Written submission in response to the Education and Gaelic Committee's inquiry into support for pupils with persistent absence, submitted 28 October 2026

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About ADR Scotland

At Administrative Data Research Scotland (ADR Scotland), the research team led by Professor Morag Treanor explores context, factors and approaches to educational exclusions and absences. This involves the analysis of linked administrative data including education and health records and the Scottish Census. The project is part of the wider *Children and Young People* research theme and has recently been renewed as part of ADR Scotland for a further five years of funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for 2026 to 2031.[1]

Summary

In March 2026, the Scottish Government published revised guidance on school attendance emphasising the importance of engagement with children and families.[2] The guidance recognises that persistent absence can arise from complex circumstances, including social and emotional difficulties, emotionally based school avoidance, anxiety and sensory overload.

Education Scotland's *Improving Attendance* work identified promising practice in schools, including 'no blame' approaches to absence, breakfast clubs and supportive relationships with families,[3] which were reported to have helped improve attendance. Education Scotland's 2026 report highlighted the importance of using inclusive and relational approaches to addressing absence, multi-agency working and robust evidence.[4]

This submission provides evidence on support for pupils with persistent absence, specifically on the following themes, as asked by the Committee:

- Theme 1: Identification and support of pupils with persistent absence.

[1] ADR Scotland. Exploring context, factors and approaches to educational exclusions and absences.
[2] Scottish Government (2026). Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools
[3] Education Scotland (2023). Improving Attendance: Understanding the Issues.
[4] Education Scotland (2026). Improving Attendance in Scotland: 2024-2026. Evidence, Impact and Actions for Consideration.

    - Persistent absence is a useful measure to raise concern over pupils' attendance but must be used in combination with further evidence on reasons behind absence.
    - **Key recommendation:** Policy should explicitly target the combination of structural disadvantages, particularly poverty and mental health on attendance at school.
- Theme 2: The role of multi-agency working and family engagement.
    - Attendance should be treated not only as an educational outcome but also as a potential indicator of unmet economic, health and family needs. Attendance figures alone cannot show whether pupils' needs are being met.
    - **Key recommendation:** Family engagement should be included as part of intervention and prevention. Attendance difficulties should be addressed through collaboration between schools and families instead of approaches that place responsibility solely on the child or family.

This submission does not provide evidence on the implementation of recent national attendance guidance because the data needed for this research are not available; however, it acknowledges the need for further research due to the changes made at local authority and school levels to improve attendance. Attendance data was only made available for every other year between 2010/11 and 2022/23, restricting longitudinal research.[5]

We welcome education providers' efforts to share and evaluate effective practice. However, persistent absence is a signal and not a substantive measure of pupils' experiences. Understanding why children are absent and approaches to address its causes requires quantitative and qualitative research in collaboration with local authorities and schools. Please see detailed policy recommendations below.

Theme 1: Identification and support of pupils with persistent absence

Identification of pupils with persistent absence

1. **Persistent absence** is conventionally defined as missing 10% or more of the academic year. The threshold is used to identify levels of absence that may undermine educational attainment.[6]
2. Persistent absence remains considerably higher than pre-pandemic levels in Scotland. In 2024/25, the overall rate of persistence absence was 28.5%. For

[5] Research Data Scotland (2026). Attendance and Absence linkage data - Scotland.
[6] Dräger et al. (2025). Trajectories of school absences across compulsory schooling and their impact on children's academic achievement: An analysis based on linked longitudinal survey and school administrative data. *PLoS One*, *19*(8). doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0306716

primary school pupils, this figure was at 21.1%, for secondary school pupils at 37.4%.[7]

3. Our research in Behrens et al. (2026a)[8] estimated that the overall probability of persistent absence among secondary school pupils rose from 24.9% in 2014/15 to 31.9% in 2018/19, a shift from 1 in 4 to 1 in 3 pupils. The risk for persistent absence is greatest during secondary school stages S3-S5.

4. Poverty was the strongest predictor identified: pupils who had ever been registered for free school meals were twice as likely to experience persistent absence.

5. Pupils with additional support needs (ASN) were around 40% more likely to be persistently absent.

6. Differences between schools and local authorities accounted for only a small proportion of the variation in persistent absence (of around 4%), with most variation occurring within schools and local authorities. This suggests that, while institutional practices and policies matter, persistent absence is more closely associated with pupils' individual experiences of school than with differences between schools or local authorities.

7. Additional research in Behrens et al. (2026b)[9] tracked absence across primary and secondary school for pupils with and without ASN. Absence rose sharply for all pupils after the transition to secondary school. By the end of compulsory schooling at S4, average absence rates are 13.3% for pupils with ASN and 10.0% for pupils without ASN.

8. These differences in absence rates varied by ASN category. Pupils with social-emotional needs and needs resulting from family circumstances associated showed the greatest risks of increasing absence over time. Poverty intensified the effect of ASN on attendance.

Differentiating between authorised and unauthorised absence

9. As Behrens et al. (2026a)[10] argue, the measure of persistent absence enables comparisons of absence rates but does not distinguish types of absence, its timing, length or causes.

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[7] Scottish Government (2025; corrected 2 March 2026). School attendance and absence statistics. Attendance and absence 2024-25. Note: The national figure of 28.5% includes special school pupils.
[8] Behrens, S., Treanor, M., Troncoso, P., Lee-Shield, B., Russell, E., Williamson, L. & Macintyre, C. (2026a). Predictors of authorised, unauthorised and persistent absence among secondary school pupils in Scotland. *British Educational Research Journal*, 52, 3738-3765. doi.org/10.1002/berj.70162
[9] Behrens, S., Treanor, M., Troncoso, P., Lee-Shield, B., Williamson, L., & Macintyre, C. (2026b). Early ASN identification and trajectories of school absence in Scotland. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2026.2713545
[10] Behrens, S., Treanor, M., Troncoso, P., Lee-Shield, B., Russell, E., Williamson, L. & Macintyre, C. (2026a). Predictors of authorised, unauthorised and persistent absence among secondary school pupils in Scotland. *British Educational Research Journal*, 52, 3738-3765. doi.org/10.1002/berj.70162

10. It is therefore a useful but limited indicator that requires further differentiation between authorised and unauthorised absence and attention to pupils' individual circumstances.

11. **Authorised absence**, including sickness and other approved absence, is more common among pupils from low-income households (up to 50% more authorised absence days) and pupils with mental health prescriptions (up to 90% more authorised absence days).

12. All ASN categories – health needs, social-emotional needs, family circumstances, learning environment and other needs – are associated with increased authorised absence; long-term health conditions affecting children or their parents also have small but statistically significant associations.

13. **Unauthorised absence**, including unapproved absence and late arrival at school, is also more common among pupils from low-income households (up to 130% more days) and pupils with mental health prescriptions (up to 50% more days).

14. ASN, particularly social-emotional needs and needs relating to family circumstances are associated with up to 70% more unauthorised absence days.

15. Care experience is associated with increased unauthorised, but not authorised, absence. This may reflect instability in some care arrangements.

16. Poverty combined with social-emotional needs is associated with three times as many unauthorised absence days per academic year (equivalent to 9-11 half-days). Poverty is strongly associated with both authorised and unauthorised absence and, when combined with mental health and social-emotional needs, has a compounding effect on absence overall.

Policy recommendations

17. **Prioritise family-level support for pupils experiencing poverty:** Introduce and expand measures that ease financial pressure on families and address barriers to attendance rooted in structural inequality and material disadvantage. In practice, this could include the provision of income support and evaluations of relevant benefits uptake.

18. **Integrate poverty and mental health strategies:** Attendance improvement strategies should recognise that these factors are interconnected and should address their reciprocal effects. This requires an integrated policy approach to poverty and mental health which cannot be delivered by schools alone.

19. **Strengthen support for pupils with Additional Support Needs:** Improve early identification and tailor support to pupils' needs and family

circumstances. Support must be equally available throughout Scotland's schools and local authorities.

20. **Improve access to coordinated mental health services:** Ensure timely assessment and support through NHS and other services and school-based provision. Mental health support should respond to pupils' needs be accessible and coordinate across schools and health services without stigma.

21. **Provide focused support for care-experienced pupils:** Recognise their heightened risk of unauthorised absence and strengthen multi-agency work to support engagement between schools and carer families.

Theme 2: The role of multi-agency working and family engagement

How absence, exclusions and attainment intersect

22. Troncoso et al. (2026)[11] identified educational pathways for a cohort from primary P1 to secondary S4. Attendance, exclusions and attainment, measured through National 5 qualifications, reflect pupils' differing experiences of education.

23. Differences between groups show why a uniform response to non-attendance, exclusions or attainment gaps may fail to address pupils' varied needs and circumstances.

24. Attendance difficulties are associated with poverty, parental health problems, care experience and needs relating to family circumstances. Improving attendance alone is unlikely to close attainment gaps; the quality of learning, wellbeing, relationships and support also shape educational outcomes.

25. ASN relating to family circumstances were associated with more disadvantageous educational outcomes, including being placed in local authority care, having caring responsibilities or experiencing interrupted learning.

26. Because attendance is shaped by economic, health and family factors, school-level responses alone are unlikely to be sufficient. A family-inclusive, multi-agency approach is needed to address the underlying drivers of attendance difficulties.

27. Deficit-focused or punitive approaches should be avoided. Our findings warrant scrutiny of whether school environments and practices are welcoming and responsive to different needs, alongside providing support to pupils and families.

[11] Troncoso, P., Treanor, M., Russell, E., Behrens, S., Williamson, L., & Macintyre, C. (2026). Heterogeneous pathways of disadvantage, attendance and exclusions into attainment. *Oxford Review of Education* (under review).

Absence among secondary school pupils with ASN

28. Lee-Shield et al. (2026)[12] complement this work by examining non-attendance among pupils with ASN in Scottish secondary schools (S1-S4). In 2025, 43.0% of all pupils in Scotland were identified as having ASN (36.9% of primary school pupils and 48.8% of secondary school pupils). This heterogenous group is therefore central to effective attendance policy.[13]

29. Pupils with ASN experience more non-attendance, i.e. absence and exclusions, than peers without ASN. In the study's 2018/19 cohort, pupils with ASN had overall higher authorised absence (7.7% vs 5.5%), higher unauthorised absence (9.7% vs 5.9%), and were about three times as likely to have been excluded (5.7% vs 1.9%).

30. Needs relating to the learning environment were associated with the low non-attendance group, which had a relatively good level of attendance. Higher-risk patterns were associated with mental health difficulties, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, family circumstances, and interrupted learning.

31. Pupils with multiple ASN were more likely to fall within higher-risk groups. These groups also contained proportionally more pupils from low-income households, reinforcing the relationship between structural inequality and absence.

32. Care experience was particularly associated with very high levels of unauthorised absence, underlining the need for intensive, coordinated support involving schools, families, social care and health services.

Policy recommendations

33. **Adopt whole-family, multi-agency approaches to persistent absence:** Coordinate attendance support across education, health and mental health services, social care and family support, recognising the overlap between social, economic, health and family challenges.

34. **Prioritise early identification and prevention:** Use attendance patterns, additional support needs, care experience and family circumstances to identify risk and provide support before disengagement becomes entrenched.

35. **Build collaborative relationships with families through proactive engagement:** Seek proactive engagement with parents and guardians,

[12] Lee-Shield, B., Treanor, M., Behrens, S., Troncoso, P., Russell, E., Williamson, L., & Macintyre, C. (2026). Non-attendance among pupils with additional support needs in Scottish secondary schools. *Review of Education* (in press).
[13] Scottish Government (2025). Pupil census supplementary statistics 2025. Note: The national figure of 43.0% includes special school pupils.

particularly where pupils have needs relating to family circumstances, care experience or caring responsibilities.

36. **Offer targeted interventions instead of uniform approaches:** Replace uniform responses with targeted interventions tailored to the combination of needs and underlying causes associated with different attendance patterns.

37. **Improve access to health and mental health support while reducing structural inequality:** Children's and families' health and mental health needs are important influences on attendance and are often connected to socioeconomic disadvantage.

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