Attendance Improvement and the Implementation of National Attendance Guidance

Feedback provided by the Scottish Guidance Association

The Scottish Guidance Association (SGA) provides a national forum for professionals involved in guidance, personal support, pastoral care and pupil support in Scottish schools. Our Association is run on an entirely voluntary basis, in our own time, by staff who work in guidance and pupil support. The purpose of the SGA is to support practitioners, encourage communication and cooperation, disseminate good practice and contribute a practitioner voice to national developments. The Association's mission is grounded in the belief that every young person is entitled to the best possible guidance provision, and that effective provision depends on appropriate professional conditions, training and resources. We therefore consider attendance not simply as an administrative or compliance issue, but as a central pastoral, inclusion and wellbeing matter.

Implementation of Recent National Attendance Guidance

The SGA welcomes the refreshed national guidance, Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools, published on 18 March 2026. It is particularly helpful that the national approach places attendance within a wider framework of inclusion, participation, relationships and rights. The guidance confirms that attendance is a collective responsibility and that schools and education authorities should identify and respond to barriers to attendance and engagement. It also recognises participation in agreed educational activity beyond the school building, including flexible arrangements and adapted timetables, as attendance where the activity has been arranged and agreed by the school.

The SGA supports the following national principles:

- an inclusive and supportive whole-school culture in which pupils feel safe, respected and connected.
- positive relationships and clear communication with children, young people and families.
- early identification of reduced engagement or emerging patterns of absence.
- intelligent use of attendance data alongside professional and relational knowledge of the learner.
- clear staged intervention processes where absence becomes persistent, long-term or complex.
- GIRFEC-aligned assessment and planning, including multi-agency coordination where required.
- the meaningful participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them.
- flexibility in curriculum, environment and learning pathways where this is required to sustain engagement.

Across our members, there is a clear agreement for the need for a consistent approach to improving the significant issue of attendance in secondary schools. In particular, the increase in internal truancy in recent years, the reduction in engagement from parents and the rise of mental health impacting on attendance, are areas which have been highlighted as areas of greatest concern. There are varying levels of awareness and implementation of the national attendance guidance published in March 2026. Among schools that are aware of the guidance, there remains significant variation in implementation, which is understandable given the limited time since publication.

While the national guidance establishes a clear framework for improving attendance, there is a widespread view that greater consistency is required across Scotland in relation to planning, coordination, systems, documentation, data access and analysis, partnership working, and resource allocation.

The guidance places a strong emphasis on:

- A person-centred approach.
- Early identification and intervention.
- Proactive and intelligent use of attendance data.
- Developing a whole-school culture that promotes attendance.
- Positive engagement with families.
- Coordinated support through multi-agency partnerships.

However, these principles are not new to schools. Many establishments have been striving to implement such approaches for several years, often within significant operational constraints.

PTs Guidance are acutely aware of the need to improve attendance and work tirelessly to support pupils and families. However, the role varies considerably both between schools and across local authorities. Caseload sizes, teaching commitments, staffing levels, and the breadth of guidance responsibilities differ significantly, which inevitably affects the capacity to implement attendance-related recommendations consistently. Until greater consistency exists in the structure and expectations of Guidance roles, variations in practice and implementation are likely to remain. This can impact staff confidence, capacity, and the ability to deliver the national guidance in a fully consistent manner.

Identification and Support of Pupils with Persistent Absence

Many schools begin identifying attendance concerns during the Primary 6 to Secondary 1 transition process. Early identification at this stage supports smoother transitions for pupils and their families and allows concerns to be addressed before attendance patterns become entrenched. PTs Guidance are often involved in transition meetings with primary schools, pupils, and parents/carers. This early engagement helps establish positive relationships and fosters trust before pupils enter secondary education. The continuity provided by a dedicated PT Guidance throughout a pupil's secondary school experience is particularly valuable.

Consistent relationships enable staff to develop a true person-centred approach to support:

- Develop a detailed understanding of individual strengths, needs, and circumstances.
- Build trusting, non-judgemental relationships with pupils and families.
- Provide tailored support and guidance over time.
- Respond effectively to emerging attendance concerns.

Parents/carers have important responsibilities in relation to school attendance. Schools also have a responsibility to create the conditions in which families can disclose difficulty early and work collaboratively on solutions. It is vital for PT Guidance to combine clarity about the importance of

attendance with curiosity about the barriers to a young person's attendance with an explicit offer of support.

Early Identification, Intervention and Effective Use of Data

The SGA believes that Guidance and Pupil Support staff are central to effective attendance practice because they hold the relational knowledge that allows data to be interpreted in context. A pupil's attendance profile rarely tells the whole story. The professional who knows the learner, family history, strengths, previous interventions, peer context and wellbeing concerns is often best placed to coordinate an appropriate response.

The SGA supports accurate, timely and intelligent use of attendance data. Schools employ a range of tracking and monitoring approaches to identify attendance concerns at an early stage, including:

- Period-by-period attendance monitoring.
- Daily, weekly, and termly attendance tracking.
- Analysis of attendance trends and patterns.
- Identification of factors contributing to poor attendance, including:
    - Mental health concerns.
    - Family circumstances.
    - Additional support needs.
    - Other social or emotional factors.
- Prioritisation of support and interventions based on available data.
- Escalation through staged intervention processes where required.

The ongoing involvement of PTs Guidance allows attendance data to be considered alongside professional knowledge of pupils and their families. This combination of quantitative data and relational understanding supports more personalised and effective interventions. Strong partnerships with families are central to this process. Building positive relationships before difficulties arise enables schools to respond more effectively when attendance concerns emerge. PT's Guidance are able to coordinate Child's Planning and multi-agency communication, ensure that attendance interventions remain person-centred and proportionate and advocate for flexible pathways where school-based factors are contributing to absence. Providing a supportive, blame-free culture is essential, ensuring families are actively involved in planning interventions and reviewing progress without setting unrealistic expectations.

The SGA would welcome greater national consistency in:

- definitions and reporting of absence and reduced learning hours.
- SEEMiS coding and the recording of flexible/adapted arrangements.

The Role of Partnership & Multi-Agency Working and Family Engagement

Effective attendance support relies on strong partnership working across a range of services and agencies. Partnerships with organisations such as Social Work, Health Services, and Third Sector providers can play a vital role in addressing barriers to attendance and supporting both pupils and

families. In many cases, PTs Guidance provide the continuity, coordination, and oversight necessary to facilitate this partnership working. They often act as the key point of contact, ensuring communication remains focused on the needs of the young person and that support is delivered in a coordinated manner.

Schools engage with a broad range of external partners, including:

- Educational Psychology Services.
- Social Work.
- Health Services.
- Community and Third Sector organisations.
- School-based counselling services.
- Family engagement and attendance officers.

Where available, these supports contribute significantly to relationship-building, pupil wellbeing, and coordinated intervention planning.

The SGA strongly supports the national expectation that complex absence should be addressed through coordinated partnership. Members continue, however, to report practical barriers that limit the effectiveness of that model:

- Lengthy referral processes, including information gathering, referral preparation, assessment procedures, and waiting lists.
- Inconsistent availability of partner services, particularly in rural and remote areas.
- Limited transport options, which can prevent families from accessing support services.
- Financial costs associated with some community-based interventions.
- Education often remains the only consistent service, while partner agencies may close cases quickly where engagement is limited.
- Short-term interventions can result in support being withdrawn before sustainable improvements in attendance are established.
- Some parents and carers remain reluctant to engage with external support services.
- In some instances, certain supports may be viewed positively by young people for social reasons rather than being accessed for meaningful engagement and support.
- A reduction in both the availability and diversity of support services, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Increased levels of mental health concerns and social anxiety among young people and families, which can reduce resilience and contribute to attendance difficulties.

A genuinely multi-agency attendance strategy therefore requires shared ownership, agreed thresholds, clear routes for consultation, continuity during waiting periods and accountability for outcomes across services, not only within schools.

Sharing and Evaluating Effective Practice Across Local Authorities and Schools

There remains considerable variation in attendance practices both within and across local authorities. While many schools have established mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and ensure that support represents good value and meets pupil needs, this level of evaluation is not always reflected across all partner agencies.

Effective practice-sharing opportunities exist in some authorities through:

- Regular networking meetings.
- Professional learning communities.
- INSET and staff development days.
- Collaborative authority-wide initiatives.

However, opportunities for attendance-related development are often constrained by competing priorities, particularly those linked to attainment, curriculum development, and wider educational improvement agendas.

To support the successful implementation of the national attendance guidance, greater national and local consistency is required in systems, processes, professional learning opportunities, and the sharing of effective practice. This would help ensure that all schools, staff, pupils, and families benefit from a coordinated and equitable approach to attendance improvement.

Conclusions

The SGA recommends the following actions to strengthen implementation of the 2026 guidance and improve outcomes for children and young people:

1. Adopt a common national practice framework for EBSNA/EBSA and sustained emotionally based absence, using shared terminology, assessment principles and staged intervention expectations, ensuring that local authority attendance framework is explicitly aligned with GIRFEC, with clear routes to universal support and coordinated planning.
2. Protect the relational function of Guidance by reviewing caseloads, teaching commitments, non-contact time and administrative support required for attendance casework.
3. Provide national professional learning for Guidance, senior leaders and wider staff on emotionally based absence, school-related anxiety, neurodivergence, sensory needs, trauma informed practice and functional assessment of attendance difficulties.
4. Use attendance data proactively, but avoid rigid percentage thresholds as the sole determinant of intervention. Need, change over time, pattern, risk and context should guide response.
5. Develop stronger multi-agency pathways with realistic service standards, consultation routes and support during waiting periods, particularly for learners with complex mental health or additional support needs.
6. Create regular national and local practitioner networks through which effective approaches can be shared, evaluated and adapted, consistent with the SGA's core purpose of disseminating good practice and bringing support together.

The SGA shares the national ambition to improve attendance. Regular participation in education matters profoundly for learning, relationships, wellbeing and future outcomes. The challenge is to ensure that the pursuit of improved attendance does not become detached from the reasons children and young people are absent. For some pupils, clear expectations and prompt follow-up will be sufficient. For others, especially those experiencing emotionally based absence, anxiety, sensory overload, disability, additional support needs or complex family circumstances, progress depends on trust, careful assessment, adjustment, coordinated support and time. A young person's return is most sustainable when the barriers that made attendance difficult have been understood and addressed.