4 November 2026

Education and Gaelic Committee: Inquiry into support for pupils with persistent absence

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Background

Children in Scotland is a welcoming and dynamic charity that amplifies the voices, views and experiences of our members and children, families and professionals across Scotland. We achieve this through direct services, meaningful participation, policy work, inspiring communications and sector-leading events and learning opportunities.

We are a vibrant and inclusive community of dedicated individuals and organisations who use our skills and passion to bring evidence-based and fresh thinking together, with one shared aim of giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish.

We are stronger together in driving lasting impact for Scotland's children.

Our response

Improving the delivery of additional support for learning for children and young people is a key policy priority for Children in Scotland.[1] Our work in this area is aimed at delivering the Inclusion Ambassadors vision for Scottish education:

> *"School should help me be the best I can be. School is a place where children and young people learn, socialise and become prepared for life beyond school.*
>
> *"Success is different for everyone. But it is important that all the adults that children and young people come in to contact with in school get to know them as individuals. They should ask, listen and act on what the young people say about the support that works best for them."*

As an organisation, we play an important role across the development, delivery and implementation of additional support for learning policy in Scotland. We were a member of the Scottish Government's additional support for learning Project Board and participated in the School Attendance

[1] Children in Scotland, (2026), Manifesto 2026

working group, supporting the development of the new Attendance guidance. [2]

We also manage several national services such as Enquire, the national information and advice service for additional support for learning, Resolve, an independent mediation services, and the Children's Views service. Enquire and the Children's Views service are also partners in My Rights, My Say, supporting 12- to 15-year-olds with additional support needs to fulfil their right to be heard in decisions about their education. In addition, we deliver a wide range of participation work focussing on children's experiences of additional support for learning, including the Inclusion Ambassadors and My Rights My Say Young Advisors networks.[3]

Attendance, persistent absence and a systems-led approach

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into attendance and persistent absence. We know that too many children and young people spend a significant amount of time out of school, which we believe is often driven by the education system not meeting their support needs.

We have consistently focused on this topic over a number of years. In 2018 we partnered with Scottish Autism and National Autistic Society on the Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved report, which explored the educational experiences of autistic children, highlighting the prevalence of informal exclusion and the use of part-time timetables.[4]

Our 2025 policy briefing on attendance explored the most common issues raised relating to attendance, and how this exemplifies the gaps in the delivery of additional support for learning.[5] We have drawn heavily on this evidence to formulate this response, whilst also utilising evidence emerging from our Enquire helpline from across Q1&2 of 2026-27.[6]

Attendance is regularly raised as an issue throughout our services. Between April and June of this year, attendance was raised as the main issue in 35% of all enquiries that Enquire received. From July to September, this rose to 36%. There has been no notable change from the same period last year.

In the last quarter, 33% of all helpline enquiries were concerned with children being out of school, with 50% of these noting issues with level of support as a driver of this, 46% regarding school-related anxiety, and 39% also citing a wellbeing concern.

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[2] Scottish Government, (2026), Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools

[3] Children in Scotland, Inclusion Ambassadors

[4] Children in Scotland, National Autistic Society, Scottish Autism, (2018), Not included, not engaged, not involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school

[5] Children in Scotland, (2025), Policy briefing: Additional support for learning – Attendance

[6] Enquire data is not representative of all children and young people in Scotland, but it does provide a clear insight into issues arising nationally in the implementation of additional support for learning

Attendance and persistent absence must be considered within the wider context of the education system and the plans for system-wide change to the delivery of additional support for learning. As demonstrated in our recent policy briefing on the recommendations of the McManus review, the level of need currently far outstrips the level of provision in this area. [7] Any measures which seek to respond to persistent absence must be considered through this lens, acknowledging the pressures on the additional support for learning system.

It is also vital that the committee take a holistic understanding of the drivers of absence, and subsequently the solutions which will have the biggest impact. This includes taking account of the role for whole family support in responding to the range of factors which may contribute to persistent absence.

Implementation of recent national attendance guidance

Children in Scotland strongly agree with the positive approach taken to supporting attendance as set out in the guidance. Whilst the advice Enquire provides reflects the updated guidance, to date there does not appear to be a significant impact of how often or the type of issues regarding attendance are raised. It is important to recognise that this guidance has only recently been published, and it may be too early for any significant impacts on practice to be noted.

Rights-based approach

Persistent absence often reflects a learner's unmet support needs. We firmly support a rights-based approach to supporting children and young people, including in relation to absence. We see the whole school ethos and emphasis on collaboration between pupils, families and school staff when looking at what support is needed as a strength of the new guidance.

However, practice does not seem to consistently reflect the updated guidance's emphasis on a rights-based and holistic approach. A significant barrier that we see is around lack of engagement with children in decisions regarding their support in school, with a knock-on effect on attendance. Children and young people supported by My Rights, My Say have previously linked not being heard with support needs not being met, resulting in negative feelings towards attending school.[8]

Enquire noted that 23% of out of school enquiries referred to relationship difficulties. A recent example from the helpline details the impact of this on school attendance:

> (Following a school meeting, parent explained that their child had said) *'school does not know me...They were very insistent, persistent... they don't*

[7] Children in Scotland, (2026), Policy briefing: From vision to delivery
[8] Children in Scotland, (2025), Policy briefing: Additional support for learning – Attendance

care what I had to say' and *'mum, stop defending them. Just stop. I am not going in on Thursday.'* (Example from Enquire Helpline)

Not only should children and young people be included in meaningful participation, but there also needs to be a system in place where learners can have their right to support fully upheld.

Part-time timetables

As detailed previously in this response the Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved report considered autistic pupils' experience of part-time timetables and their likely use to manage support needs.[9] Whilst this report was published eight years ago, we are aware of ongoing issues in this area, with part-time timetables being misused in practice as a way of managing support needs.

The Children's Views service continue to identify situations where children become 'stuck' on part-time timetables because the school lacks resources to support them with a full-time education. Enquire also hear regularly about similar situations through the helpline, including a recent situation which resulted in a child being placed on a part-time timetable for months as the school could not provide appropriate support.

'school have asked to keep this in place until the end of term as they are not able to deal with how to help [child].' (Parent caller to Enquire Helpline)

Whilst it is positive to see a more detailed coding practice for schools on SEEMIS regarding part-time timetables in the updated guidance, they should still only be used temporarily, within a wider package of tailored support. Children in Scotland is clear that using reduced timetables to manage unmet support needs reflects an incorrect implementation of the refreshed guidance and is a symptom of system pressures.

Identification and support of pupils with persistent absence

Children with additional support needs

Attendance is persistently lower for children and young people with additional support needs.[10] As articulated in our 2025 Attendance Policy Briefing, we see this as a clear signifier of unmet support needs, and the term 'lower' does not imply a lesser measure of effort, behaviour or worth.

We regularly hear through our services about children and young people who spend significant periods of time out of school because of a lack of support.

Through the Children's Views service we have heard from local authorities that they do not have the resources to provide support to children and

[9] Children in Scotland, National Autistic Society, Scottish Autism, (2018), Not included, not engaged, not involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school
[10] Scottish Government, (2025), School attendance, absence and exclusions statistics 2024-25

young people in line with their rights under the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act 2004.

We consistently hear about similar examples through the Enquire helpline, with parents explaining how schools say they cannot support their child but that there are also no places in alternative provisions. Enquire also report parents repeatedly seeking support that schools introduce and then remove after a short period of time.

'the school is not putting enough support. Child now also has anxiety around attendance... Last thing agreed is home tuition, but this was confirmed months ago and is not yet in action.'(Parent calling the Enquire Helpline)

It is important to highlight here that local authorities have a legal duty to provide education to pupils who are unable to attend school. Since the updated guidance, 37% of enquiries to Enquire regarding children who were out of school concerned out of school education provision. Of all enquiries in the period from July to September, over 13% cited the main issue as out of school education provision.

Across our services we have consistently heard of examples where neither education nor support are provided when a child is out of school due to their unmet support needs. A lack of resources is a commonly cited reason for why support cannot be provided. We have continued to hear of examples of this following the refreshed guidance.

'*Now high school is turning out to be the same... No school work has ever been sent home over the years and schools are not looking at how they can support [their] needs...' (Parent caller to the Enquire Helpline)*

<u>Anxiety and mental health</u>

Evidence from our services also suggests that issues relating to anxiety and mental health are an increasing factor in school attendance. Across Q2 of this financial year, anxiety has been the second most prominent factor for people reaching out to Enquire, with 24% of all enquiries concerning this issue. This has increased from 20% during the same period last year. The Children's Views service reported that anxiety and self-harm are increasing, and schools can appear unsure as to how to handle conversations around this. School-related anxiety and wellbeing concerns feature prominently in out-of-school enquiries.

'Child [primary school] *anxious about going to school as does not feel safe. Has been self harming... School have offered lots of supports for child but still too scared to go into school.' (Parent caller to the Enquire Helpline)*

Across our services, and our work with children and young people, there appears to be a lack of resources and capacity in the workforce to deal with current levels of anxiety and provide the support that children need and are entitled to.

The role of multi-agency working and family engagement

Provision of rights based, inclusive education is of course a key driver of supporting children to attend school. Across our work with the Inclusion Ambassadors and My Rights My Say Young Advisors we have provided key insight into what this looks like for children and young people. [11]

However, addressing persistent absence requires a more holistic approach than focussing purely on the education delivered within school. Where a child has been unable to attend school for a significant period of time, there will likely be a requirement for strong multi-agency working to support a child back into school and to sustain their attendance where this is the best path for the child.

We know from the work across our services that there can be challenges in how education and health services work together. It would be of value to explore how the connection between these key services can be improved.

The Scottish Government's focus on the Whole Family Support Integration Programme offers a key opportunity to align the wider family support agenda with responses to persistent absence. Youth work and whole family support should be integral to multi-agency responses, given their role in improving outcomes for children, young people and families.

The need to connect discussions around school attendance to the wider family support agenda is also reinforced when we consider the impact of a child having time out of school on the financial situation for families. Families who engage with our services report the financial impact of non-attendance, with parents explaining how it affected their employment. We also know that children being out of school can have an impact on parent and carer mental health and wellbeing.

Responses to persistent absence must take account of these wider impacts that stem from school absence, both as a rationale for why action is needed, but also in looking to understand the support required around the whole family when a child is out of school longer term.

Sharing and evaluation of effective practice

Children in Scotland are not aware of any national approach to sharing effective practice in relation to school attendance or persistent absence. There could be an opportunity to strengthen how good practice is shared to support ongoing learning.

There is also a need to strengthen how information is shared with children, young people and families about the support available around attendance. Enquire reports that parents and carers must sometimes ask school to reach out to the local authority for further support, or contact the local authority themselves, rather than this information being shared proactively. Our

[11] Inclusion Ambassadors, (2026), Improving Additional Support for Learning: Evidence and Recommendations from the Inclusion Ambassadors (2020-26)

outreach activity has also highlighted the key role that the third sector has taken in information sharing and connecting services.

It is also worth highlighting that we continue to hear of examples of poor practice in how attendance is managed – including examples of punitive attendance policies that could be seen as exclusionary by nature. This highlights a need for embedding the refreshed attendance guidance, centred on inclusive approaches to attendance in schools.

Finally, we are aware there are ongoing issues around how attendance is monitored and tracked, due to challenges around the use of the SEEMIS system for monitoring part-time timetables and school exclusions.[12] The refreshed guidance does provide more direction on this; however, there is scope for significant inconsistency in how data is recorded as this required the creation of custom tab for each child - an issue worth exploring further.[13] A more coherent national picture around attendance, persistent absence and use of part-time timetables would strengthen our national approach to managing this issue.

Summary and Recommendations

Children and young people with additional support needs are significantly more likely to be out of school. Across our services and participation work we consistently hear about how a lack of appropriate, accessible support can make school attendance more challenging.

Delivery of rights based, inclusive education is a key way to tackle persistent absence. Yet, system wide pressures around resources, workforce capacity and culture must be addressed to improve the wider education and additional support for learning environment.

Our 2025 Attendance policy briefing outlines a series of policy recommendations relating to attendance. In producing this response, we have also identified the following recommendations

- **View persistent absence through a systems-led lens**, acknowledging the environment that additional support for learning operates in, where need outstrips resources and capacity.
- **Increase workforce capacity and specialist support so schools can meet additional support and wellbeing needs,** provide timely and effective interventions, and support school attendance in an environment where children and young people can thrive.
- **Embed children and young people's participation in delivery of additional support for learning**

[12]Children in Scotland, National Autistic Society, Scottish Autism, (2018), Not included, not engaged, not involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school
[13]Scottish Government, (2026), Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools

- **Improve data collection and monitoring of attendance and absence,** making stronger use of systems like SEEMIS to provide an improved national picture.
- **Embed improved multi agency working within the Additional Support for Learning System to address persistent absence**

For further information, please contact Chris Ross, Participation and Policy Manager, Children in Scotland.