based social and emotional support to help children feel more included, improve their wellbeing and become more ready to engage in learning. The model is highly flexible and responsive to the changing needs of individual children, families and schools, with workers collaborating closely with teaching staff, parents and other agencies to address barriers to participation before they escalate.

Through services such as Empowering Futures in Glasgow, Barnardo's also provides early intervention family support to children showing early signs of disengagement from education. The service works alongside families and schools to respond to concerns at the earliest stage and provide practical and emotional support before attendance difficulties become severe. However, practitioners report that referrals frequently arrive when attendance has already fallen significantly, highlighting the need for earlier intervention across the wider system.

Barnardo's Attachment and Nurture Service in Lanarkshire supports children and young people whose attendance is often affected by unmet additional support needs, emotional distress and difficulties managing within mainstream school environments. Practitioners report that a significant proportion of referrals involve children with

additional support needs who are struggling in placements that do not adequately meet their needs. While some children are supported through reduced or part-time timetables intended to promote inclusion, in practice these arrangements can result in children spending less time in education and becoming increasingly disconnected from school. The service frequently works alongside schools and families where children are regularly sent home because schools are unable to manage incidents of distress or dysregulation. Although referrals often focus on supporting parents, practitioners highlight that the primary challenge is not a lack of parental engagement but the child's difficulty coping within their educational environment. The service therefore adopts a whole-family and multi-agency approach, working with children, families and schools to better understand needs, strengthen relationships and identify more sustainable solutions that support attendance and wellbeing.

Barnardo's also supports older children and young people who have become disengaged from mainstream education. In Tayside, employability and transition support workers help young people who are experiencing significant attendance difficulties, many of whom have additional support needs or complex personal circumstances. Support focuses on building trust, understanding individual strengths and aspirations, and helping young people re-engage with learning, training, employment or other positive destinations. This work recognises that, for some young people, success may involve alternative pathways rather than a return to traditional school attendance.

In Dundee, Barnardo's School Link Coordinator works across every secondary school in the city to support young people who may require additional help to achieve positive post-school destinations. The role includes meeting young people and their families, building relationships, introducing them to education, training and employability opportunities, accompanying them to placements where necessary, and providing ongoing support to sustain engagement. This relationship-based approach helps reduce barriers to participation and creates smoother transitions into further learning and employment.

Implementation of recent national attendance guidance

Our practitioners had limited awareness of the revised attendance guidance published in March 2026 and, where awareness existed, there was little evidence that it had yet resulted in significant changes in practice for children and families we support.

Many of the principles contained within the guidance are welcome and reflect long-established evidence. However, a key concern raised by frontline staff in Barnardo’s is the gap between expectations contained within national guidance and the reality of current service capacity. Schools are increasingly being asked to respond to complex social, emotional and educational needs while operating within significant resource constraints.

The challenge is not a lack of understanding about what works, it is whether schools and partner services have sufficient capacity and resources to implement these approaches consistently.

Barnardo's Scotland would encourage the Committee to explore not only awareness of the guidance, but also whether schools and local authorities have access to the resources, specialist support and workforce capacity necessary to deliver it effectively.

Identification and Support of Pupils with Persistent Absence

Our evidence suggests that attendance data alone does not provide an accurate picture of children's experiences.

Attendance is frequently used as a measure of engagement, yet our services regularly support children and young people who:

- attend school on highly reduced, part-time timetables
- spend little or no time in classrooms
- are present but unable to meaningfully engage in learning
- experience significant anxiety throughout the school day; or
- spend substantial periods isolated from peers or educational activity.

In these circumstances, children may be recorded as attending school, but their right to education is not being fully realised.

A particularly significant issue raised by our services is the increasing number of children with additional support needs whose needs are not being adequately met within mainstream settings.

Across multiple local authority areas, Barnardo's staff report:

- increased demand for ASN support
- greater levels of complexity within referrals
- growing numbers of children on part-time timetables
- schools requesting that parents collect children early because needs cannot be safely or appropriately managed; and
- families becoming increasingly disengaged from education after repeated experiences where support has not met need.

Practitioners described situations where attendance concerns are framed primarily as parental issues when the fundamental challenge relates to the suitability of support available within the school environment.

There is also concern that intervention frequently occurs too late. While evidence suggests attendance difficulties should be addressed at the earliest signs of

disengagement, schools often have limited capacity to intervene until difficulties have already become entrenched.

One practitioner said "From attending various school partnership meetings across the local high schools, low school attendance is something that schools often struggle with and are often looking for partners to help work with families on this issue. There seems to be a gap in service provision around this. While lots of services may well address the underpinning reasons for low school attendance, and therefore hopefully improve this, it doesn't seem that that alone is a referral criteria for any services in (the local authority)"

Views of children and young people

In preparing this written evidence submission, we also sought the views of children and young people aged between 12 and 18 in our 'Barnardo's Voices Scotland' participation group and asked their opinion via a survey. We asked them what helps young people attend school, who should be involved in helping them attend school, and what they want adults to understand about school attendance. We received seven responses and have included some direct feedback and quotes below.

'One things adults should understand about school attendance is...'

"Having poor attendance doesn't automatically mean you're a misbehaving kid, or skiving but most the time has a deeper reason as to why they aren't going to school".

"It doesn't always mean your child is being bad and bunking off of class or taking fake sick days just for the fun of it. Sometimes people just can't handle it because it does take a lot of motivation having to do it every single day when sometimes the teachers don't make the class very interesting to go to their class".

"It is complicated , it's never just one thing."

"We usually want to be in school."

"Missing class isn't always for a bad reason or to cause trouble, sometimes it can be good things like volunteering, extracurriculars (which they look for constantly) or attending an important event."

Do you have ideas of how these people can help you stay connected to school?

"Maybe take a day off every now and again to maybe talk to a youth worker about how school/college is making you feel and if you need any support or help with anything."

“Keep talking and supporting me - get me help when I ask for it not because the adults think I need it. Tell me what help I can access and let me decide rather than adults deciding for me.”

“More encouragement that's actually helpful advice instead of hoping for the best or getting into trouble for not being bothered to attend. Attending school can be daunting sometimes and the last thing that is needed is getting into trouble for it.”

“Having one of the supports in school so you can meet them when you need them.”

What more should schools do to support young people while they are waiting for diagnosis or health support:

“not every young person is the same – we are all individual. Sitting with the young people and asking questions. It’s ok to ask – just listen to us.”

“teachers and school staff need to have more training to understand what it is like for a young person who is neurodiverse or who has trauma, how overwhelming school can be.

“having peer support groups during break and lunch.”

Barnardo's Scotland believes that early intervention should be prioritised, with greater emphasis placed on emerging patterns of disengagement and wellbeing concerns rather than relying solely on attendance thresholds. We would urge the committee to ensure it is taking a broader view of the underlying factors of low school attendance.

The Role of Multi-Agency Working and Family Engagement

Our evidence strongly supports the importance of multi-agency working and family engagement. In practice, however, successful partnership working is increasingly constrained by workforce pressures and reductions in support services.

Many practitioners highlighted the erosion of specialist support that schools previously had access to – meaning that as a result, children and families often face long waits for support or fall between services entirely.

A consistent message from Barnardo's practitioners was the importance of trusted relationships. Across a wide range of services, the most significant factor in engaging children and families is often the presence of a consistent adult with whom they can develop a relationship, who understands their circumstances and can advocate alongside them.

Many parents of children with additional support needs report feeling that they must continually advocate for support that their child is already entitled to receive.

Practitioners also reported increasing numbers of families seeking support to navigate education systems and understand their rights.

Meaningful family engagement requires schools and services to work alongside families, recognise parental expertise, and build trust through transparency and collaboration.

Sharing and evaluation of effective practice

Barnardo's Scotland has observed examples of highly effective practice across Scotland, particularly where school leaders have prioritised whole-school approaches to positive relationships and wellbeing.

Some local models have demonstrated positive outcomes through proactive attendance support, including daily engagement with families, rapid responses to absence and relationship-based outreach.

However, participants consistently reported significant variation in practice between schools and local authorities.

There is currently no consistent mechanism for identifying, evaluating and scaling effective approaches. Where innovative practice exists, it is often dependent on individual leaders, short-term funding streams or local circumstances rather than embedded system-wide approaches.

Practitioners also highlighted concerns that current measures focus heavily on attendance rates rather than broader indicators such as wellbeing, sense of belonging, feeling safe and included.

Attendance does not automatically equate to learning, and increasing attendance rates alone will not improve outcomes if children remain disengaged, unsupported or unable to access education in a meaningful way. We would therefore encourage a broader understanding of success that considers both attendance and children's educational experiences.

Conclusion

School absence should be understood primarily as an indicator of wider unmet need rather than a standalone issue.

We would urge the Committee to consider not only whether children are physically present in school, but whether they are safe, supported, included and able to engage meaningfully in their education.

Attendance matters, but attendance alone is not enough. A child being present in school does not necessarily mean they are learning, participating or having their

needs met. Sustainable improvements in attendance can only be achieved when children and young people feel safe, understood and supported to succeed.