Education and Gaelic Committee
Tuesday 3 November 2026
7th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Support for pupils with persistent absence

Introduction

1. School attendance has not recovered to the level it was at before the COVID-19 pandemic. To support the recovery, the Scottish Government published revised attendance guidance in March 2026. Education Scotland has also undertaken work on improving attendance. Together, these emphasise person-centred approaches, early intervention, effective use of attendance data and coordinated support involving schools, families and partner services.

2. In this short inquiry, the Committee will aim to understand—

    - how schools and councils are implementing guidance
    - whether it is leading to improvements
    - how schools identify and respond to persistent absence
    - how multi-agency working is supporting individual pupils
    - how schools and councils are sharing effective practice

Committee meeting

3. This is the first evidence session on the short inquiry and the Committee will take evidence from the following witnesses—

    - Barry Syme, Glasgow Educational Psychology Service, the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP);
    - Stuart Mathers, Head of Evidence Mobilisation, Education Endowment
    - Foundation;
    - Helen Waggott, President, Scottish Guidance Association;
    - Dr Silvia Behrens, Research Associate (Urban Studies and Social Policy),

Supporting information

4. SPICe has provided a background briefing which is attached at **Annexe A.** Written submissions from witnesses are attached at **Annexe B**.

5. The Committee has written to all local authorities on their approach to education which included seeking information on this short inquiry. Responses are due on 4 November and will be circulated with the papers for the meeting on 10 November.

6. In addition, the Committee has requested written evidence from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, the Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland, School Leaders Scotland, Education Scotland and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. These will be circulated and published with committee papers for future evidence sessions.

Next steps

7. The Committee will continue to take evidence on its inquiry at the next meeting on 10 November and intends to visit a school on 17 November to see first-hand how it supports pupils with persistent absence.

Clerk to the Committee
October 2026

Annexe A

Scottish Parliament Information Centre
Ionad Fiosrachaidh Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

School attendance and persistent absence

Introduction

The Committee is undertaking a short inquiry on pupils' attendance from school. Rates of attendance have fallen compared to before the pandemic.

Improving attendance is a headline aim of the Scottish Government's activities in relation to school education. It is one of the "ABCs" along with attainment, behaviour and curriculum. The 2026 National Improvement Plan linked attendance to better attainment and closing the attainment gap; it stated:

> "Achievement in education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty - ensuring all children and young people have the tools they need to achieve their full potential and create better futures for themselves and their families. It is important, therefore, that young people attend school and engage fully in their learning. Education Scotland has established an Improving Attendance Quality Improvement Programme to provide bespoke support on attendance, which will be offered to all local authorities in session 25-26. The update of our national attendance guidance will be published in Spring 2026, and has been informed by research with young people. We also launched a national campaign on attendance in the autumn of 2025, to reinforce this priority and support improved attendance at school."

This paper is intended to support the Committee in its evidence sessions on attendance for the meetings on 3 November and 10 November. The focus of the inquiry is on persistent absence and Members will have a range of submissions in their papers which also cover these issues and will support members in exploring a range of issues.

Persistent absence is part of a broader issue of attendance rates falling. This paper explores both the wider issues around attendance rates in Scotland and persistent absence.

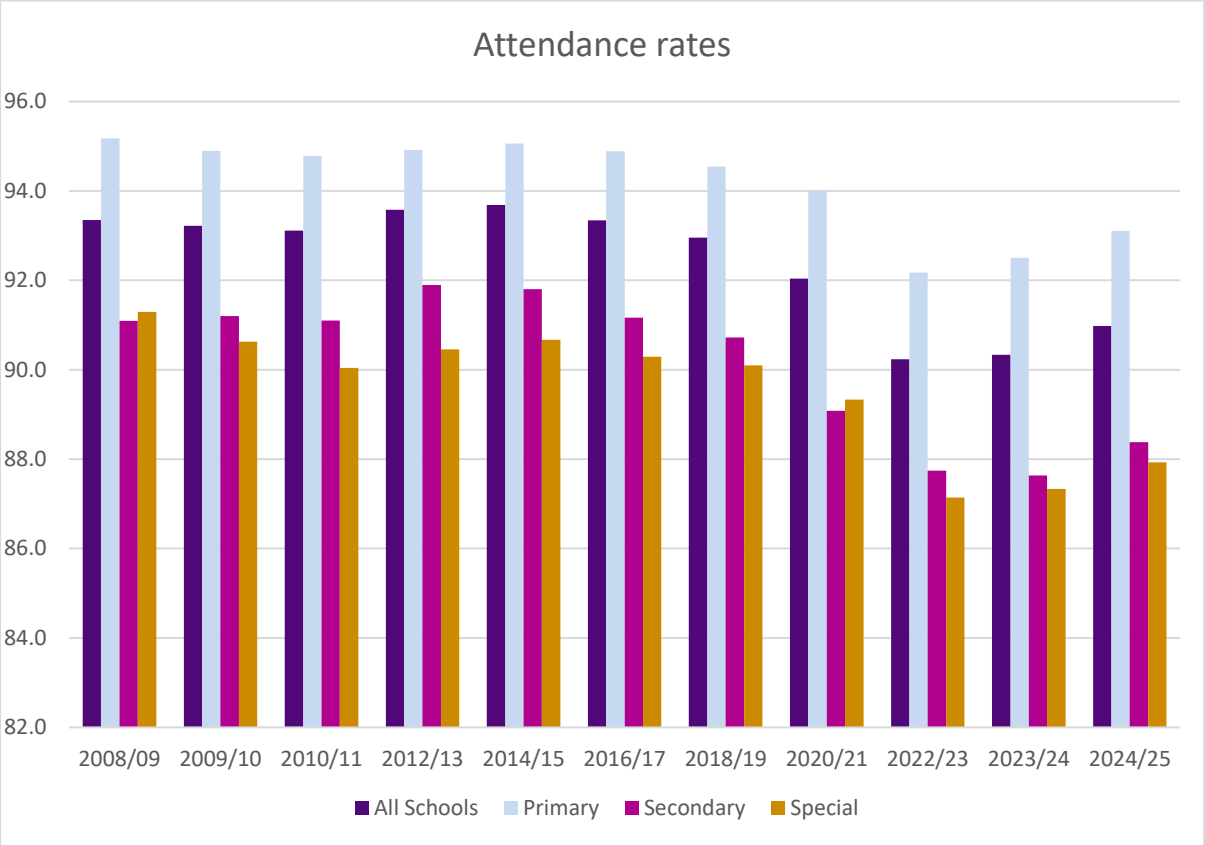
Data

The Scottish Government regularly publishes statistics on school attendance – the latest published statistics relate to the 2024-25 school year. Attendance is recorded on SEEMiS, the national school management information system. Schools are expected to record attendance in both the morning and afternoon sessions as a minimum. The data therefore refers to percentage attendance of half-days.

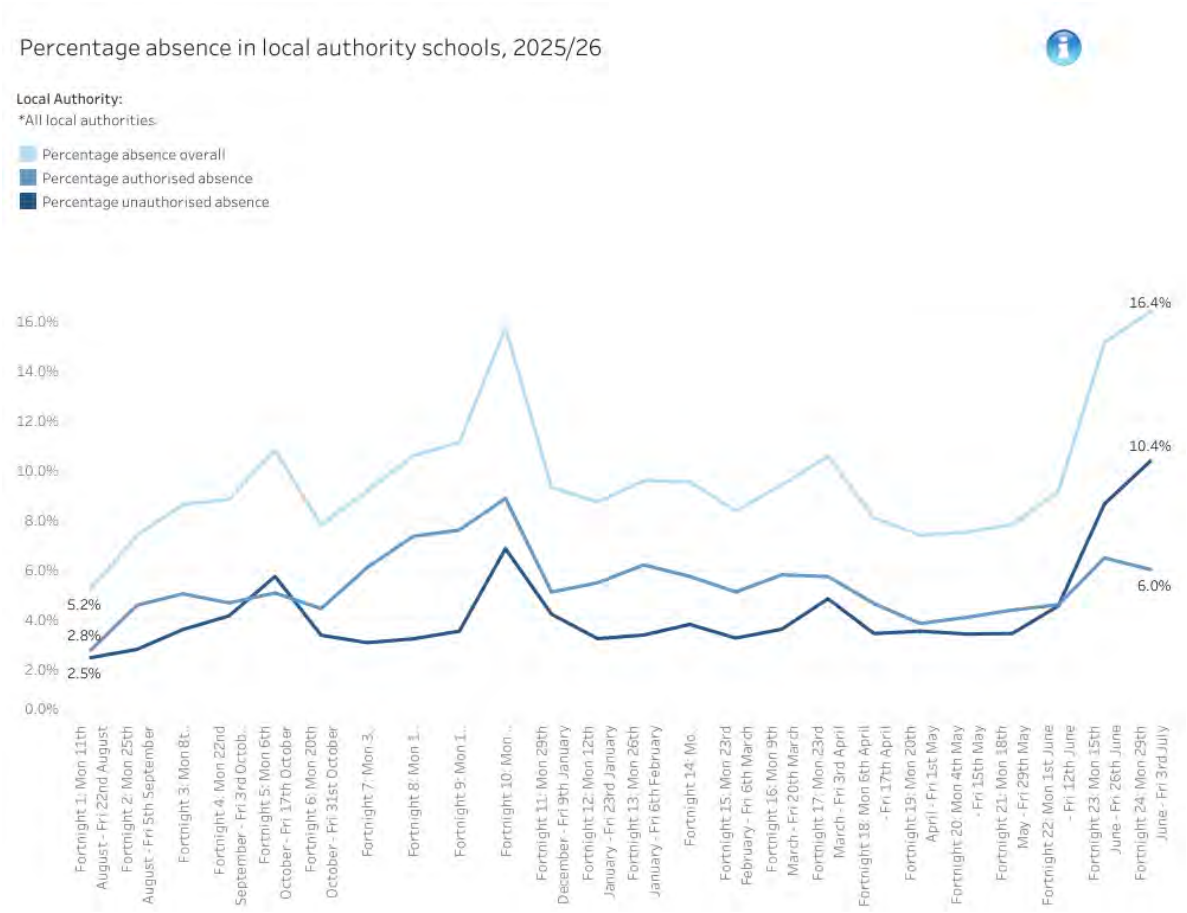
The data suggests attendance challenges are concentrated rather than evenly distributed. Lower attendance is associated with deprivation, additional support needs and the early secondary years.

Overall attendance trends

Attendance rates were relatively stable between 2008/09 and 2018/19, with overall attendance in all schools remaining around 93-94%. Primary schools consistently recorded the highest attendance rates (around 95%), while secondary and special schools were lower, generally at around 91-92% and 90-91% respectively.
A marked decline is visible from 2020/21 onwards, with attendance falling across all sectors. Although rates have recovered somewhat since the low point in 2022/23, attendance in 2024/25 remains below pre-pandemic levels, particularly in secondary and special schools.

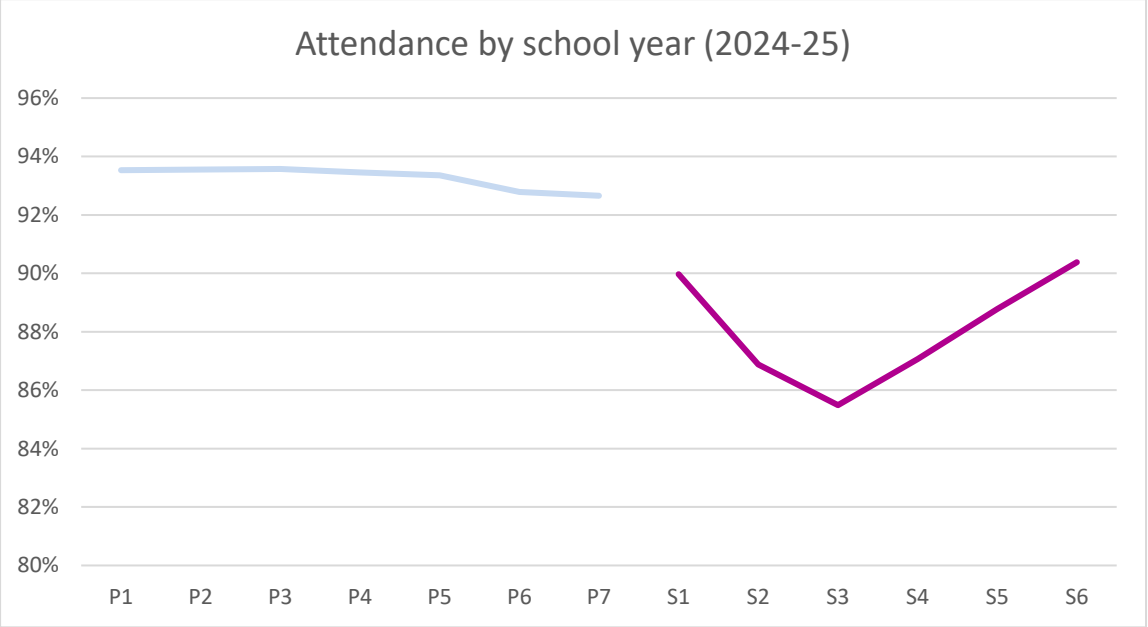


The Government also publishes fortnightly data on attendance. Provisionally the attendance for 2025-26 overall was 90.6%. From this data we can see how attendance patterns change across the year.



There are clear peaks of absence in the weeks running up school holidays, particularly before the summer break and in the half-term running from October to December.

The following chart shows the attendance rate in 2024-25 by year in mainstream schools.

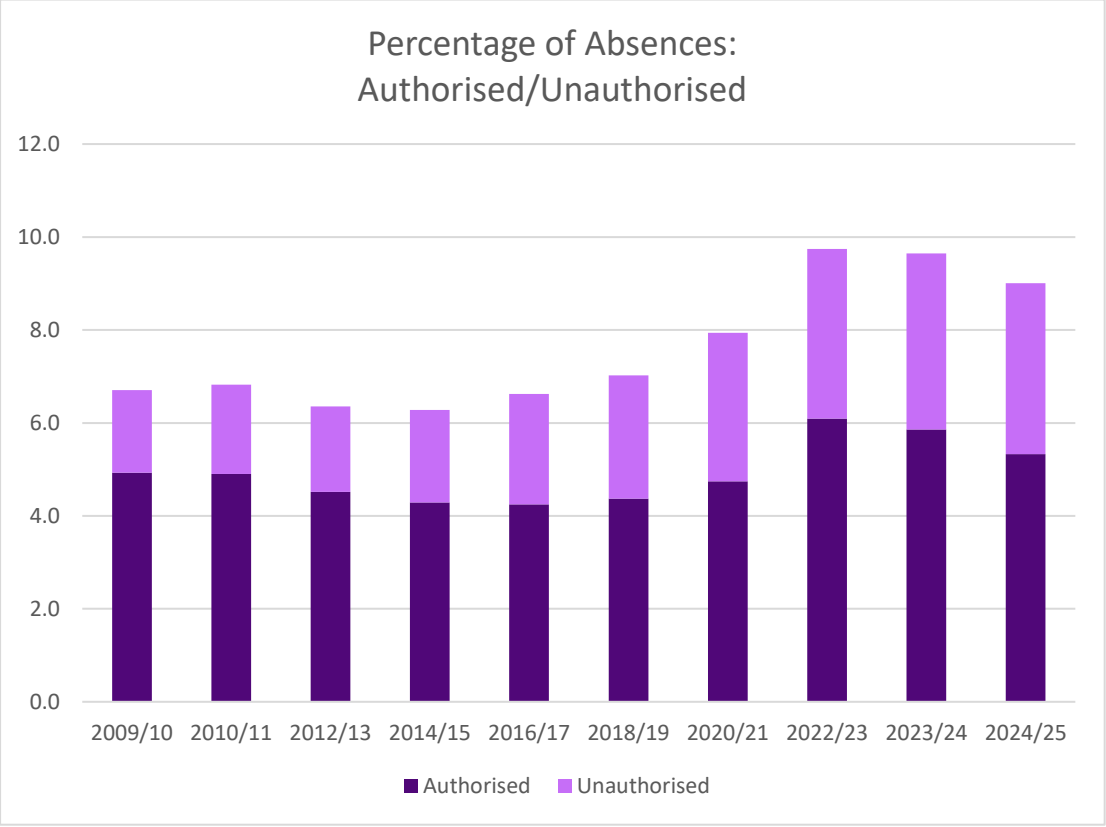


Attendance in 2024/25 was markedly higher in primary than secondary education, remaining relatively stable across the primary years at around 93-94%. Attendance peaks slightly in P2-P3 before declining modestly in P6 and P7.

In secondary school, attendance falls sharply between S1 (90.0%) and S3 (85.5%), reaching its lowest point in S3 before recovering steadily through the senior phase to 90.4% in S6. This means attendance in S6 is broadly comparable to S1 but remains around 2 percentage points lower than in the primary years.

There is some variation across local authorities. In 2024-25, East Renfrewshire (93.6%), East Dunbartonshire (92.9%), and Aberdeenshire (92.8) had the highest attendance rates. East Ayrshire (89.1%), Glasgow City (89.2%) and North Ayrshire (89.6%) had the lowest attendance rates.

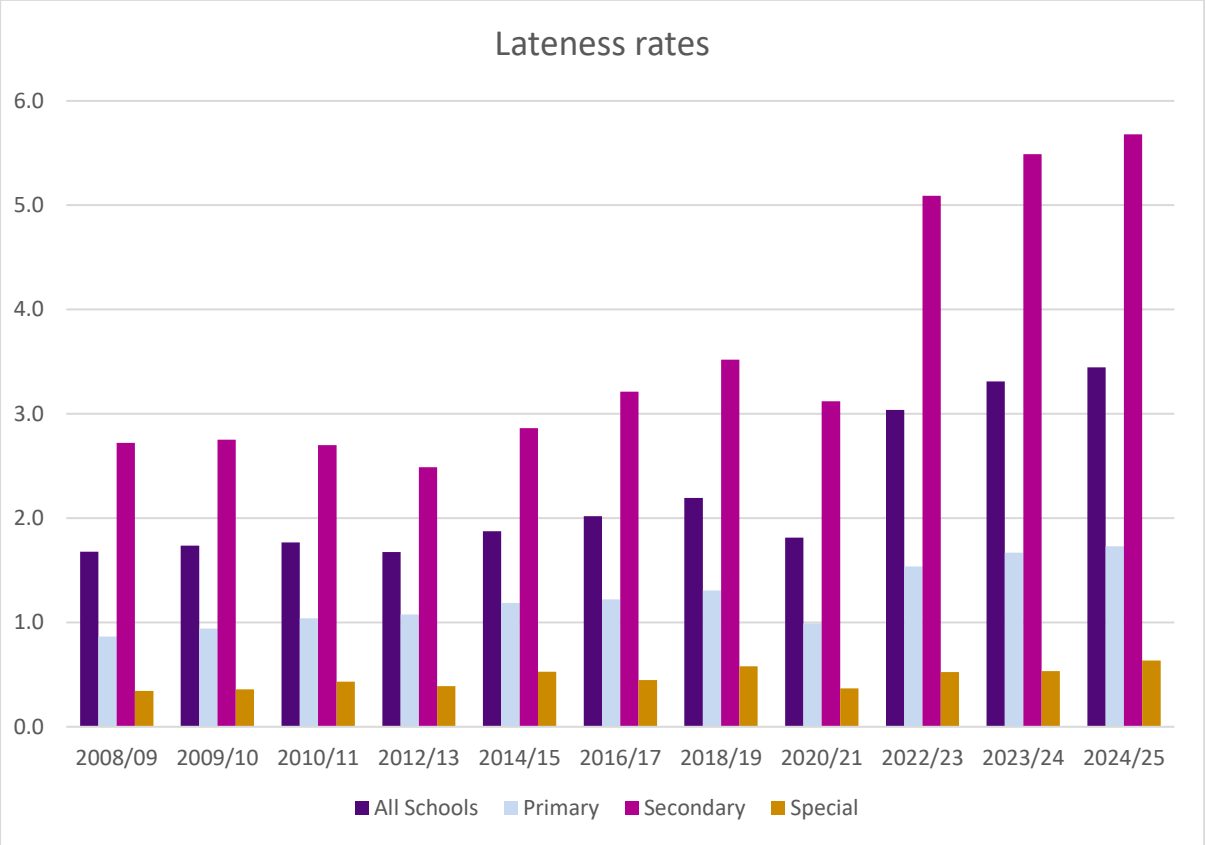
Absence can be either authorised (e.g. off sick) or non-authorised (e.g. unexplained absence or unauthorised holidays). The chart below shows school absences split by these categories



Another notable trend has been the increase in lateness. If a pupil arrives in the first half of a half-day session, they are marked as late and this is included in the attendance figures.

Lateness rates were broadly stable before the pandemic, with overall lateness across all schools fluctuating between around 1.7% and 2.2% from 2008/09 to 2018/19. Secondary schools consistently recorded the highest lateness rates, while primary schools had the lowest.

Since 2020/21, lateness has increased sharply across all sectors. The overall rate rose from 1.8% in 2020/21 to 3.4% in 2024/25, while secondary school lateness increased particularly markedly, from 3.1% to 5.7% over the same period. Although primary and special schools also experienced increases, lateness remains substantially lower than in secondary schools.

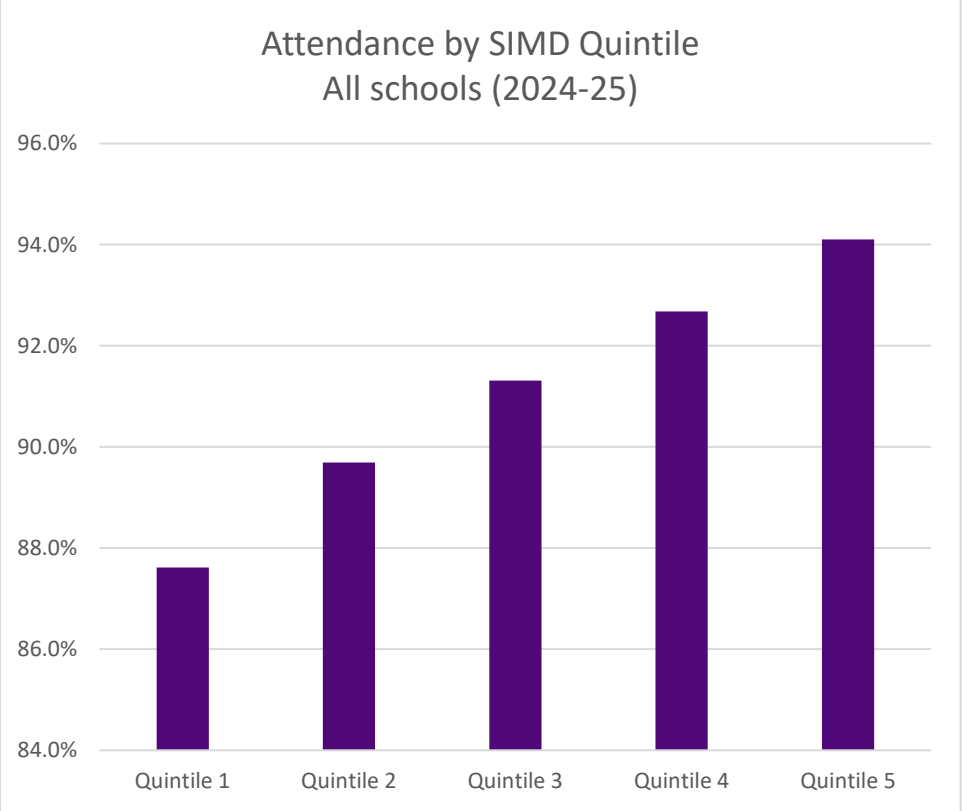


Deprivation

The published statistics includes two measures for deprivation: by SIMD quintile and eligibility for free school meals.

The attendance of pupils registered for FSM was 82.4% in 2024-25 compared to 91.2% for those not registered for FSM. The FSM measure excludes pupils receiving the universal FSM offer – in P1-P5 and special schools.

The chart below shows attendance by SIMD quintile. SIMD quintile 1 refers to relatively more deprived areas while SIMD quintile 5 refers to relatively less deprived areas.



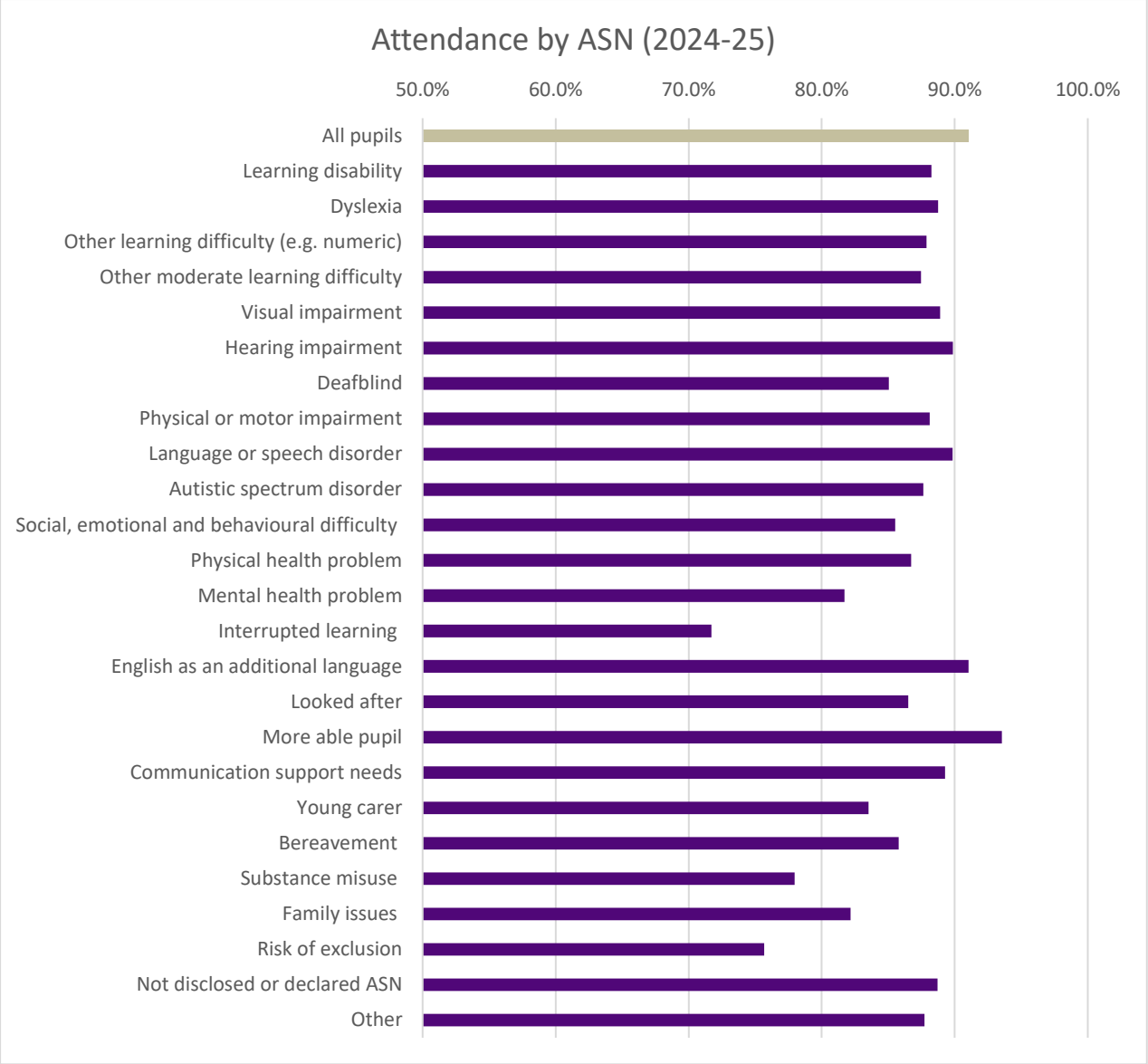
There is a clear correlation between neighbourhood deprivation and attendance.

Additional Support Needs

Pupils with an additional support need have lower rates of attendance than those without ASN. The Scottish Government's report accompanying the 2024-25 statistics noted:

> "Pupils with additional support needs (ASN) had a lower overall attendance rate than pupils with no ASN (88.2% compared with 92.9%), a gap of 4.7 percentage points. This trend is similar across primary and secondary schools, but the gap is greater in secondary schools than in primary schools. Attendance rates increased for both pupils with and without an ASN compared to 2023/24. However, it increased more for pupils with no ASN therefore the gap has widened compared to the gap of 4.6 percentage points in 2023/24."

The definition of ASN encompasses a wide range of needs. The chart below shows attendance under each recorded ASN category (note that a pupil can have more than one category recorded against their record).



Pupils in all but two ASN categories had lower average attendance than the pupil population as a whole. More able pupils had higher attendance (93.5%) and the attendance of pupils with English as an additional language was the same as the overall average (91.0%).

Pupils with interrupted learning had the lowest attendance (71.7%) –for at least some pupils this is definitional: the additional support need is because of low attendance. Pupils identified under the categories “substance misuse” and “risk of exclusion” also had average rates of attendance lower than 80%. These are small categories of ASN. In 2024, 0.1% of pupils were identified as having an ASN due to substance misuse and 0.3% at risk of exclusion. By far the largest ASN category is “Social, emotional and behavioural difficulty” and the attendance of pupils identified as having SEBD was 85.5% in 2024-25.

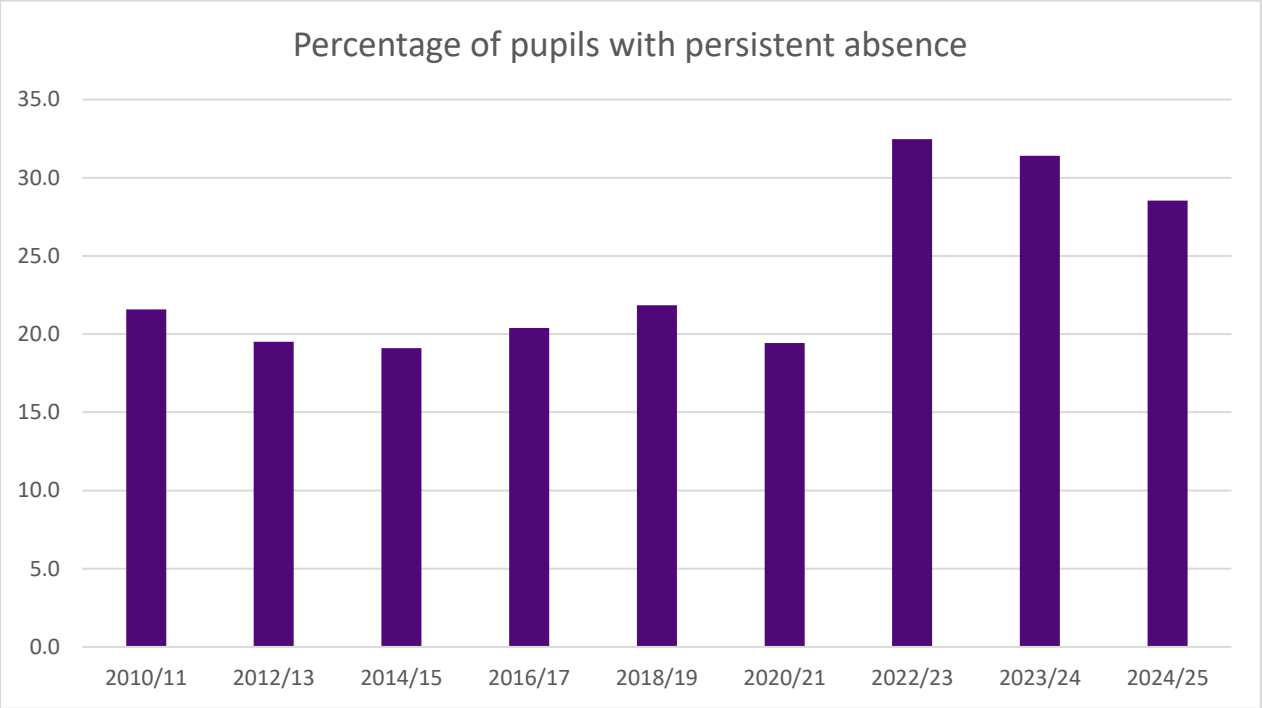
There is also a gap in lateness between pupils with an ASN (4.4%) and with no identified ASN (2.8%).

Sex and ethnicity

In 2024-25 overall attendance was slightly higher among male pupils (91.1%) than female pupils (90.8%). This difference was driven by attendance patterns in secondary and special schools, whereas in primary schools, female pupils had a marginally higher attendance rate (93.3%) than male pupils (93.0%).
Attendance varied relatively little across most ethnic groups, with rates generally ranging between 90.8% and 92.0%. The highest attendance rate was recorded among pupils in the Black/African/Caribbean ethnic group (95.1%).

Persistent absence

The Scottish Government reports on 'persistent absence' where pupils miss 10% or more sessions. The chart below shows the percentage of pupils who meet this criteria over time.



Other jurisdictions

Reduced school attendance is not an issue specific to Scotland. It is also an issue faced in other jurisdictions. The OECD reports that:

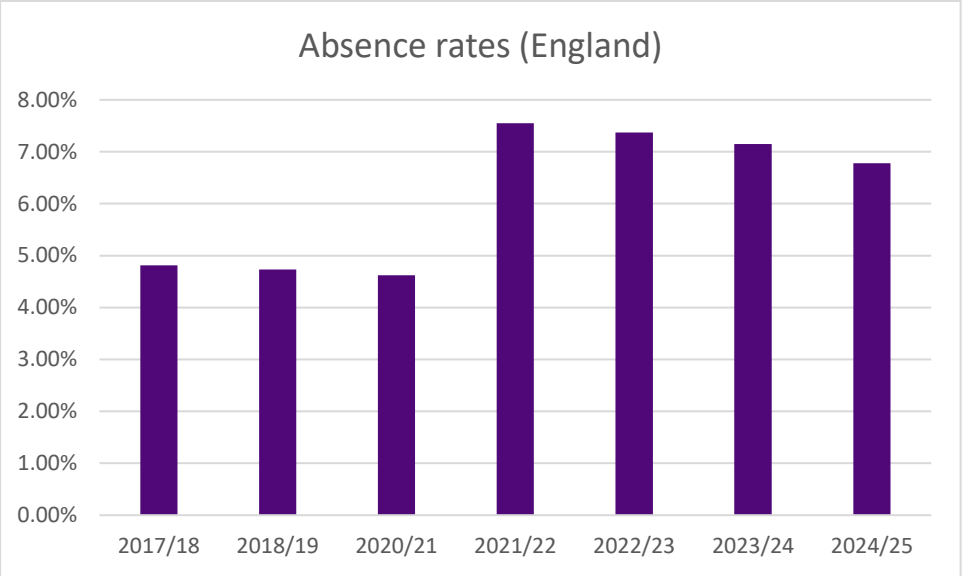
> "Across countries, there is growing recognition of the importance of ensuring that all learners can participate fully in education and benefit from supportive learning environments. However, data show that not all students attend school regularly and that school attendance problems (SAP) have become a challenge affecting classrooms in nearly every country … with the COVID-19 pandemic further worsening absence rates. Results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 indicate that as many as 8% of 15-year-old students, on average across OECD countries, had missed school for more than three consecutive months during their

previous educational journey."[1]

England

The latest (provisional) annual data for schools in England shows that attendance last year (2025-26) was 93.1% and the persistent absence rate was 19.1%[2].

The Department for Education's annual statistics which include time series report the absence rates. There is a similar pattern to Scotland – a large increase in absences after the pandemic and while the falls between 2021-22 to 2024-25, absence rates remain higher than pre-pandemic. The chart below shows this.



Rates of absence in England are higher for pupils eligible for FSM and for pupils who have Special Educational Needs.

This data is for pupils of school age (5-15).

Wales

There is a similar picture in Wales. In 2024/25, attendance in all state-funded schools was 91.1%, below the pre-pandemic figure of 94.3% in 2018/19. For persistent absence, the 2024/25 figure of 27.0% is well above the 2018/19 level of 14.7%.

Potential reasons for falling rates of attendance

Education Scotland's 2023 Improving Attendance: Understanding the Issues report noted a "a system-wide concern about reduced levels of attendance, particularly since the covid-19 pandemic". This report said that the "causes of absence are multifaceted" and highlighted four categories of causes of absence:

[1] OECD 2026, Tackling school attendance problems in Ireland
[2] Reported as 19.05% in the source.

- Individual, i.e.:
    - pupil mental health and wellbeing, emotionally-based school avoidance and anxiety
    - social difficulties (eg, isolation, bullying)
    - lack of interest
    - additional support needs
    - cultural issues
    - children and young people/families citing types of illness that pre-pandemic would not have led to absence
- poor relationships with peers
- family, i.e.:
    - parental mental health and/or anxiety
    - low parental interest
    - families experiencing financial stress
    - parental attitudes around the value of learning within the school building
    - taking term-time family holidays
- school, ie: in effectively supporting pupils' interest in education and attending school.

Education Scotland suggested a broader understanding of 'attendance' to include active engagement with schooling. It said:

> "Children and young people may physically be in school but can be disengaged from learning. Attendance, combined with engagement should support children and young people to make progress in their learning and have a positive impact on educational outcomes."

The 2026 Scottish Government guidance, Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools identified groups of pupils who may be vulnerable to low attendance:

- Children and young people with additional support needs
- Children and young people from Gypsy Traveller communities
- Children and young people impacted by poverty
- Children and young people who have been excluded

The guidance suggests both universal and targeted approaches to supporting attendance. It stated that "poor attendance often signals underlying needs and challenges" and that professionals should gain "a clear understanding of the specific barriers affecting attendance or engagement". That is, the reasons for low attendance can be specific to the individual case.

These documents highlight correlations between children's circumstances and lower attendance. However, they do not set out why attendance was trending downwards in the latter half of the 2010s and dropped significantly after the pandemic.

The OECD's recent report on attendance in Ireland noted:

> "Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Ireland has also seen a noticeable rise in

> casual non-attendance due to changing parental perceptions about daily schooling, the cost-of-living crisis, transportation issues, and increased suspensions or expulsions in special schools, potentially linked to pandemic closures."

Impact of Absence

Where pupils attend school less, there are likely to be fewer opportunities to learn and take part in the life and learning of the school.

The Education Endowment Foundation states that "with clear links between poor attendance and poor attainment and behaviour, tackling persistent absence is an important part of improving outcomes for all pupils." Education Scotland states:

> "Children and young people's progress, attainment and achievements can be impacted by any absence. Evidence suggests that attendance that falls below 90% impacts negatively on progress. The higher the absence, the greater the impact on attainment."

The Milburn Review's interim report, Young people and work: interim report, said (about England) "school absence has become a crisis in its own right". It noted:

> "The consequences for attainment are direct and measurable. Pupils who attended school at least 95% of the time in Year 11, were 1.9 times more likely to achieve Grade 5 in English and Maths GCSE compared to pupils who attended 90% to 95% of the time, and 3 times more likely than those attending 85 to 90%. Missing just ten days of Year 11 reduced the likelihood of achieving Grade 5 by around 50%. …
> "Persistent absenteeism is associated with a 3.9 times greater risk of being NEET at age 16 to 18 and a 6.3 times greater risk of being persistently NEET."

Suggested approaches and national guidance

In 2022, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) undertook a rapid evidence review of international research on interventions that aim to improve attendance. The EEF found that in relation to approaches to support attendance, "there is some evidence of promise for parental communication and engagement approaches and responsive interventions that meet the individual needs of the pupils". It also noted that, "the interventions that show promise take a holistic approach in understanding pupils and their specific need, and address the specific barriers to attendance that have been identified." The EEF noted that the majority of studies took place in the USA and there was a lack of UK-based research. It also said that "over 2/3 of the studies included were considered to have potential bias, which may have affected their conclusions."

The OECD's recent report on attendance in Ireland suggested that addressing school attendance problems "requires more than isolated interventions, it demands a robust legal, governance and policy framework supported by co-ordinated action across the education system. In Ireland, existing governance, legal and policy

structures have already laid important groundwork." It highlighted the importance of: collaboration; engagement with stakeholders; monitoring; and leadership; in supporting effective policy frameworks.

Current guidance

The 2026 Scottish Government guidance, Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools ("the guidance") is intended to support local authorities and schools to develop local policies and procedures.
The guidance says that local policies should be developed in collaboration with parents/carers, pupils, staff and other partners. The policies should reflect multi-agency working and underpinned by GIRFEC and a rights-based approach. The guidance says that policies should promote early intervention and prevention and include a staged intervention model.

The guidance suggests an approach that combines prevention and targeted interventions.

Whole school approach

The guidance recommends a whole school approach which creates an inclusive, rights-based environment in which pupils feel safe, respected, connected and engaged. This approach means that attendance is promoted through positive relationships, wellbeing, participation and early intervention. Schools are expected to have clear policies and monitoring systems with thresholds for more targeted approaches. Schools and local authorities are also expected to actively raise awareness of the importance of attendance and the impacts of absence.

Specific strategies

Along with a whole school approach, schools are expected to develop their own strategies to support attendance in their own specific contexts. The guidance says these strategies should align "with GIRFEC and broader strategies to support the mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing of children and young people". The guidance highlighted some options schools may consider, including:

- Breakfast clubs
- Adapted timetables and flexible approaches to curricula and learning
- Family support
- Changes to the physical environment of the school (e.g. bell noise, lighting, noise levels)
- Peer support
- Dedicated roles or teams to provide consistent and targeted support
- Multi-agency approaches

The guidance says that personalised approaches to supporting attendance "can be particularly beneficial for children and young people who are facing complex challenges in accessing full-time education". These include providing a flexible curriculum or timetable. Examples of flexible approaches in the guidance include:

- Accessing learning in a nurture base in the school
- Offering a range of learning in senior phase (e.g including options for volunteering, vocational learning, splitting time between college and school)

Where appropriate and in exceptional circumstances, the guidance notes that schools may offer reduced timetables. The purpose of a reduced timetable would be to facilitate a return to full-time education at the earliest opportunity, and these approaches should be recorded, monitored and reviewed.

Responding to long-term, persistent or complex absence

The guidance notes that there "is growing concern about children and young people who are persistently absent". To support those children, the guidance suggests a child-focused, multi-agency approach aimed at addressing underlying causes of persistent absence. It says:

> "Schools should undertake a comprehensive assessment in collaboration with all relevant partners, including the team around the child, to understand the underlying reasons for the absence and ensure that appropriate support is identified and put in place. This should be aligned with existing staged intervention procedures, reflect the GIRFEC principles and follow child protection procedures as required. It is vital that this approach includes meaningful collaboration with children and young people, parents, school staff, and wider partners to ensure that individual needs are identified and addressed effectively.
>
> "Recognising and addressing both the underlying cause, and the impact of absence or disengagement, is essential to supporting a successful return to school."

Use of data

The guidance highlights the importance of collecting data and using it purposefully to inform policy and practice at a school level as well as targeted interventions.

Ned Sharratt, (Education & Culture)
SPICe
Date: 28 October 2026

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.
The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

Annexe B

Written submission from Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP)

The Contribution of Educational Psychologists in Supporting School Attendance in Scottish Schools- A response on behalf of the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP)

Introduction

The Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP) welcomes the revised *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools* (Scottish Government, March 2026). The revised guidance provides an important opportunity to strengthen Scotland's approach to school attendance through early intervention, inclusive practice, positive relationships and coordinated support for children, young people and their families.

ASPEP considers that educational psychologists have a distinctive and valuable contribution to make to the implementation of this guidance. Their expertise in child development, learning, wellbeing, mental health, additional support needs, systems change and evidence-informed practice enables them to work across individual, family, school, community and local authority levels.

Educational psychologists can help education services move beyond understanding attendance primarily as an administrative measure or an individual responsibility, towards understanding it as an important indicator of children and young people's experiences of education, their sense of belonging, their wellbeing and their access to appropriate learning opportunities. This does not diminish the responsibilities of schools, education authorities, parents and other services. Rather, educational psychologists can strengthen the capacity of these partners to understand and address the complex, interacting factors that influence attendance.

ASPEP proposes that educational psychology should be recognised as a strategic and operational partner in delivering the revised national guidance, with a particular contribution across four interconnected areas.

1. Implementation of recent national attendance guidance

The contribution of educational psychologists

Educational psychologists can support education authorities and schools to translate the revised national guidance into coherent, locally responsive policies and practices. The guidance emphasises a whole-school approach, positive relationships, inclusion, early identification, effective use of data and staged intervention. Educational psychologists are well placed to support these developments through consultation, professional learning, research, evaluation and organisational development.

Their contribution should include:

- **Strategic planning and policy development:** Advising education authorities on the development and review of attendance policies, ensuring these reflect the principles of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), children's rights, equity, inclusion and additional support for learning.
- **Building professional understanding:** Supporting school leaders, teachers and support staff to understand the diverse reasons for absence and to distinguish between the presentation of non-attendance and the underlying factors contributing to it.
- **Developing inclusive school cultures:** Helping schools examine whether relationships, curriculum provision, learning environments, approaches to behaviour, bullying prevention and the availability of appropriate support promote pupils' safety, belonging and engagement.
- **Strengthening early intervention:** Supporting schools to develop graduated approaches that identify emerging patterns of absence and respond before difficulties become entrenched.
- **Developing staff confidence and capacity:** Providing professional learning in areas such as anxiety, emotional regulation, trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity, attachment, relational approaches and psychologically informed problem-solving.

Educational psychologists can also support schools to reflect on the potential unintended consequences of attendance initiatives. For example, approaches that rely heavily on sanctions, rewards or numerical targets may fail to address the reasons a child is struggling to attend and can increase feelings of shame, exclusion or disconnection. A psychologically informed approach recognises that attendance is influenced by the interaction between the child or young person, their family circumstances, the school environment and the wider social context. This requires schools to consider not only how to encourage attendance, but also what changes may be necessary to make attendance achievable, safe and meaningful.

Principal and senior educational psychologists can contribute to strategic attendance planning, supporting the alignment of educational psychology services with wider improvement priorities. They can help authorities identify systemic barriers, determine where specialist input is most needed and develop a consistent approach across schools without losing sight of local context. ASPEP recommends that educational psychology services are represented in local authority attendance improvement structures and that their contribution is reflected explicitly in attendance policies, improvement plans and arrangements for professional learning.

2. Identification and support of pupils with persistent absence

Understanding the reasons behind absence

The revised guidance recognises that long-term, persistent or complex absence requires a coordinated response, including comprehensive assessment with the team around the child. It identifies a range of potential contributing factors, including anxiety and mental health concerns, difficulties with learning, bullying, relationships, family adversity, poverty and experiences within the wider community.

Educational psychologists can add considerable value by helping schools develop a

fuller understanding of these factors and their interaction.

In particular, educational psychologists can support schools to:

- Analyse attendance patterns alongside information about wellbeing, attainment, participation, relationships and additional support needs.
- Explore the experiences and perspectives of children and young people, including their feelings about school, relationships with adults and peers, and perceived barriers to attending.
- Understand the potential relationship between anxiety, emotional distress, neurodevelopmental differences, unmet learning needs and difficulties attending school.
- Identify environmental and organisational factors that may be contributing to absence, such as inaccessible learning, sensory demands, inflexible timetables, perceived threats to safety or a lack of belonging.
- Develop hypotheses about the factors maintaining absence and identify appropriate, proportionate interventions.
- Review progress and adapt support in response to evidence about what is helping.

Educational psychologists can use consultation and collaborative problem-solving approaches to help school staff move from asking, “How do we get this pupil back to school?” to asking, “What is making attendance difficult, what needs to change, and how can we work together to make participation possible?”

This distinction is important. Persistent absence should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of motivation, poor parenting or deliberate disengagement. Equally, recognising the complexity of absence should not delay appropriate action to establish the child’s safety, maintain contact and provide educational support.

Developing individualised and psychologically informed support

Educational psychologists can contribute to assessment and planning for pupils whose attendance difficulties persist despite initial interventions, particularly where there are complex or interacting needs.

This may include supporting the development of an individual attendance and engagement plan that:

- Identifies the pupil’s strengths, interests, protective factors and aspirations.
- Establishes the pupil’s own understanding of the difficulties and their preferred forms of support.
- Specifies changes to the learning environment, relationships, curriculum or support arrangements.
- Identifies a trusted adult and clear arrangements for communication with the family.
- Sets realistic, agreed steps towards increased participation, with regular review.
- Includes appropriate support for transitions, periods of absence and reintegration into learning.

- Identifies responsibilities across school staff and partner services.

For some pupils, flexible timetables, phased returns, alternative learning arrangements, access to quieter spaces or adjustments to particular aspects of the school day may be necessary. Educational psychologists can help schools consider these options carefully, ensuring that any temporary arrangements are purposeful, regularly reviewed and directed towards meaningful participation and appropriate educational opportunities.

It is important that flexibility does not become a substitute for addressing the barriers that prevent full participation. Nor should a return to full-time attendance be pursued without sufficient consideration of the child's needs, circumstances and readiness.

A preventative, rather than solely reactive, contribution

Educational psychologists can also support the identification of groups of pupils who may be at increased risk of persistent absence. These may include children and young people experiencing poverty, care experience, additional support needs, mental health difficulties, bullying, disrupted transitions or difficulties accessing an appropriate curriculum. Through work with schools, educational psychologists can help identify patterns across year groups, transitions and stages of education. This can support preventative approaches, including transition planning, targeted nurture and wellbeing provision, improvements to school connectedness and early support for pupils beginning to disengage. ASPEP recommends that educational psychology involvement is available through staged intervention processes, with timely access to consultation and more intensive collaborative assessment where absence is persistent, complex or associated with significant concerns about wellbeing.

3. The role of multi-agency working and family engagement

Strengthening the team around the child

Persistent absence frequently involves factors that extend beyond the remit of any single professional or service. Effective responses therefore depend on coordinated assessment, shared understanding and clear accountability across education, health, social work and other relevant services.

Educational psychologists can make a distinctive contribution by helping partners develop a shared formulation of the difficulties, drawing together different perspectives to understand how individual, relational, educational and contextual factors interact.

Their contribution may include:

- Facilitating collaborative meetings and structured problem-solving with the team around the child.
- Supporting clear, shared plans that identify agreed outcomes, actions, responsibilities and review arrangements.
- Helping partners understand the relationship between emotional wellbeing, learning, family circumstances and school experiences.

- Supporting the coordination of educational interventions with appropriate mental health, social work, health, youth work and third-sector support.
- Advising on transitions between services, educational stages and learning arrangements.
- Helping resolve differences in professional perspectives and maintain a shared focus on the child's needs and rights.

Educational psychologists can also help ensure that multi-agency working results in coordinated action rather than repeated assessments, disconnected plans or families having to navigate multiple services independently. This requires clarity about respective responsibilities, appropriate information sharing, timely decision-making and access to services capable of responding to the identified needs.

Meaningful engagement with children, young people and families

The revised guidance places considerable emphasis on listening to children and young people and working constructively with parents and carers. Educational psychologists can support schools to make this engagement meaningful, particularly where relationships have become strained following prolonged absence or repeated unsuccessful attempts to improve attendance. A psychologically informed approach recognises that families may be experiencing considerable stress, anxiety, financial hardship, health difficulties or other adversity. Parents may also feel blamed or judged when their child struggles to attend school. Children and young people may feel misunderstood, unsafe, overwhelmed or disconnected from learning. Educational psychologists can help schools develop approaches that are compassionate, curious and collaborative, without losing sight of the importance of regular educational participation.

This can include:

- Creating opportunities for children and young people to express their views in ways that reflect their age, communication preferences and additional support needs.
- Supporting professionals to listen to parents' experiences and understand the practical and emotional barriers facing the family.
- Helping schools rebuild trust where relationships have deteriorated.
- Supporting the identification of family strengths, existing support networks and potential sources of assistance.
- Advising on communication approaches that reduce blame and promote shared responsibility for finding solutions.
- Ensuring that the child's views remain central to assessment, planning and review.

Educational psychologists can also help services recognise the impact of poverty, disability, neurodivergence, discrimination and unequal access to resources on attendance. This is important to ensure that interventions are equitable and do not inadvertently penalise children or families for circumstances beyond their control.

Supporting a shared preventative approach

At a strategic level, educational psychologists can contribute to stronger relationships between schools, educational psychology services, health and social care partnerships, community services and third-sector organisations. They can help identify gaps in local provision, advise on appropriate referral and consultation pathways, and support the development of joint professional learning. ASPEP recommends that local authorities establish clear pathways for educational psychology involvement in complex attendance cases, alongside agreed arrangements for multi-agency assessment, family engagement, information sharing and review.

4. Sharing and evaluation of effective practice across local authorities and schools

Using evidence to improve practice

The revised guidance emphasises the importance of accurate attendance data, regular analysis and evaluation of approaches to improving attendance. Educational psychologists have relevant expertise in research, evaluation, applied psychology and improvement methodologies, which can support this work.

Their contribution should extend beyond monitoring whether attendance rates increase. It should include evaluating whether interventions address the underlying barriers to participation and improve pupils' experiences and outcomes. Educational psychologists can support schools and authorities to:

- Establish clear baseline information and identify the pupils or groups targeted by interventions.
- Examine patterns of attendance alongside measures of wellbeing, inclusion, participation and educational progress.
- Evaluate the implementation, reach and impact of interventions.
- Gather qualitative feedback from pupils, families and practitioners.
- Identify which approaches are effective for which pupils and under what circumstances.
- Adapt or discontinue approaches that do not achieve their intended outcomes.
- Use findings to inform school improvement planning, authority-level strategy and future resource allocation.

A key contribution is the ability to combine quantitative data with qualitative evidence. Attendance figures can identify where concerns exist, but they cannot, on their own, explain why a pupil is absent or whether a particular intervention has improved their experience of education. For example, a phased return to school may initially result in a modest increase in attendance while also improving a pupil's sense of safety, relationships with staff and readiness to participate. These changes may be important indicators of progress, although they should be considered alongside longer-term attendance and learning outcomes.

Evaluation should also examine the unintended consequences of interventions, including whether particular groups of pupils experience greater barriers or whether

approaches inadvertently increase stigma or exclusion.

Developing a culture of shared learning

Educational psychologists can facilitate the sharing of effective practice within and between local authorities, drawing on their links with schools, education services, professional networks and research evidence.

This could include:

- Establishing local authority or regional attendance learning networks involving educational psychologists, school leaders and other relevant professionals.
- Developing anonymised case studies that illustrate successful approaches to complex attendance difficulties.
- Sharing examples of effective consultation, family engagement, psychologically informed assessment and reintegration planning.
- Supporting collaborative action research and improvement projects across schools.
- Identifying common themes in persistent absence and translating findings into practical resources and professional learning.
- Contributing to national discussions about emerging challenges, service gaps and promising approaches.

ASPEP is well placed to support the exchange of learning between principal educational psychologists and to help identify opportunities for collaborative work across Scotland. This could support a more coherent national understanding of the contribution of educational psychology to attendance improvement while respecting differences in local contexts, resources and service models. There is also an opportunity to strengthen the links between educational psychology, Education Scotland, local authority improvement teams and national attendance initiatives, so that learning from individual cases and local improvement projects informs wider system development.

Measuring impact and sustaining effective practice

To ensure that this work is sustainable, educational psychology involvement should be evaluated in terms of its contribution to improved practice and outcomes. Potential indicators include:

- Earlier identification of emerging attendance difficulties.
- Increased staff confidence in understanding and responding to barriers to attendance.
- Improved quality and timeliness of individual support plans.
- Stronger coordination between schools, families and partner agencies.
- Improved pupil and family experiences of support.
- Increased participation in learning and, where appropriate, improved attendance over time.
- Reduced recurrence of persistent absence.
- Greater consistency in the implementation and evaluation of effective approaches across schools.

These measures should be proportionate, meaningful and interpreted in context. Educational psychologists should not be held solely responsible for attendance outcomes, which depend on a range of interacting factors, including school capacity, family circumstances and access to wider services.

Conclusion

ASPEP believes that educational psychologists can make a significant contribution to the successful implementation of the revised *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1* guidance.

Their added value lies in helping schools and education authorities understand attendance difficulties within a broader framework of learning, wellbeing, inclusion, relationships and children's rights. They can support earlier identification, strengthen professional confidence, facilitate coordinated multi-agency responses, promote meaningful engagement with families and contribute to the evaluation and dissemination of effective practice.

Importantly, educational psychologists can help ensure that efforts to improve attendance are not confined to responding to absence once it has become persistent. Their preventative and systems-level work can support the development of school environments in which children and young people feel safe, valued, included and able to participate in learning.

Improving attendance is a shared responsibility. Educational psychologists cannot address the full range of barriers to attendance independently, nor can improved attendance be achieved without appropriate resources, effective partnerships and a sustained commitment to inclusion. However, their distinctive contribution can help services move from monitoring absence towards understanding and addressing its causes.

ASPEP therefore recommends that educational psychology is explicitly recognised as a key professional partner in Scotland's national and local attendance improvement work, supporting a coordinated, evidence-informed and child-centred approach that enables all children and young people to access and benefit from education.

Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP)
October 2026

Written submission from Education Endowment Foundation

About the EEF, their work in Scotland and the evidence presented

The EEF is an independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. We **generate**, **synthesise** and **mobilise** evidence on what works to close the poverty related attainment gap**.**

We are beginning to undertake work in Scotland through our pilot project, Education Evidence Scotland, funded by the Robertson Trust until November 2028. Our aim is to increase the use of research by Scottish educators to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty.

Our evidence on attendance comes mainly from a 2022 rapid evidence assessment of 72 studies from the international evidence base (EEF, 2022), our resources on **supporting school attendance** for schools in England (EEF, 2026) and **recent evaluations** funded jointly with the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) in England and Wales (EEF and YEF, 2026). We have also supplemented this work with relevant Scottish policy and Education Scotland documentation.

Scottish context

In Scotland persistent absence is defined as: missing 10% or more of all possible school sessions (half-day openings) across the academic year (Scottish Government 2025a, 2026)

Official Scottish Government education statistics for the 2024/25 academic year reveal a modest recovery in primary and secondary school attendance compared to the immediate post-pandemic period, yet attendance remains below pre-pandemic benchmarks.

Attendance Indicator	**Pre-Pandemic Benchmark (2018/19)**	**2023/24 Academic Year**	**2024/25 Academic Year**
Overall Attendance Rate	93.0%	90.3%	91.0%
Persistent Absence Rate	21.8%	31.4%	28.5%

Scottish Government 2025a

While the overall attendance rate improved by 0.7 percentage points between 2023/24 (90.3%) and 2024/25 (91.0%), more than a quarter of all pupils in Scotland (28.5%) remain persistently absent, missing at least 10% of total half-day school sessions (equivalent to missing four full weeks of schooling per year).

Disadvantage and absence

Pupils living in Scotland's most deprived communities experience lower attendance and higher rates of persistent absence than their peers in the most affluent areas:

- **Overall Attendance Rate Gap**: Pupils in SIMD Quintile 1 (most deprived 20%) record an overall attendance rate of 87.6%, compared to 94.1% for pupils in SIMD Quintile 5 (least deprived 20%), generating a 6.5 percentage point gap. (Education Scotland 2026)
- **Persistent Absence Rate Gap:** Pupils in SIMD Quintile 1 exhibit a persistent absence rate that is 26.5 percentage points higher than pupils in SIMD Quintile 5. (Education Scotland, 2026)

Link between absence and attainment

School absence, whether in the form of missed school sessions or fixed and permanent exclusions, is associated with lower pupil attainment. Longitudinal evidence from the Scottish Study (Dräger, Klein & Sosu, 2022/2025) demonstrates that all forms of absence - including authorised sickness -have a negative association with academic attainment and Senior Phase qualification tariff scores. On average, pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds tend to achieve lower attainment outcomes from their more affluent peers. In Scotland, there is a persistent poverty related attainment gap, starting in the early years and getting wider over time (Poverty Alliance, 2021). This table shows the latest available figures for the poverty-related attainment gap.

	Percentage gap between most and least deprived (using Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) data)	
Stage and subject	**2023/2024**	**2024/2025**
Primary school literacy	20.2	19.4
Primary school numeracy	17.4	16.6
Secondary school (end of S3) literacy	12.7	10.8
Secondary school (end of S3) numeracy	12.0	11.6

Scottish Government 2024; 2025b

There is evidence that absence can be a key driver of disadvantage attainment gaps (EPI, 2025), both due to a higher rate of absence amongst disadvantaged pupils and due to a higher penalty (i.e. the impact of that absence is greater) for a given rate of absence on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils**.** Further, evidence indicates that absence has a progressively larger role in contributing to the disadvantage attainment gap as pupils move through school (EEF, **2026**).

Drivers of absence

School absences may be symptomatic of, driven by or otherwise linked to, other factors which may be consequential for attainment, as well as being important in and

of themselves. These examples are **not exhaustive** and the evidence referenced does not necessarily make *causal* links between these factors and attendance. Many of these drivers are likely to be overlapping and the evidence is taken from predominantly English sources.

- **Hardship:** Some qualitative evidence links absence amongst disadvantaged pupils to the hardship they experience. CPAG (2025) found that, on average, disadvantaged pupils missed school due to not having something they needed to attend (e.g., uniform, money for transport) more often than their more affluent peers.
- **Mental health and wellbeing:** There is evidence that mental health and wellbeing (for example, life satisfaction) is a predictor of levels of absence (NFER, 2026). Other studies have found that mental health-related absence may be more frequent amongst disadvantaged pupils (CPAG, 2025).
- **Engagement [3]:** There is evidence that pupils' engagement at school is also linked to absence, particularly in English secondary schools (ImpactEd Group, 2025). Secondary pupils in the top 25% of engagement scores were 10 percentage points less likely to be persistently absent than those in the bottom 25%.

What works to support attendance

Our synthesis of the global evidence suggested the evidence was relatively weak but there were some areas of promise (EEF, 2022). We used this to create a resource for schools on **Supporting school attendance** (EEF, 2026). The resource is organised around six recommendations:

1. build a holistic understanding of pupils and families, and diagnose specific needs
2. build a culture of community and belonging for pupils
3. communicate effectively with families
4. improve universal provision for all pupils
5. deliver targeted interventions to supplement universal provision
6. monitor the impact of approaches

1.Build a holistic understanding of pupils and families, and diagnose specific needs

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to improving attendance. Knowing and understanding pupils, their families, the influences, and their specific challenges can help diagnose some of the underlying causes of absence and more clearly define the problem. Better identification is a helpful first step but does not improve attendance

[3] Pupil engagement can be proxied by multiple, different measures (for example, this report uses enjoyment, perception of peer and peer-teacher relationships, perception of value of school)

on its own: schools need a clear, evidence-informed response to identified needs reflecting the individual and contextual factors affecting pupil attendance (EEF, 2026).

2.Build a culture of community and belonging for pupils

Making sure pupils feel seen, understood, and safe is a crucial starting point for supporting attendance, especially for more vulnerable students who may have fewer protective factors than others. There is some evidence that targeted parental engagement, in which staff communicate with parents to understand the reasons for absence and plan support together, has a small positive effect. However, there were fewer studies to draw this conclusion from and so it warrants caution (EEF, 2023).

3.Communicate effectively with families

Well-designed communications with families can be effective for improving attendance and supports positive relationships through two-way communication. Our review (EEF, 2022) found that parental communication approaches, such as personalised letters or texts to the families of persistently absent pupils, had a very small positive effect. This finding is relatively secure, as most of the studies involved had large samples and a low risk of bias. The EEF recommends that schools communicate proactively with families, in ways that are personalised and positive (EEF and YEF, 2026).

4.Improve universal provision for all pupils

When pupils are in school, their experience should be inclusive, positive and supportive of their long-term academic attainment and personal development. It may be that an aspect of universal provision could be improved for all pupils, which might support the attendance of those with more barriers to learning (EEF, 2026). Areas to consider include explicit teaching of learning behaviours, academic and behaviour routines, social and emotional skills and metacognitive strategies (EEF, 2026).

5.Deliver targeted interventions to supplement universal provision

Targeted intervention may be needed for persistent or particularly challenging causes of pupil absence. Our 2022 review found some evidence of promise for responsive interventions, in which a member of staff or team uses several approaches tailored to the needs of individual pupils. This can include monitoring attendance, parental communications and motivation systems. The average effect was small and positive, and the quality of the studies means it should be treated with caution (EEF, 2022; EEF, 2023).

Some targeted approaches might include additional staffing. An evaluation of employing attendance and family liaison officers in English secondary schools found no meaningful average effect on persistent absence. Schools described these roles as most effective when they provided tailored, one-to-one support within a coordinated whole-school approach (EEF and YEF, 2026).

6.Monitor the impact of approaches

Monitoring the effectiveness of an approach will help understand whether it is being delivered with high quality and success, or whether (and how) it might need to be changed to improve processes and outcomes. Data collection processes need to fit with school routines and be sustainable for staff to use. Planning evaluation alongside rollout, potentially with comparable data across authorities, gives a better chance of learning what works. The EEF's guidance asks schools to monitor the impact of their approaches and adapt in response (EEF, 2026).

How the current position in Scotland aligns with the evidence:

The current non-statutory “Improving Attendance in Scottish Schools” guidance maps closely to the EEF recommendations. However, alignment does not by itself show the guidance will be effective for two main reasons:

- The evidence on what works to improve attendance is relatively thin.
- Implementation matters. We have not- and are not in a position to – evaluate the implementation of Scottish guidance. Our work in Scotland is so nascent that we are not in a position to comment on its implementation more anecdotally. Wider implementation research evidence suggests that that how an approach is delivered often matters as much as which approach is chosen (EEF, 2024).

The design of the guidance itself is worth further reflection, including the balance of prescription and specificity given the reasons for absence are complex and there is no one-size-fits-all model. Potentially national guidance is best placed to set out principles and expectations, leaving schools room to respond to their own context (EEF and YEF, 2026).

Further considerations

Multi-agency working. The Scottish guidance treats partnerships with health, social work and other services as essential (Scottish Government, 2026). The research evidence on which multi-agency models work is limited. The most effective targeted parental engagement approaches were multi-component, offering access to services such as counselling alongside school-family discussion, and one study involved social workers identifying and addressing barriers (EEF, 2023). **Sharing practice on attendance**. A potential risk is that examples of practice are shared without good

evidence warrant i.e. the practices themselves do not have evidence of effectiveness and/or do not relate to wider evidence. Further a recent EEF study of internal provision (support for pupils in school but outside regular classroom space and/or mentoring, tutoring or health and wellbeing support) in England**,** found that schools' practice varied widely and overlapped. This suggests that in England at least a shared language for describing approaches has not yet been established (EEF and YEF, 2026). For practice sharing to be successful it requires a shared language (so there is consistent understanding of the practices) and it is important to show the process of implementation of the approach including exploration of the feasibility and fit for those practice in that school context to support effective implementation (EEF, 2024). An example of this can be seen through this case study showing evidence-informed approaches to improving attendance using EEF and wider guidance (Education Evidence Scotland, 2026).

Generating evidence on scalable interventions that can support attendance.

The evidence EEF reviewed contains some clear areas of promise, particularly around multi-component interventions that combine universal elements (such as effective parental communication) with targeted support for pupils with persistent absence. There is, however, a limited causal evidence base for these interventions in Scotland and limited scalable support for schools in Scottish education.
Primary research in England has shown that there are many programmes, training offers and approaches that do not translate to real-world impacts on attendance when measured against business as usual. For this reason, any approaches to improve attendance should be accompanied by rigorous evaluation that can identify and share areas of promise, iterate and improve approaches, and support schools to select appropriate and well-evidenced approaches to support their children.

Appendix A: Evidence Generation in England

Since 2021, the EEF has built evidence on attendance and exclusion in England through evidence synthesis, programme trials and school-level evaluations.
This has included the Attendance Interventions Rapid Evidence Assessment, the joint EEF–YEF *A Safe, Positive Place to Learn* funding round, and practical resources for schools. Across this work, findings point to the importance of understanding pupils' barriers, combining universal provision with tailored support, engaging families, and monitoring implementation and outcomes.

However, the evidence from England is mixed: several approaches were feasible and acceptable but did not produce clear improvements in attendance or exclusions, often because of small samples, variation in delivery or weak contrast with existing practice (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022; Education Endowment Foundation and Youth Endowment Fund, 2026).

For a fuller summary see: educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/research-agenda-themes-priority-areas/research-agenda-theme-attendance-and-exclusions

References

Child Poverty Action Group (2025) *Priced out of school: how lack of money prevents young people from attending school*. London: Child Poverty Action Group. Available at: **https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/Priced-out-of-school-CPAG-May-2025_5.pdf** (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

Dräger, J., Klein, M. and Sosu, E. (2022/2025) *Examining the impact of school absence on academic attainment: evidence from the Scottish Longitudinal Study*. Edinburgh: University of Strathclyde and University of Edinburgh.

Education Endowment Foundation (2022) *Attendance interventions: rapid evidence assessment*. London: Education Endowment Foundation. Available at: **https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/pages/Attendance-REA-report.pdf?v=1792055842** (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

Education Endowment Foundation (2024) *A school's guide to implementation*. 3rd edn. London: Education Endowment Foundation. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/implementation (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

Education Endowment Foundation (2026) *Supporting school attendance*. Available at: **https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/leadership-and-planning/supporting-attendance** (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

Education Endowment Foundation and Youth Endowment Fund (2026) 'Four new evaluations of programmes and approaches designed to improve attendance and prevent persistent absence from school', press release, 6 May. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/evaluations-improve-attendance-and-prevent-persistent-absence (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

Education Evidence Scotland (2026) *Supporting attendance case study: Crieff High School*. Available at: https://www.educationevidencescotland.com/case-studies/supporting-attendance/ (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

Education Policy Institute (2025) *Breaking down the gap*. Available at: **https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/breaking-down-the-gap/** (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

Education Scotland (2026) *Improving attendance in Scotland: 2024–2026: evidence, impact and actions for consideration*. Livingston: Education Scotland. Available at: https://education.gov.scot/media/yexn2dhn/improving-attendance-in-scotland-2024-2026.pdf (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

ImpactEd Group (2025) *Mind the engagement gap: a national study of pupil engagement in England's schools*. Available at: https://www.impactedgroup.uk/research-campaigns-and-resources/mind-the-engagement-gap-a-national-study-of-pupil-engagement-in-englands-schools (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

NFER (2026) *Understanding the relationship between attendance, wellbeing and sense of belonging*. National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Available at: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/understanding-the-relationship-between-attendance-wellbeing-and-sense-of-belonging/ (Accessed: 16 October 2026). **[nfer.ac.uk]**

Scottish Government (2024) *Evidence and Insights on the Poverty-Related Attainment Gap*. Livingston: Education Scotland. Available at: https://education.gov.scot/media/jirk0kss/evidence-and-insights-on-the-poverty-related-attainment-gap.pdf (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

Scottish Government (2025a) *School attendance, absence and exclusions statistics 2024–25*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-absence-and-exclusions-statistics-2024-25/ (Accessed: 16 October 2026).
Scottish Government (2025b) *Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Levels 2024–25*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2025/12/achievement-of-curriculum-for-excellence-cfe-levels-2024-25/documents/acel-2425-publication-pdf/acel-2425-publication-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/ACEL%2B2425%2B-%2BPublication%2B-%2BFINAL%2B2.pdf (Accessed: 16 October 2026). **[gov.scot]**
Scottish Government (2026) *Included, engaged and involved part 1: improving attendance in Scotland's schools*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/included-engaged-involved-part-1-improving-attendance-scotlands-schools (Accessed: 16 October 2026).
The Poverty Alliance. (2021) *The Poverty-related Attainment Gap: A Review of the Evidence*. Glasgow: Poverty Alliance. Available at: https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Poverty-related-Attainment-Gap-A-Review-of-the-Evidence-11Feb2021.pdf (Accessed: 16 October 2026)

EG/S7/26/7/1

Written submission from Scottish Guidance Association

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.

Written submission from Dr Silvia Behrens, University of Glasgow

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

Dr Silvia Behrens[1], Professor Morag Treanor[1], Dr Patricio Troncoso[2], Dr Lee Williamson[2], Bethany Lee-Shield[2] and Dr Peter Barlow[1] (ADR Scotland research team on educational exclusions and absences)
[1] University of Glasgow, [2] The University of Edinburgh

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.[4]

Summary

In March 2026, the Scottish Government published revised guidance on school attendance emphasising the importance of engagement with children and families.[5] 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,[6] 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.[7]

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

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

- Theme 1: Identification and support of pupils with persistent absence.
    - 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.[8]

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.[9]
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

[8] Research Data Scotland (2026). Attendance and Absence linkage data - Scotland.
[9] 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%.[10]

3. Our research in Behrens et al. (2026a)[11] 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)[12] 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)[13] argue, the measure of persistent absence enables comparisons of absence rates but does not distinguish types of absence, its timing, length or causes.

[10] 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.
[11] 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
[12] 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
[13] 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)[14] 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.

[14] 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)[15] 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.[16]

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,

[15] 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).
[16] 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.

Acknowledgements
As part of ADR Scotland, we receive funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through their investment of £168 million awarded to ADR UK until March 2031. The Grant Ref is: UKRI3324. The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged.

We would like to acknowledge the support of the eDRIS Team (Public Health Scotland) for their involvement in obtaining approvals, provisioning and linking data and the use of the secure analytical platform within the National Safe Haven.