EDUCATION, CULTURE AND GAELIC COMMITTEE

1. Education Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's discussion about the support for pupils with persistent absence.

2. We remain committed to the Scottish Government's ambitions to improve levels of attendance and reducing persistent absence.

3. Since the pandemic, Education Scotland (ES) recognises a shift in the attendance of children and young people. We are continuing to work closely with the Scottish Government within this priority.

4. We have developed a range of materials to support schools in addressing this issue and continue to provide bespoke support in local authorities where attendance remains a challenge.

Background

5. In 2023, Education Scotland completed a "deep dive" to support greater understanding of attendance and the reasons for absence. Within Improving Attendance: Understanding the Issues, five recommendations were identified which were the basis of our work over the subsequent two years.

6. In May 2026, ES subsequently published Evidence, Impact and Actions for Consideration 2024-26 report | Improving attendance in Scotland | Resources | Education Scotland. This report is a follow up to the 'deep dive' and provides an updated understanding of attendance and absences over two previous years, and the practice that is having a positive impact nationally, across local authorities and in educational establishments.

7. The evidence shared within this submission has either been gathered through the work of ES towards the five recommendations in the 2023 deep dive, or as part of evidence gathering to inform the second report.

8. As part of the support from ES, three online packages have been published which have focussed on policy and guidance, effective use of data, partnerships and multi-agency working and examples of effective strategies.

9. The national strategic approach builds upon the work already being undertaken by all education authorities to improve attendance as part of their stretch aims within the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

How are schools and local authorities implementing guidance?

10. Since 2023, and over the course of publication of guidance from both ES and Scottish Government (SG), all local authorities have, or are in the process of, reviewing and amending their local attendance policies to reflect national guidance and messaging. Evidence indicates this is an iterative process, with most currently updating their policies since the publication of the Scottish Government published

revised attendance guidance. There is less evidence of schools having their own attendance policy, with many relying on local authority guidance.

11. Over half of all local authorities have engaged in the 'Improving Attendance Quality Improvement Programme', delivered by ES over three separate cohorts. For cohort three, all local authorities were offered a place, ten of which accepted. Where local authorities did not accept this offer, this was due to a variety of reasons including having their own programme in place, not having the capacity or that this was not an identified need at this point. This programme has supported over 100 schools in using Quality Improvement approaches and small tests of change to improve attendance for identified target groups of children and young people within the persistent absence category. Where schools have fully engaged with this programme, it has resulted in improved levels of attendance for the targeted groups. The programme strengthened evidence-informed practice across schools and local authorities, enabling participants to better analyse attendance data, identify underlying causes of non-attendance, implement targeted interventions and monitor impact over time.

12. Effective use of attendance data to inform improvements in persistent absences is a key recommendation from both the report published by ES. Where local authorities and schools have engaged with support from ES to further develop their approaches to both analyse data and inform planning, there is evidence of improvement. Challenges still exist within this area; mainly through reduced resource, not having access to appropriate systems or not having a clear understanding of the root causes of absence. A continued challenge highlighted, particularly from schools, is inconsistent use of absence coding within the system used by local authorities and schools to record absences (SEEMiS).

13. The Behaviour in Scottish Schools 2023 report highlights the perceived impacts of COVID-19 and changed attitudes to attendance. There has been consistent and clear messaging on the need for schools and local authorities to increase work with parents and carers and their school communities to re-engage families. In many cases, Strategic Equity Fund and/or Pupil Equity Fund has been integral to provide or strengthen support to re-engage families.

Is the guidance leading to improvements in attendance?

14. Due to wide ranging strategic approaches being taken in most local authorities, and local approaches in schools, it would be difficult to directly make correlation of the impact of the guidance to any improvements nationally.

15. However, at local authority level, there is strong evidence, through responses from strategic central authority officers, of engagement with Education Scotland professional learning, support and the published resources for improving attendance. This support has led to strengthened local approaches.

16. Central officers who have attended the National Attendance Network, facilitated by Education Scotland, highlighted valuable opportunities for wider collaboration and sharing of practice.

17. Nationally in session 24-25, both overall attendance levels and the rates of persistent absence improved. Almost all local authorities (31 out of 32) improved their attendance rates.

18. Data indicates that persistent absences are highest in secondary schools and for most local authorities, particularly within S3 girls. To further address this, more work needs to be undertaken to understand the reasons behind this data, understand the barriers and inform planning that is grounded on early-intervention rather than being reactive.

19. The National Statistics will be published in December, however data within Fortnightly School Absence Information 2025-26 | Tableau Public, suggests that there has been a decline in attendance for session 25-26. Some of this may be explained by increased levels of seasonal illness in children and young people but shows that improving attendance should continue to be a priority – nationally, locally and at school/community level.

20. While variability in overall attendance is apparent across local authorities and schools, a range of factors, including rates of deprivation and the numbers of learners with additional support needs, continues to have an impact on individual local authority results. Local authority comparisons require careful and cautious interpretation.

21. Variations in context, especially where there are large numbers of learners living in the areas with the highest levels of deprivation, mean that relative positions across Scotland may not fully capture the significant improvements achieved by some authorities. It continues to be important to ensure a continued focus on improvement, informed by local data.

How do schools and local authorities identify and respond to persistent absence?

22. Local authority and school level attendance policies will detail arrangements for identifying and responding to persistent absence, both at local authority level and at school level.

23. Approaches vary widely across local authorities, are dependent on robust and timely analysis of data, relationships with families, children and young people, as well as access to further local supports.

24. Most local authorities and schools understand the multi-faceted nature of pupil absence and continue to develop strategies to respond to barriers to attendance.

25. Guidance has reinforced the importance for supportive, relationship-based communication with children, young people and their families. This is reflected in refined communication strategies and approaches to support.

26. There are persistent and indeed intersecting attendance challenges linked to poverty, Additional Support Needs (ASN), care-experience, parent and learner mental health.

How is multi-agency working supporting individual pupils?

27. Where there are strong-partnership and multi-agency approaches in place strategically, there is evidence of improved levels of persistent absences for targeted groups. However, most local authorities and schools report challenges due to financial restraints as well as large numbers on waiting lists for support due to increased demand. This can result in barriers to being able to access effective support beyond the school.

How are schools and local authorities sharing effective practice?

28. ES has established the National Attendance Network. There is strong regular participation by around half of all local authorities, with others taking part at some points through the year.

29. Participants in the network report substantial gains in knowledge, confidence and readiness to implement learning in practice. The network's strongest features are its expert inputs, opportunities for professional dialogue, sharing of effective practice and relevance to ongoing improvement priorities across Scotland.

30. Many authorities have organised their own strategic conferences or have local networks set up to share effective practice, often supported by ES.

31. The ‘Improving Attendance Quality Improvement Programme’ supports the sharing of effective practice, both from schools who have previously implemented successful small tests of change, as well as ongoing learning from current schools involved.

Tackling the challenges

32. Education Scotland are continuing to work with partners and schools to provide support for improving attendance, aligning this with our work on the Curriculum Improvement Cycle.

33. Education Scotland has also established a further programme of work to support response to the six key actions in Education Scotland’s Evidence, Impact and Actions for Consideration 2024-26 report, including delivering cohort four of the Improving Attendance Quality Improvement Programme, focussing on S3 and care experienced children and young people, recognising the commitment to The Promise.

34. Education Scotland will further develop a package of professional learning to support local authorities and schools in further developing consistency with effective use of data to improve attendance.

35. Attendance remains a key priority for the Scottish Government, and we will continue to engage with partners to understand how ES can support the work being undertaken to address this, within our functions as Scotland’s Curriculum Agency.

Conclusion

36. Continued improvement in levels of persistent absence will require sustained focus and collaboration across national and local partners.

37. Education Scotland is committed to playing its part in this improvement work and continuing close working relationships with the Scottish Government and local authorities to improve attendance and reduce persistent absence.

38. Education Scotland welcomes continued engagement with the Committee on this issue and would be pleased to provide any further information that may assist its work.