Support for pupils with persistent absence

Written evidence from Includem - Education and Gaelic Committee

About this evidence

Includem supports children, young people and families across Scotland through intensive Whole Family Support underpinned by trusted relationships and a strength-based approach. We work with children and families facing significant challenges and our work includes helping children engage with education, supporting families and working alongside schools and other services.

This submission draws on our Transforming Lives Whole Family Support Education Briefing (2026), covering additional support for learning and part-time timetables and flexible learning, alongside additional feedback from colleagues delivering intensive whole family support in Aberdeen, Fife, Stirling, Glasgow, and West Dunbartonshire, gathered for this session. It reflects the experiences of children, young people and families we support, rather than a representative survey of schools.

Key messages

- Attendance difficulties often reflect unmet needs and barriers to accessing education. Responses must establish what needs to change for the child to engage and learn.
- Flexible learning arrangements and part-time timetables can help, but reduced hours without appropriate support, meaningful learning and regular review can deepen disconnection from education.
- Whole family support can connect home, school and services, addressing practical pressures and helping children and families shape decisions.
- Guidance needs sufficient resources, specialist support and clear accountability to translate its principles into children's everyday experiences.
- Gaps in specialist provision including support for neurodiversity and child and adolescent mental health services must be addressed alongside efforts to improve attendance and engagement.

1. Implementation of national attendance guidance

The revised national guidance emphasises early intervention, inclusion, family engagement and coordinated support. These principles align with our practice. The test is whether children and families experience timely understanding, appropriate adjustments and delivery of agreed support.

Across our services, colleagues have reported no noticeable change following the revised guidance in the cases they described. Individual examples of good practice and creative support were raised but feedback consistently identified continuing difficulties

accessing additional support, coordinated planning and meaningful review of part-time timetables and flexible learning arrangements. These are local practice observations; we cannot assess implementation or impact of the revised guidance across Scotland from these accounts.

While the guidance supports monitoring and recording of part-time timetables and flexible learning arrangements, future work should monitor recording and use of data including national oversight and visibility. Records should reflect when support begins, whether agreed actions happen, and what education children actually receive while attendance is reduced.

2. Identification and support of pupils experiencing persistent absence

Our education briefing highlighted the intersection between unmet additional support needs and reduced time spent in education. Colleagues described children experiencing bullying, exclusion from peers and insufficient support in mainstream settings, alongside families struggling to navigate services. Subsequent feedback describes anxiety, sensory overwhelm, sleep and communication difficulties, learning gaps and unsuitable environments affecting attendance.

"Even when needs are recognized, appropriate resources or specialist provision often do not materialise" (Includem worker)

Across all our services colleagues described children waiting for long periods of time for specialist input and the significant impact this lack of support has on their engagement with education.

"So many children are trying to access support, and it makes it tricky for them to manage in schools. They go on temporary timetables because they don't manage in education because of their mental health. But they spend a long time waiting for that support, if they get it at all." (Includem worker)

Reduced timetables and flexible learning arrangements:

Our briefing found that flexibility can help some children engage: quieter attendance times, smaller groups and gradual approaches with enhanced opportunities for relationship-building were reported to reduce anxiety and enable learning. At the same time, the briefing documented limited teaching time, delayed reviews and stalled progression. Some children and young people spend longer travelling to education provision than the session they are provided with.

Recent feedback from teams still describe cases where children and young people have reduced hours without a clear next step, including accounts of children who are attending education settings for no more than an hour a day.

Scrutiny should distinguish education offered from education accessed. We are currently supporting a child who, following a year-long gap in education provision had been accessing an Interrupted Learner's placement. Due to a change in his family circumstances, this child is currently living in kinship care and no longer able to access this placement because of the travel required.

A child unable to attend an available offer and a child whose available provision has been reduced may need different responses. Every reduced timetable should have an individual educational purpose, meaningful provision, the child's and family's involvement, named responsibilities, review dates and a progression plan. Arrangements must not drift because appropriate support is unavailable.

The impact of reduced educational provision and persistent absence

Our briefing describes lost opportunities for friendships, social development and independence, pressure on family relationships, and parents reducing or leaving employment to provide care.

"The child we worked with was only in school for 2 hours each day. He didn't always feel welcome or included in the school – wasn't invited to go on trips or other experiences." (Includem worker)

Colleagues also raised safeguarding concerns where children spent substantial time outside education without appropriate support or supervision.

"He is not at school and so the behaviours are getting worse. These children need the most support and we're isolating them and stigmatising them." (Includem worker)

Timetables should therefore be evaluated through learning, wellbeing and participation, as well as attendance.

3. Multi-agency working and family engagement

Relationships with children and families help uncover barriers that attendance records cannot explain. Includem workers support morning routines and journeys, help address school-related costs, build confidence, and help children understand and communicate their needs. Colleagues also support families to navigate processes, prepare for meetings and pursue agreed actions. Our briefing identifies whole family support as an important connection between home, school, and the communities that children live and spend time in.

Practice example: rebuilding engagement with education

In a Glasgow example shared for this written response, a worker supported a parent whose own experience of formal education was limited. Support included addressing practical barriers, including school unform costs and travel arrangements, developing routines and building the family's relationship with education. The school offered

flexibility, including softer starts and activities to encourage engagement by the parent and the child. Following this the worker reported improved attendance by the child and greater communication with the family.

This example illustrates the combined contribution of a responsive school, the family, and sustained whole family support. Progress required understanding of the family's experiences and practical circumstances,non-judgmental support, alongside changes to how education was accessed.

Coordination must lead to action

Our briefing included examples of effective multi-agency working and regular learning reviews. Subsequent feedback from teams describes inconsistent coordination and families having to pursue support themselves. A meeting is valuable when it produces a shared understanding, clear actions and delivery. Colleagues have reported that even where plans are in place they are not always a purposeful mechanism for progressing change.

"There are regular education meetings and discussions around a plan moving forward for the young person but agreed plans can be time limited or difficult to action." (Includem worker)

Plans should identify who is responsible, when action will happen and how unresolved gaps will be escalated. Children and families should understand and influence these plans. Their involvement must extend beyond being informed about decisions already made. Accessible communication and a clear point of contact can reduce the burden of navigating several services.

Continuity of relationships

Children and young people consistently highlight the role of relationships in either hindering or supporting engagement with education. Last year, a service supporting children who were facing significant barriers to engaging with education had to be terminated following a reduction in funding. Feedback from a parent described the worker as the only consistent support successfully engaging their child and helping him leave the house. The parent feared that ending support would increase isolation and anxiety.

"As his parent, I am doing everything I can to help him, but the level of need he has cannot be met without professional involvement" (Parent)

This is only one example but highlights the importance of continuity and planned transitions when support ends. Schools and partners supporting children and young people should consider how trusted relationships can be sustained where needs remain. This should be reflected in commissioning practices and allocation of resources. Whole family support cannot replace teaching, specialist input or a suitable

placement, but it can enhance engagement with education and improve outcomes for children and their families.

4. Sharing and evaluating effective practice

Our evidence identifies features worth evaluating and sharing: consistent relationships, quieter or smaller settings, planned transitions, meaningful family participation and coordinated support. The briefing also recommends wider access to practical and vocational learning, and suitable alternative settings and online provision where these meet children's needs.

We have limited evidence about how these approaches are systematically evaluated or transferred between schools and authorities. We encourage improvement activity that includes children, families and third sector partners, and examines which approaches help which children, in what circumstances.

Monitoring should make visible the purpose and duration of reduced timetables, learning hours offered and received, review history and outcomes. Attendance figures should be considered alongside learning, wellbeing, belonging and the child's experience, helping distinguish beneficial flexibility from provision that has stalled.

Recommendations

Building on our education briefing and subsequent practice feedback, Includem asks the Committee to consider the following priorities:

- Ensure early, needs-led support. Schools and local authorities should involve children and families when difficulties emerge, make appropriate adjustments and provide support while specialist assessment or input is pending.
- Strengthen oversight of reduced timetables and flexible learning arrangements. Local authorities should ensure written plans, meaningful learning, named responsibilities, regular reviews and action when progression stalls. National and local monitoring should examine duration, provision and outcomes to ensure attendance and engagement are reflected in data and information.
- Invest in support that makes participation possible. Scottish Government and local authorities should enhance additional support for learning provision, improve staff development, design suitable settings, provide specialist input and planned transitions, alongside investment in sustainable whole family support.
- Make multi-agency responsibility clear and ensure planning considers transitions and changes in support.
- Evaluate and share what helps children learn. Schools and authorities should include children's and families' experiences alongside attendance measures and evidence of progress towards meaningful learning pathways suited to individual needs.

Sources

Includem, Transforming Lives Whole Family Support: Education Briefing.

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

Includem practitioner feedback and case material collated for this evidence session, October 2026.