Education and Gaelic Committee
Tuesday 10 November 2026
8th 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 second evidence session on the short inquiry and the Committee will take evidence from the following witnesses—

    - Billy Anderson, Head of Services and Influencing, Children in Scotland;
    - Gavin Yates, Executive Director, Connect;
    - Lisa Weylandt, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer, Includem.

Supporting information

4. SPICe provided a background briefing for this meeting and the meeting on 3 November which was published with the papers for that meeting. Written submissions from witnesses are attached at **Annexe A**. Additional written submissions from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, Education Scotland and Barnardos have been published on the website.

5. The Committee has written to all local authorities on their approach to education which included seeking information on this short inquiry. Responses received will be published on the website.

Next steps

6. The Committee will visit a school on 17 November to see first-hand how it supports pupils with persistent absence.

Clerk to the Committee,
November 2026

Annexe A

Written submission from Children in Scotland

Background

Children in Scotland is a welcoming and dynamic charity that amplifies the voices, views and experiences of our members and children, families and professionals across Scotland. We achieve this through direct services, meaningful participation, policy work, inspiring communications and sector-leading events and learning opportunities.

We are a vibrant and inclusive community of dedicated individuals and organisations who use our skills and passion to bring evidence-based and fresh thinking together, with one shared aim of giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish. We are stronger together in driving lasting impact for Scotland's children.

Our response

Improving the delivery of additional support for learning for children and young people is a key policy priority for Children in Scotland.[1] Our work in this area is aimed at delivering the Inclusion Ambassadors vision for Scottish education:

"School should help me be the best I can be. School is a place where children and young people learn, socialise and become prepared for life beyond school.

"Success is different for everyone. But it is important that all the adults that children and young people come in to contact with in school get to know them as individuals. They should ask, listen and act on what the young people say about the support that works best for them."

As an organisation, we play an important role across the development, delivery and implementation of additional support for learning policy in Scotland. We were a member of the Scottish Government's additional support for learning Project Board and participated in the School Attendance working group, supporting the development of the new Attendance guidance. [2]

We also manage several national services such as Enquire, the national information and advice service for additional support for learning, Resolve, an independent mediation services, and the Children's Views service. Enquire and the Children's Views service are also partners in My Rights, My Say, supporting 12- to 15-year-olds with additional support needs to fulfil their right to be heard in decisions about their education. In addition, we deliver a wide range of participation work focussing on children's experiences of additional support for learning, including the Inclusion Ambassadors and My Rights My Say Young Advisors networks.[3]

[1] Children in Scotland, (2026), Manifesto 2026
[2] Scottish Government, (2026), Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools
[3] Children in Scotland, Inclusion Ambassadors

Attendance, persistent absence and a systems-led approach

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into attendance and persistent absence. We know that too many children and young people spend a significant amount of time out of school, which we believe is often driven by the education system not meeting their support needs.

We have consistently focused on this topic over a number of years. In 2018 we partnered with Scottish Autism and National Autistic Society on the Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved report, which explored the educational experiences of autistic children, highlighting the prevalence of informal exclusion and the use of part-time timetables.[4]

Our 2025 policy briefing on attendance explored the most common issues raised relating to attendance, and how this exemplifies the gaps in the delivery of additional support for learning. [5] We have drawn heavily on this evidence to formulate this response, whilst also utilising evidence emerging from our Enquire helpline from across Q1&2 of 2026-27.[6]

Attendance is regularly raised as an issue throughout our services. Between April and June of this year, attendance was raised as the main issue in 35% of all enquiries that Enquire received. From July to September, this rose to 36%. There has been no notable change from the same period last year.

In the last quarter, 33% of all helpline enquiries were concerned with children being out of school, with 50% of these noting issues with level of support as a driver of this, 46% regarding school-related anxiety, and 39% also citing a wellbeing concern.

Attendance and persistent absence must be considered within the wider context of the education system and the plans for system-wide change to the delivery of additional support for learning. As demonstrated in our recent policy briefing on the recommendations of the McManus review, the level of need currently far outstrips the level of provision in this area. [7] Any measures which seek to respond to persistent absence must be considered through this lens, acknowledging the pressures on the additional support for learning system.

It is also vital that the committee take a holistic understanding of the drivers of absence, and subsequently the solutions which will have the biggest impact. This includes taking account of the role for whole family support in responding to the range of factors which may contribute to persistent absence.

[4]Children in Scotland, National Autistic Society, Scottish Autism, (2018), Not included, not engaged, not involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school
[5] Children in Scotland, (2025), Policy briefing: Additional support for learning – Attendance
[6] Enquire data is not representative of all children and young people in Scotland, but it does provide a clear insight into issues arising nationally in the implementation of additional support for learning
[7] Children in Scotland, (2026), Policy briefing: From vision to delivery

Implementation of recent national attendance guidance

Children in Scotland strongly agree with the positive approach taken to supporting attendance as set out in the guidance. Whilst the advice Enquire provides reflects the updated guidance, to date there does not appear to be a significant impact of how often or the type of issues regarding attendance are raised. It is important to recognise that this guidance has only recently been published, and it may be too early for any significant impacts on practice to be noted.

Rights-based approach

Persistent absence often reflects a learner's unmet support needs. We firmly support a rights-based approach to supporting children and young people, including in relation to absence. We see the whole school ethos and emphasis on collaboration between pupils, families and school staff when looking at what support is needed as a strength of the new guidance.

However, practice does not seem to consistently reflect the updated guidance's emphasis on a rights-based and holistic approach. A significant barrier that we see is around lack of engagement with children in decisions regarding their support in school, with a knock-on effect on attendance. Children and young people supported by My Rights, My Say have previously linked not being heard with support needs not being met, resulting in negative feelings towards attending school.[8]

Enquire noted that 23% of out of school enquiries referred to relationship difficulties. A recent example from the helpline details the impact of this on school attendance:

(Following a school meeting, parent explained that their child had said) *'school does not know me...They were very insistent, persistent... they don't care what I had to say'* and *'mum, stop defending them. Just stop. I am not going in on Thursday.'*
(Example from Enquire Helpline)

Not only should children and young people be included in meaningful participation, but there also needs to be a system in place where learners can have their right to support fully upheld.

Part-time timetables

As detailed previously in this response the Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved report considered autistic pupils' experience of part-time timetables and their likely use to manage support needs.[9] Whilst this report was published eight years ago, we are aware of ongoing issues in this area, with part-time timetables being misused in practice as a way of managing support needs.

The Children's Views service continue to identify situations where children become 'stuck' on part-time timetables because the school lacks resources to support them with a full-time education. Enquire also hear regularly about similar situations

[8] Children in Scotland, (2025), Policy briefing: Additional support for learning – Attendance
[9] Children in Scotland, National Autistic Society, Scottish Autism, (2018), Not included, not engaged, not involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school

through the helpline, including a recent situation which resulted in a child being placed on a part-time timetable for months as the school could not provide appropriate support.

'*school have asked to keep this in place until the end of term as they are not able to deal with how to help [child].' (Parent caller to Enquire Helpline)*

Whilst it is positive to see a more detailed coding practice for schools on SEEMIS regarding part-time timetables in the updated guidance, they should still only be used temporarily, within a wider package of tailored support. Children in Scotland is clear that using reduced timetables to manage unmet support needs reflects an incorrect implementation of the refreshed guidance and is a symptom of system pressures.

Identification and support of pupils with persistent absence

Children with additional support needs

Attendance is persistently lower for children and young people with additional support needs.[10] As articulated in our 2025 Attendance Policy Briefing, we see this as a clear signifier of unmet support needs, and the term 'lower' does not imply a lesser measure of effort, behaviour or worth.

We regularly hear through our services about children and young people who spend significant periods of time out of school because of a lack of support.

Through the Children's Views service we have heard from local authorities that they do not have the resources to provide support to children and young people in line with their rights under the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act 2004. We consistently hear about similar examples through the Enquire helpline, with parents explaining how schools say they cannot support their child but that there are also no places in alternative provisions. Enquire also report parents repeatedly seeking support that schools introduce and then remove after a short period of time.

'the school is not putting enough support. Child now also has anxiety around attendance... Last thing agreed is home tuition, but this was confirmed months ago and is not yet in action.' (Parent calling the Enquire Helpline)

It is important to highlight here that local authorities have a legal duty to provide education to pupils who are unable to attend school. Since the updated guidance, 37% of enquiries to Enquire regarding children who were out of school concerned out of school education provision. Of all enquiries in the period from July to September, over 13% cited the main issue as out of school education provision.

Across our services we have consistently heard of examples where neither education nor support are provided when a child is out of school due to their unmet support needs. A lack of resources is a commonly cited reason for why support cannot be provided. We have continued to hear of examples of this following the refreshed guidance.

[10] Scottish Government, (2025), School attendance, absence and exclusions statistics 2024-25

'Now high school is turning out to be the same... No school work has ever been sent home over the years and schools are not looking at how they can support [their] needs...' (Parent caller to the Enquire Helpline)

Anxiety and mental health

Evidence from our services also suggests that issues relating to anxiety and mental health are an increasing factor in school attendance. Across Q2 of this financial year, anxiety has been the second most prominent factor for people reaching out to Enquire, with 24% of all enquiries concerning this issue. This has increased from 20% during the same period last year. The Children's Views service reported that anxiety and self-harm are increasing, and schools can appear unsure as to how to handle conversations around this. School-related anxiety and wellbeing concerns feature prominently in out-of-school enquiries.

'*Child* [primary school] *anxious about going to school as does not feel safe. Has been self harming... School have offered lots of supports for child but still too scared to go into school.' (Parent caller to the Enquire Helpline)*

Across our services, and our work with children and young people, there appears to be a lack of resources and capacity in the workforce to deal with current levels of anxiety and provide the support that children need and are entitled to.

The role of multi-agency working and family engagement

Provision of rights based, inclusive education is of course a key driver of supporting children to attend school. Across our work with the Inclusion Ambassadors and My Rights My Say Young Advisors we have provided key insight into what this looks like for children and young people. [11]

However, addressing persistent absence requires a more holistic approach than focussing purely on the education delivered within school. Where a child has been unable to attend school for a significant period of time, there will likely be a requirement for strong multi-agency working to support a child back into school and to sustain their attendance where this is the best path for the child.

We know from the work across our services that there can be challenges in how education and health services work together. It would be of value to explore how the connection between these key services can be improved.

The Scottish Government's focus on the Whole Family Support Integration Programme offers a key opportunity to align the wider family support agenda with responses to persistent absence. Youth work and whole family support should be integral to multi-agency responses, given their role in improving outcomes for children, young people and families.

The need to connect discussions around school attendance to the wider family

[11] Inclusion Ambassadors, (2026), Improving Additional Support for Learning: Evidence and Recommendations from the Inclusion Ambassadors (2020-26)

support agenda is also reinforced when we consider the impact of a child having time out of school on the financial situation for families. Families who engage with our services report the financial impact of non-attendance, with parents explaining how it affected their employment. We also know that children being out of school can have an impact on parent and carer mental health and wellbeing.

Responses to persistent absence must take account of these wider impacts that stem from school absence, both as a rationale for why action is needed, but also in looking to understand the support required around the whole family when a child is out of school longer term.

Sharing and evaluation of effective practice

Children in Scotland are not aware of any national approach to sharing effective practice in relation to school attendance or persistent absence. There could be an opportunity to strengthen how good practice is shared to support ongoing learning.

There is also a need to strengthen how information is shared with children, young people and families about the support available around attendance. Enquire reports that parents and carers must sometimes ask school to reach out to the local authority for further support, or contact the local authority themselves, rather than this information being shared proactively. Our outreach activity has also highlighted the key role that the third sector has taken in information sharing and connecting services.

It is also worth highlighting that we continue to hear of examples of poor practice in how attendance is managed – including examples of punitive attendance policies that could be seen as exclusionary by nature. This highlights a need for embedding the refreshed attendance guidance, centred on inclusive approaches to attendance in schools.

Finally, we are aware there are ongoing issues around how attendance is monitored and tracked, due to challenges around the use of the SEEMIS system for monitoring part-time timetables and school exclusions.[12] The refreshed guidance does provide more direction on this; however, there is scope for significant inconsistency in how data is recorded as this required the creation of custom tab for each child - an issue worth exploring further.[13] A more coherent national picture around attendance, persistent absence and use of part-time timetables would strengthen our national approach to managing this issue.

Summary and Recommendations

Children and young people with additional support needs are significantly more likely to be out of school. Across our services and participation work we consistently hear about how a lack of appropriate, accessible support can make school attendance more challenging.

[12]Children in Scotland, National Autistic Society, Scottish Autism, (2018), Not included, not engaged, not involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school
[13]Scottish Government, (2026), Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools

Delivery of rights based, inclusive education is a key way to tackle persistent absence. Yet, system wide pressures around resources, workforce capacity and culture must be addressed to improve the wider education and additional support for learning environment.

Our 2025 Attendance policy briefing outlines a series of policy recommendations relating to attendance. In producing this response, we have also identified the following recommendations

- **View persistent absence through a systems-led lens**, acknowledging the environment that additional support for learning operates in, where need outstrips resources and capacity.
- **Increase workforce capacity and specialist support so schools can meet additional support and wellbeing needs,** provide timely and effective interventions, and support school attendance in an environment where children and young people can thrive.
- **Embed children and young people's participation in delivery of additional support for learning**
- **Improve data collection and monitoring of attendance and absence,** making stronger use of systems like SEEMIS to provide an improved national picture.
- **Embed improved multi agency working within the Additional Support for Learning System to address persistent absence**

For further information, please contact Chris Ross, Participation and Policy Manager, Children in Scotland

Written submission from Connect

Connect thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment on support for pupils with persistent absence.

Connect was a member of the Scottish Government working group reviewing the school attendance guidance. During this period, we conducted an online survey to help inform the working group of views of parents and carers.

School Attendance: Hearing from Families about Supporting Children ran from 9 June to 8 July 2025, with 350 responses from 30 local authorities across Scotland. Over half (60%) of parents reported their child attends school nearly all the time, and two thirds (67%) said they were satisfied with their child's attendance. However, a quarter (25%) of parents reported that their child had experienced long term absence from school.

The survey found that nearly half of the parents whose children experienced long term absence (47%) received no support during the absence and over half (52%) received no support on their child's return from long term absence.

These parents cited poor communication and support from school, lack of resources required to support absence and unsympathetic approaches from school staff as issues experienced during periods of absence for their child.

For those facing long term absences, issues impacting attendance were thought to be part of a wider systemic issue, and parents felt school staff required training and greater resources to support pupils before, during, and after absence.

Other Key Findings

Parents say positive relationships with staff (69%) and provision of desired subjects (67%) are key to encouraging attendance, as are friendships (65%) and feeling supported (61%) and safe (60%) in school.

43% said schools most commonly offer communication with parents to support with attendance, 38% said a named member of staff was allocated to children to talk to about their worries. Parents report better communication and trusted relationships with staff would be beneficial for their child's attendance.

Thoughts on attendance communication is mixed – communication is generally thought to be clear and understandable, while perception of tone varied, although the majority thought it was positive or neutral (39% very or quite supportive and understanding, 22% neutral).

Parents are broadly confident about how they would raise attendance concerns to their child's school (86%).

For those raising concerns, the actions taken were mixed – 60% felt listened to, but there were also many reports of no action being taken or that the actions taken were insufficient.

Sample of Parent Comments

‘My child had long periods of absences in nursery due to a family member being diagnosed with a terminal illness before passing away. The nursery is connected to the school and the staff were very supportive and understanding not to mention they helped her readjust to being back at nursery.’

‘I have felt that I have had to work hard to be credible and believed. I am still not certain I have succeeded. School does want to help and has limited understanding of autistic burnout which requires acceptance and patience along with minimal demands (from family and school). I think school has at times been slow to respond- accommodations too little too late- though I appreciate it can be difficult with high masking young people.’

‘We had a very supportive guidance teacher who did everything she could to help my child with attendance issues during Nat 5’s. Individual support from class teachers was variable and this could have been improved.’

‘My child was off school because of a concussion. She was off school for over 2 months. We did not get any support from the school or help. My child was not able to use any electronics to do school work at home. … My child found it very difficult when she eventually returned to school. Her teachers were not very supportive, or did not understand about her situation. I feel the school system failed with support for my child and with me as her parent. No resources were given to her or me when she was absent for so long.’

‘It is horrendous. School sending a group call absence text morning and afternoon only served to add stress and anxiety. We felt like we were failing every day. Our child was expected to return to school into the same conditions that caused her to burn out. No changes could be made to support her.’

‘It's awful. You feel like a failure. People don't understand unless they've been through it too. It affects everything, jobs, relationships, finances, everyone's mental health.’

‘Attendance policies do not account for effect lack of additional support has on mental health. Lack of course choices also affecting attendance as so few subjects in S5 and S6 combined with lack of support resulted in part time.’

‘Attendance is important but I think that performance should be taken into account too. Quality over quantity. Young people should not made to feel like criminals for taking a few hours for dentist/doctors appointments or even a few days for illness.’

‘I feel one individual teacher is trying hard to help my child, but there were many missed opportunities before she became involved. My child is now attending school sporadically, despite the lack of support from anyone other than the one guidance teacher who has helped us. My child has missed large chunks of education yet I feel I have asked for help frequently for 3 years but only recently (in last 6 months) been offered any support.’

‘I believe that the communication from the school surrounding attendance is fairly negative and can be interpreted poorly as if parents aren’t making the effort for their children when quite often the children feel more supported and calmer at home. This isn’t always parental negligence but rather protecting the wellbeing of our children.’

‘Also it is a lonely and frightening experience for our young people and their families. It is a widespread issue but you don’t know this at the start of the journey until you find others eg through social media. Why the secrecy? It adds to the shame.’

‘Council’s decision to remove the secondary school bus has created yet another barrier to attendance for many families. This disproportionately affects those without alternative transport options and adds stress to both children and parents. Communication with parents around these changes, and more broadly has been some of the worst I’ve experienced. Families are often left in the dark, unsupported, and excluded from decisions that directly affect their children.’

‘There needs to be a far more robust action plan for children in the early stages of school refusal. The Ed Psych team says a plan exists (the 5 GIRFEC questions). Speaking to friends working in pupil support roles, this is NOT adequate. Surely it’s better to nip the problem in the bud by providing some scaffolding support straight away.’

‘ASN provisions in main stream are not adequate, they are failing these children and parents are punished for lack of attendance when schools more the goal posts on a daily weekly basis.’

Connect’s Calls for Change

Based on these survey findings, Connect made the following calls for change:

A compassionate, family-focused and support-based approach to absence policies: school staff should take an empathetic, non-judgemental approach to absence, prioritising individual experience to create a support plan from this.

Clear channels of communication between parents and carers and school staff, with designated points of contact for parents and children to raise any concerns and provide preventative support before absences occur. Building relationships and taking preventative action will help children and young people to attend school and will provide parents with reassurance of ongoing support should long-term absence occur.

Ongoing support during and after long-term absences from school. Children and their families need to be supported during their absence by school staff with external support, such as mental health professionals, if needed. Support and guidance during and after returning to school is imperative, to catch up on learning and to aid social integration during the transition back to school.

Parents and young people must be listened to when creating plans for returning to school after long-term absence, so their family experiences feed into an individualised plan of action and support, not a one size fits all implementation of

school policy.

School staff must be trained on compassionate approaches to managing attendance concerns. Greater resourcing is essential to ensure staff can spend adequate time building supportive relationships with children in schools.

Other issues must be tackled including: the provision of school transport; an inclusive curriculum with subject choices that reflect the diversity of children and young people; comprehensive whole-school approaches to challenging bullying behaviour; and improved mental health support for young people. These factors can all contribute to school attendance - a holistic approach will ensure better outcomes for children and their families.

About Connect

Connect is a long-standing independent parents' organisation and the only Scottish charity which is dedicated to supporting parental engagement in education. We provide membership services to almost 2500 Parent Councils and PTAs, as well as offering advice and information to individual parents/carers about any aspect of the education of their child or the wider education system. Our evidence-based approaches reflect the recognised significant role of families in the learning of their children and young people, and in their expertise and knowledge of their own child.

Connect
2 November 2026

Written submission from Includem

About this evidence

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

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

Key messages

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

1. Implementation of national attendance guidance

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

Across our services, colleagues have reported no noticeable change following the revised guidance in the cases they described. Individual examples of good practice and creative support were raised but feedback consistently identified continuing difficulties accessing additional support, coordinated planning and meaningful review of part-time timetables and flexible learning arrangements. These are local practice observations; we cannot assess implementation or impact of the revised guidance across Scotland from these accounts.

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

2. Identification and support of pupils experiencing persistent absence

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

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

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

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

Reduced timetables and flexible learning arrangements:

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

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

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

A child unable to attend an available offer and a child whose available provision has been reduced may need different responses. Every reduced timetable should have an individual educational purpose, meaningful provision, the child’s and family’s involvement, named responsibilities, review dates and a progression plan.

Arrangements must not drift because appropriate support is unavailable.

The impact of reduced educational provision and persistent absence

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

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

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

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

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

3. Multi-agency working and family engagement

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

Practice example: rebuilding engagement with education

In a Glasgow example shared for this written response, a worker supported a parent whose own experience of formal education was limited. Support included addressing practical barriers, including school unform costs and travel arrangements, developing routines and building the family's relationship with education. The school offered flexibility, including softer starts and activities to encourage engagement by the parent and the child. Following this the worker reported improved attendance by the child and greater communication with the family.

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

Coordination must lead to action

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

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

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

Continuity of relationships

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

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

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

4. Sharing and evaluating effective practice

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

We have limited evidence about how these approaches are systematically evaluated or transferred between schools and authorities. We encourage

improvement activity that includes children, families and third sector partners, and examines which approaches help which children, in what circumstances.

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

Recommendations

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

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

Sources

Includem, Transforming Lives Whole Family Support: Education Briefing.

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

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