Improving Attendance: Understanding the Issues

November 2023

Contents

Executive summary

Background

There is a system-wide concern about reduced levels of attendance, particularly since the covid-19 pandemic. National statistics provide evidence that there is a poverty-related gap in attendance. This report, which is the result of a deep dive led by Education Scotland (ES), aims to provide an understanding of the issues that impact attendance and how LAs (LAs) might support increased attendance and reduced absence with support where appropriate from ES and Scottish Government (SG). The findings should be used by LAs when considering approaches to improve attendance and reduce absence. Suggested actions are intended for LAs, ES, SG, and relevant partners.

Process

ES's attainment advisors, the inclusion, wellbeing and equalities team, National Improvement Framework (NIF) officers and the SG support and wellbeing and education analytical services teams supported the creation of this report. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe) contributed relevant evidence from school inspections. All 32 LAs across Scotland were consulted. Through attainment advisors, 14 LAs and 18 schools were sampled to gain local level understanding of related issues. Examples of emerging or effective practice were also gathered.

Key findings

Engagement is as important as attendance

Attendance is defined as participation in a programme of educational activities arranged and agreed by the school, including:
- attendance at school
- learning out with the school provided by a college or other learning provider while still on the school roll
- educational visits, day and residential visits to outdoor centres
- interviews and visits relating to further and higher education or careers events
- debates, sports, musical or drama activities in conjunction with the school
- study leave for pupils participating in national exams, if arranged by the school during the period of the national examination timetable
- receiving tuition via hospital or outreach teaching services
- work experience

(SG, 2019a).

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.

All absence can affect progress

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.

Certain groups are more vulnerable to low attendance

- those impacted by poverty
- secondary-aged pupils
- young people from Gypsy and Traveller communities
- pupils with additional support needs including:
  - children and young people who have experienced care
  - young carers
  - children and young people who have experienced exclusion
  - anxious children and young people

The causes of absence are multifaceted

The causes of absence are multifaceted. Forth Valley and West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative (2022) categorise the main causes of absence as:

- individual
- peer
- family
- school

Children and young people may have absences which relate to more than one of these factors at the same time. Sampled authorities and schools cited individual factors, in particular, wellbeing and social difficulties as the greatest factors contributing to absence.

Themes of culture, systems, and practice can provide helpful structures when considering approaches to improving attendance and engagement

When planning an attendance strategy, it is worth considering the themes of culture, systems, and practice and how these impact on attendance. These should be considered as cogs which are interdependent.

Schools should work in partnership with families

Schools should work in partnership with families to ensure that effective communication and support are in place to remove barriers that impact on attendance. The positive benefits of using home link workers or third sector organisations to support this process was evident in several examples where gains were being made.

Early warning systems should initiate intervention

Effective systems to track and monitor attendance ensure early intervention is triggered. This is essential to avoid lengthier absences which often require more complex interventions. All absence should be followed up in line with child protection purposes.

There are several resources to support schools with attendance

- The national policy on promoting attendance and reducing absence: Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: A Positive Approach to the Promotion and Management of Attendance in Scottish Schools
- Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2: Preventing and Managing School Exclusions
- The national policy on school exclusions: Included, engaged and involved part 2: preventing and managing school exclusions
- The Forth Valley and West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative Attendance Toolkit
- Promoting Attendance: self-reflection questions for educational settings

Attendance continues to be a priority in all LAs

In the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC), all LAs have included attendance as a core stretch aim for health and wellbeing for the next three years. As part of their analysis, twenty-five LAs have a strategic plan to improve attendance.

Fifteen of the eighteen schools sampled included improving attendance in their school improvement plans. Three Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) have included improving attendance in their improvement plans, with one other maintaining work from the previous year.

There is variation across LAs and schools in how data is used to support attendance

There appears to be significant variations across Scotland in how data is used to identify children and young people who require support and the thresholds that trigger support.

Actions for consideration:

1: LAs should carefully monitor their strategic and implementation plans for improving attendance or develop a plan where one is not in place.

2: Put children and young people's views at the centre of refreshed approaches.

3: ES, working with stakeholders and partners should provide bespoke support for areas where improving levels of attendance remains a challenge.

4: Approaches to effective tracking and monitoring attendance should be collated and shared.

5: ES and SG should collaborate with the wider system to bring coherence to the work on improving attendance.

Purpose, method & process

Purpose

There are system-wide concerns about reduced levels of attendance, particularly since the covid-19 pandemic. National data provides evidence there is a poverty-related gap in attendance. In response, ES, as part of the SAC, initiated a deep dive to provide the following outcomes:

1. A deeper understanding of the current barriers and challenges experienced by schools, children and young people and their families and which influence school attendance, including the impact of the pandemic
2. Clear examples of effective strategies that are supporting improved attendance
3. Clarity on what further support, or intervention, is required in areas where attendance is not improving
4. An understanding of how well current national approaches to data collection, analysis and presentation support LAs and schools to fully understand and address attendance issues

The deep dive was carried out in September and October of 2023 to allow the findings to be reported on timeously and to support ongoing work on attendance throughout session 2023-24.

The scope of the deep dive was to examine attendance and absence levels and suggest actions that may support attendance. Although many of the findings comment on attendance, they are also useful to support engagement with learning.

Whilst these findings are based on evidence gathered from LAs and schools, they are also relevant for early years establishments and for supporting learners beyond school leaving age.

In this report, we will refer to school attendance and absence.

The findings from the deep dive report can be used by LAs when considering approaches to improving attendance. Actions for consideration are intended for LAs, ES, SG and relevant partners.

Method and process

Findings and recommended actions were concluded through a rapid research review to better understand the reasons for the reduction in attendance of children and young people. This review also sought to identify evidence-based approaches which may support improved attendance and reduced absence at school.

During September and October 2023, attainment advisors collected responses from all 32 Scottish LAs. This established where improvements in attendance had been made in primary, secondary and special schools from June 2022 to June 2023.

Further information was collected from a sample of LAs with a range of socio-economic and geographical demographics. Attainment advisors met with 14 LA officers and

18 headteachers or nominated staff from within the sampled LAs to discuss successes and barriers in improving attendance.

These discussions were structured around a series of key questions which explored the barriers to positive attendance; these can be found in Appendix 1. Information was also gathered on how LAs and schools use data to support improving attendance.

In addition, eight case studies (two secondary schools, five primary schools and one LA) were collected to highlight positive approaches in improving attendance. During inspections, HM Inspectors examine attendance data with school leaders and staff. This information is used to support the overall evaluation of the school's capacity to improve. HM Inspectors do not report specifically on attendance or late coming. However, consideration is given to information in relation to the quality of experience children and young people receive and the approaches to child protection and safeguarding.

This report should be considered alongside the findings of planned engagement with families through the Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research and with young people through the Young Scot, 'What I need to learn' survey.

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to all LA and school staff who participated in these discussions and so generously shared their practice. A full list of LAs who participated can be found in Appendix 1.

We would also like to thank Forth Valley and West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative for freely sharing their evidence-based guidance.

Attendance: Understanding the issues

Barriers and challenges

What is attendance?

Attendance is defined as participation in a programme of educational activities arranged and agreed by the school, including:

- attendance at school
- learning out with the school provided by a college or other learning provider while still on the school roll
- educational visits, day, and residential visits to outdoor centres
- interviews and visits relating to further and higher education or careers events
- debates, sports, musical or drama activities in conjunction with the school
- study leave for young people participating in national exams, if arranged by the school during the period of the national examination timetable
- receiving tuition via hospital or outreach teaching services
- work experience

(SG, 2019a)

What is the difference between attendance and engagement?

Engagement happens when children and young people give attention to, and are actively involved in, a learning task. Types of engagement include:

- emotional (interest, boredom, happiness)
- behavioural (attention, effort, and persistence)
- cognitive (motivation, learning strategies)
- agency (children and young people can lead their learning, expressing their interests and needs)

(The Education Hub, 2020)

All four types of engagement are multifaceted and affect attainment. Children and young people may be in school physically but disengaged from learning. Attendance combined with engagement should support academic progress and potentially have an impact on educational outcomes. Engagement fosters a sense of safety and belonging and enhances relationships.

When does absence become a concern?

Maintaining high attendance rates in Scottish schools is a key priority of our education system (SG, 2019a). Research suggests all forms of absence (truancy, sickness absence, exceptional domestic circumstances, and family holidays) negatively impact achievement and attainment (Klein and Sosu, 2023). This is echoed by John et al (2021) noting that poor attendance at school, whether due to absenteeism or exclusion, leads to multiple social, educational, and lifelong socio-economic disadvantages.

Evidence demonstrates that pupil progress, attainment and achievement is affected if attendance falls below 90% or 171/190 days (SG, 2019a). An attendance rate of 90% (missing 19 days of school) is the equivalent of missing one school day every two weeks. When averaging 90% attendance over the course of their school career, by the time a young person has reached third year of secondary education, they will have missed the equivalent of an entire year of school. Furthermore, a one percentage point increase in days absent was associated with a decrease of 3% of a standard deviation in post-16 qualification tariff scores (Klein et al., 2022). Absences may also cause greater harm to children and young people who experience socio-economic deprivation as their families have fewer resources to compensate for lost teaching time (Klein and Sosu, 2023).

The SG's attendance and absence statistics (SG, 2022c) cite that school attendance in the year 2020-21 had fallen by 2.4 percentage points compared with pre covid-19 pandemic data from 2018-19. Prior to the pandemic, the 2018-19 data showed school attendance rates were already in decline and had fallen by 0.6 percentage points compared with 2016-17. The Commission on School Reform (2023) reports that there is variation across LAs in the number children and young people attending 90% or below.

In evidence gathered for this report, 15 of the Scotland's 32 LAs agreed attendance had declined in the primary sector and 24 of the 32 LAs stated attendance had declined in the secondary sector. 12 of 26 LAs with special schools stated attendance had declined in that sector. Six LAs had no standalone special school provision.

Of the schools inspected in 2022-23, 47% (15 schools) had levels of attendance in line with the national average; 31% (10 schools) were below the national average and 22% (7 schools) were above the national average.
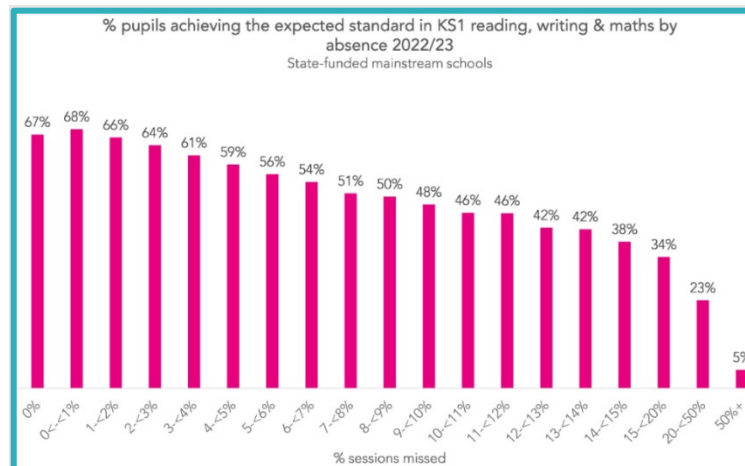
Increasing attendance rates continues to be a priority in Scottish schools. To support attendance 25 out of 32 LAs have put a strategic plan in place. Within the 18 sampled schools included in this report, 15 had included attendance within their school improvement plans. Additionally, all 32 LAs have submitted a SAC stretch aim to increase attendance rates.

How does attendance affect progress and educational outcomes?

UK Government statistics demonstrate children and young people who performed better both at the end of primary and secondary school, missed fewer days than those who did not perform as well (UK Government, 2022). Higher rates of attendance give children and young people more opportunities to learn. Attendance combined with engagement should support academic progress and potentially have an impact on educational outcomes. However, it is important to remember the relationship between attendance and attainment is not necessarily causal as there could be many underlying factors which influence both.

Research evidence from the UK Government (2022) suggests absence, at any age or stage, lowers academic progress. For example, the graph below illustrates the relationship between missed learning and attainment at Key Stage 1 in mainstream

schools in England (Education Data Lab, 2023). (Equivalent to Primary 2 and 3 working towards First Level in Curriculum for Excellence)

% pupils achieving the expected standard in KS1 reading, writing & maths by absence 2022/23
State-funded mainstream schools

% sessions missed	
0%	67%
0<<1%	68%
1<<2%	66%
2<<3%	64%
3<<4%	61%
4<<5%	59%
5<<6%	56%
6<<7%	54%
7<<8%	51%
8<<9%	50%
9<<10%	48%
10<<11%	46%
11<<12%	46%
12<<13%	42%
13<<14%	42%
14<<15%	38%
15<<20%	34%
20<<50%	23%
50%+	5%

The Scottish Longitudinal Study on absenteeism and educational attainment (Klein and Sosu, 2022) confirmed the negative impact of absence on leavers' attainment. The higher the absence, the greater the impact on attainment, and that the type of absence did affect the degree of impact. The key message emerging from the data was that all absence, even when related to illness (therefore excused or authorised), impacts attainment and therefore all absence should be prioritised for mitigating interventions.

Data evidence from a 1970 British Cohort Study (Dräger et al, 2023) shows the long-term effects of school absences on educational attainment, social class, unemployment, and earnings at age 42. The study showed school absences are associated with lower educational attainment and a greater likelihood of non-employment at age 42. Individuals who missed five days of school at age 10 were 5.7% more likely to have no qualifications and 4.2% more likely to be out of the workforce.

Exclusion, like withdrawal from class, often results in an absence from, or loss of, learning. This could be compounded for children and young people with attendance issues more vulnerable to school exclusion (Timpson, 2019). Exclusions compound the risks already associated with high absence, including low attainment, not achieving a positive post-school destination, and vulnerability to inappropriate activities in communities including anti-social behaviour and criminal activity.

Are there certain groups who are more vulnerable to low attendance?
Groups more vulnerable to low attendance include:

- **children and young people impacted by poverty:** Children and young people living in areas of high economic and social deprivation have higher absence rates (SG, 2021)
- **secondary-aged pupils:** Secondary pupils had an attendance rate of 89.1%, compared with a rate of 92.0% for all pupils in 2020-21. S4 attendance was the lowest at 87.2% (SG, 2021). Sickness absence, authorised absence and unauthorised absence was very high in S4. But in terms of high sickness absence -

S2 and S3 were higher in 2020-21. Sampled LAs and schools identified that secondary-aged pupils were a cohort where attendance was a concern. This is confirmed by data collected by the Commission on Schools Reform (2023). There was no clear pattern of which year groups were most affected

- **young people from Gypsy and Traveller communities:** Outcomes for these young people are among the worst in Scottish education. We know their school attendance rates are the lowest of any ethnic group and exclusion rates are the highest (SG, 2017b)
- **children and young people who have been excluded:** Lereya and Deighton (2019, p11) cited that exclusion is associated with poor mental and physical health, substance abuse, antisocial behaviour, crime, low academic achievement, unemployment, and homelessness. Findings in the report from the 'Headstart' programme, conclude that as mental health difficulties increase, being absent from school increases
- **pupils with additional support needs:** The SG's School Attendance and Absence Statistics Collection (SG, 2022c) consistently show children and young people with additional support needs as having lower attendance rates than pupils with no additional support needs
- **certain types of support needs** are more likely to have lower rates of attendance. For example:
  - children and young people who have experienced care (looked after) have lower attendance rates than all pupils in all school sectors (SG, 2023b) (Educational Outcomes for Looked After Children from Children's Social Work Statistics Collection). In secondary schools, the difference in attendance rates between looked after children and all pupils was greater than in primary schools and special schools in 2020-21. Looked after pupils had an attendance rate of 83.4%, compared with a rate of 89.1% for all pupils. (SG, 2022a). Of the 18 schools sampled for this report, two identified that children who had experienced care was a group of particular concern regarding absence. Five LAs have a specific stretch aim for the improved attendance of care experienced children and young people
  - Young Carers: Around 7% of young people in Scotland have caring responsibilities. It is likely this is an underestimate as not all young carers will recognise themselves as a young carer or identify as one (SG, 2017a). Over a quarter of young carers aged 11-15 regularly miss school (Action for Children, 2023)
  - **anxious children and young people**: Research suggests the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated absence issues particularly for children and young people with pre-existing anxiety (McDonald et al., 2023)

Is absence related to poverty?

There is a strong association between children and young peoples' socio-economic background and school abence (Klein et al, 2020; White 2018). Klein & Sosu (2023) suggest absences may cause greater harm to children and young people living in lower socio-economic circumstances because their families may have fewer resources to compensate for lost instructional time. Children and young people living in higher social
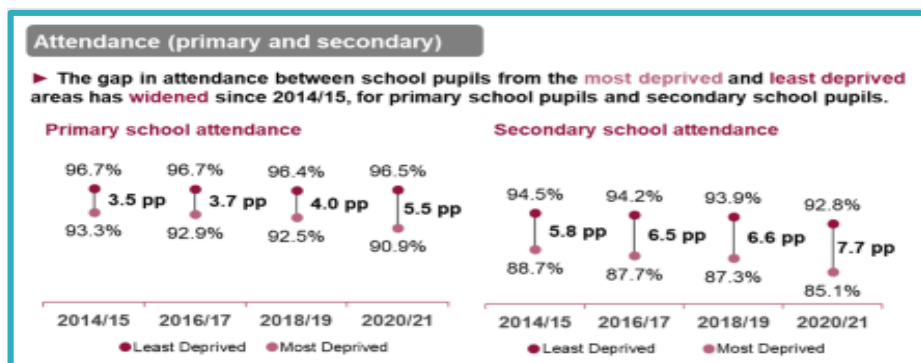
economic circumstances appear to recover more quickly from learning loss related to sickness absence. This may be owing to fewer underlying health conditions and families using assets to catch up with missed lesson content (Klein and Sosu, 2023).

> "The numbers of pupils living in low Scottish Index of Multi-Deprivation (SIMD) areas … they don't look as if the gap is widening, however, there are young people who are impacted by poverty who are not reflected in SIMD data that are struggling with attendance."
>
> school leader

The Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation (2023) states that since 2014-15, there has been a widening of the gap in attendance between children and young people living in the most deprived and least deprived areas in Scotland. This gap also showed a pattern of widening pre-pandemic.

In 2020-21 the gap in attendance rates between children living in the most and least socio-economic deprived areas of Scotland was 6.3 percentage points. This compares with 4.9 percentage points in 2018-19. While overall attendance rates decreased for all pupils, the decrease has been more significant for those pupils living in socio-economic deprived areas.

Attendance (primary and secondary)

► The gap in attendance between school pupils from the most deprived and least deprived areas has widened since 2014/15, for primary school pupils and secondary school pupils.

Primary school attendance

	2014/15	2016/17	2018/19	2020/21
Least Deprived	96.7%	96.7%	96.4%	96.5%
Gap	3.5 pp	3.7 pp	4.0 pp	5.5 pp
Most Deprived	93.3%	92.9%	92.5%	90.9%

Secondary school attendance

	2014/15	2016/17	2018/19	2020/21
Least Deprived	94.5%	94.2%	93.9%	92.8%
Gap	5.8 pp	6.5 pp	6.6 pp	7.7 pp
Most Deprived	88.7%	87.7%	87.3%	85.1%

Source: Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation: Reporting on National Improvement Framework Attainment and Health and Wellbeing Measures, 2023 (www.gov.scot)

The Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation (2023) also noted that for primary age pupils, the attendance gap narrowed for one LA and widened for 23 LAs over the same period. Similarly in secondary schools, the gap widened from 6.6 percentage points in 2018-19 to 7.7 percentage points in 2020-21. The gap narrowed for 8 LAs and widened for 21 LAs indicating a pattern of a widening attendance gap across LAs but not universal with variation at LA level.

*Note on the Attainment Scotland Fund 2023 attendance data - *The attendance rates reported here for 2020/21 use the 'attendance or absence – schools open' measure. This measure includes attendance or absence only for the occasions when schools were open to pupils and are therefore comparable to attendance rates from previous years provided the impact of COVID-19 is borne in mind.*

Current gaps in attendance data will be nationally aggregated with the official release of the Scottish Attendance and Absence Statistics in December 2023. LAs through their own data gathering indicated that 11/14 LAs and 9/18 schools reported that attendance decreased more for those children and young people impacted by poverty. One LA and 8/18 schools reported attendance was not decreasing for children and young people impacted by poverty.

HM Inspectors also noted that, challenges which have an impact on attendance levels in schools are context specific, but analysis shows common challenges across all sectors include the continuing impact of the pandemic on children and young people.

What are the current barriers and challenges of school attendance in Scotland?

Based on extensive research, the Forth Valley and West Lothian (FVWL) Regional Improvement Collaborative concluded the main causes of absence can be categorised into four main factors: individual, peer, family, and school (FVWL Improvement Collaborative, 2022).

The four factors identified by FVWL have been used in this report to structure responses from LAs and sampled schools to provide perceptions of current challenges. However, deeper analysis is required to ascertain the extent to which each factor is leading to absence. Whilst this is not a large sample it does give an indicator of the type of underlying challenges that schools and LAs are facing.

Individual factors

From 14 LAs and 18 schools:
- 13 LAs and 15 schools indicated pupil mental health is a key concern and is believed to be a significant driver behind absence
- 10 LAs and 5 schools said wellbeing, emotionally-based school avoidance and anxiety have increased since the pandemic
- 14 schools said social difficulties (eg, isolation, bullying) was identified as an absence cause
- lack of interest of children and young people in education and coming to school was cited by 7 LAs and 9 schools
- 5 LAs and 7 schools cited additional support needs
- 4 LAs and 9 schools cited cultural issues
- 2 LAs and 2 schools reported an increase in children and young people/families citing types of illness that pre-pandemic would not have led to absence

Peer factors
- Poor relationships with peers were cited by 8 out of 18 schools as contributing to pupil absence.

Family factors

From 14 LAs and 18 schools:

- parental mental health and/or anxiety was cited by 10 LAs and 16 schools. 3 schools reported this had grown or emerged since the covid-19 pandemic
- low parental interest was cited by 7 LAs and 10 schools
- families experiencing financial stress was cited by 6 LAs and 10 schools
- 3 schools noted the current cost of living crisis is influencing attendance with one school mentioning two of their young people now hold down jobs on a Friday instead of attending school
- 8 schools cited domestic violence
- change in parental attitudes around the value of learning within the school building was cited by 5 LAs and 10 schools
- taking term-time family holidays was cited by 4 LAs and 6 schools as an emerging reason for absence since the pandemic

> "Increased number of families taking holidays during term time resulting in pupil absence. With larger families, more instances of if one sibling is off then they are all off within the family. Also increased parental anxiety about sending children to school if an infection is prevalent in the community."
>
> school leader

School factors

Whilst no significant number of schools or LAs cited school factors as main causes of absence, schools have an essential role to play in addressing pupil factors such as 'lack of interest in education' or providing a curriculum that supports 'social difficulties/resilience'. Of the LAs sampled, 9/14 and 4/18 schools had experienced an increase in the number of parents/pupils requesting home schooling.

Approximately one in six young people (16%) recently reported, in the Scottish adolescent's health study, liking school a lot. Although girls have historically been more positive about school than boys, in 2022, 13-year-old girls reported liking school less than boys did (HBSC, 2023). Young Scot's, 'What I need to learn' survey is currently consulting with children and young people to ascertain how much they enjoy attending school, if they consider themselves as struggling to attend and if so, why?

Do concerns about wellbeing lead to absence?

Wellbeing and mental health concerns is reported by almost all LAs (13 of 14) and most schools (15 of 18) as one of the major contributors to current levels of absence from school. However, one school noted that:

> "Mental health is being used very liberally as a reason for absence. Lots of young people are grasping on to this term but without any real understanding of its meaning."
>
> school leader

The relationship between attendance, behaviour, and wellbeing are interlinked. Recognising and nurturing this creates a positive cycle, where wellbeing strengthens attendance, behaviour enhances wellbeing, and attendance fosters positive behaviour (Lifeskills Group, 2023). This recent research is in line with Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1(2019a).

Glasgow City Council states that during and post-pandemic, rates of emotionally-based school absence have increased overall with a particular prevalence for children and young people experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those with an additional support need. This may be directly covid-19 related absences, but it may also be linked to an increase in anxiety amongst families, children and young people (Glasgow Educational Psychology Service City Council, 2023).

The Scottish Division of Education Psychology notes that school non-attendance due to emotional factors has a cyclical impact; pupils miss school, they miss key learning and social interactions which fuel their anxiety or emotional distress making it harder and harder to return. The more school is missed, the more this is compounded with relationships breaking down and the amount of school work missed, becoming perceived as insurmountable (ES, 2023c). For some children and young people, emotional distress may be obvious in their presentation at school or through significant levels of absence. For others, their presentation may be less obvious with sporadic attendance (Solihull Community Educational Psychology Service, 2020).

The Health and Wellbeing Census (SG, 2023a) found that positive perceptions of attitudes to school decrease with pupil stage, particularly up to S4. This is also replicated in those children and young people living in the most deprived areas.

Effective strategies

Which approaches may strengthen improved attendance?

The Education Endowment Fund (2022) acknowledge there is key gap in primary research to establish what interventions may work. Limited evidence and research would suggest the following may support attendance:

It may be helpful to consider these approaches to support attendance under the themes of culture, systems and practice.

The themes should be considered as cogs which support one another. There is no 'silver bullet' to addressing absence and all three themes should be activated for positive change.
SG (2019b)

Culture

The following should be considered when developing a positive culture for attendance:

- clear leadership on promoting attendance and reducing absence
- ensure all stakeholders (pupils, parents, partners and the wider community) understand the importance of attendance and promote it
- equity and inclusion are embedded
- feelings of safety and belonging are prioritised
- compassionate, flexible relationships - strong connections with significant adult(s)
- families, partners, and community members are valued equally and collaborate to support wellbeing
- support families to build their confidence
- cross-sector working - avoiding a discrete problem-solving approach
- preventative (universal) and intervention (targeted) approaches are balanced

Systems

The following should be considered when reviewing systems to support attendance:

- effective use of data to identify early warning signs – triggering support at an 'early' stage
- rigorous tracking and monitoring of all absences
- analysis of 'actionable data'
- identify history of absence
- highlight absence through a range of lenses eg, types of absence, trends, groups (eg, care experienced children and young people, young carers, anxiety-based absence), 'pedagogical truancy,' environmental factors (including using SEEMiS coding effectively)

- systems (including attendance policies and procedures) are reviewed and implemented consistently by all team members and across sectors
- multi-dimensional, multi-tiered system (a spectrum) of support (including Scottish Children's Reporter Administration)
- effective partnerships
- evidence-based support approaches
- whole school approaches (see example in diagram below)
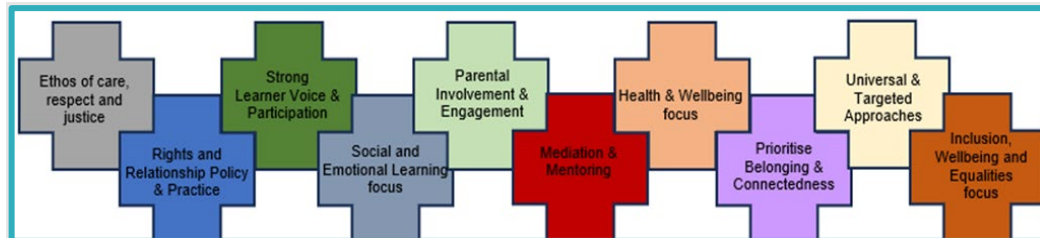
Updated from Hopkins (2004)

Practice

The following should be taken into consideration when reviewing practices to support attendance:
- adopting a 'long-term view'
- aligning to values and culture
- supporting individuals and families by getting it right for every child
- reflecting the views of the young person
- curriculum flexibility and learning pathways
- families referred to low income supports
- prioritising social and emotional support
- building connections with a key person(s) e.g., mentoring
- providing flexibility in learning and teaching, environment, and curriculum
- high quality teaching and learning that promotes personalisation and choice
- targeting underlying causes such as child health and wellbeing and additional support for learning needs
- addressing environmental factors
- activating children and young peoples' motivation

In terms of increasing engagement and motivation to learn, schools may wish to promote:
- affiliation – a sense of belonging. I belong (nurtured and included)
- autonomy – a sense of self-determination. I am allowed/trusted (responsible and respected)
- agency – a belief in your ability to achieve your goals. I can (achieving and active)

The Glasgow Motivation and Wellbeing Profile (2023) explores motivation and sense of wellbeing in the learning context.

From inspection evidence from 2022-23, HM Inspectors found similar approaches that help increase children and young people's attendance included:

- strategic focus from senior leaders and staff on improving attendance as a key improvement priority
- planned approaches to using available resources well and in a targeted way
- attendance procedures being clearly understood and followed

In the best examples, schools adopted a range of bespoke and universal measures to support children and young people's attendance and reduce late coming, such as breakfast clubs and adapted timetables to help children and young people achieve success. This support typically included support for families as well as learners. Schools took different approaches – some worked with partner organisations while others appointed teams of staff or created individual posts such as pupil support officer or family worker. The most effective measures ensured children and young people were supported to attend school through individual plans, successful partnership working which supports young people and families, and regular reviews of interventions on absence. Senior leaders who made improving attendance and reducing absence a priority involved parents, children and young people in planning to improve attendance.

What does research say about when supports should be initiated?

Kearney et al (2019) states that full attendance through to school refusal can be considered as a spectrum which can be used as an early warning system to initiate support.
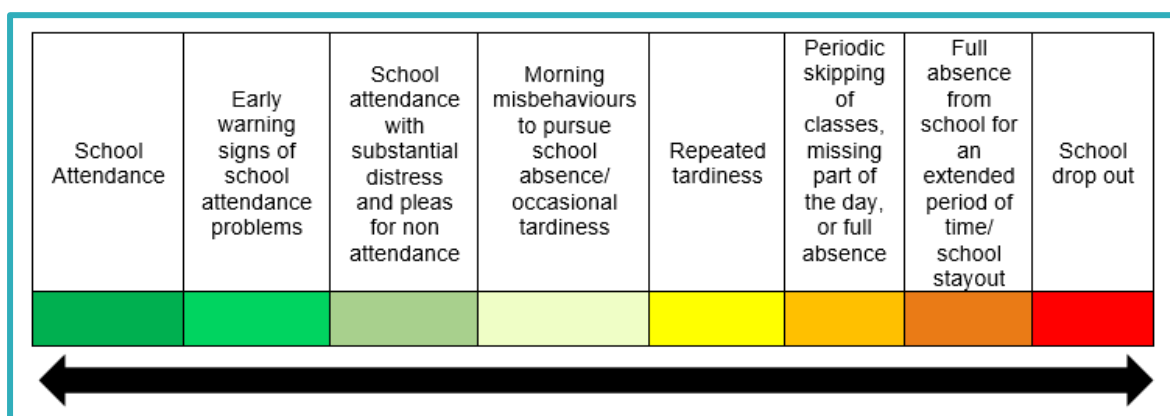
(Kearney et al., 2019)

Common early warning signs which may signal later absenteeism included frequent requests to leave the classroom or to contact parents, difficulties attending specialised sections of a school building (eg, gymnasium, cafeteria), difficulties transitioning from class to class, persistent distress, and sudden changes in grades, completed work, or behaviour, among others.

Over time, these early warnings can move to school attendance mixed with school absenteeism in some form, such as arriving late to school, missing some classes or times of day but not others, and periodic absences during a particular week, including early departures from school (Kearney et al, 2019). In general, more lengthy cases of

absenteeism requires more complex interventions and with multiple parties than less lengthy cases. Initiation of support should take place at the early stages of the spectrum.

Every absence should be followed up for child protection reasons. Thresholds can be used as a trigger for initiating support when further intervention if required. Using a 'Getting it right for every child' approach to meet the needs of individuals will support attendance and engagement.

In assessing reasons for absence, consideration should be given to what is pushing the child or young person away from school and pulling them towards home, or the community (Kearney, 2002). Assessment should also take place to determine what would support improvements in attendance (Milton Keynes Council, 2023). Risk and resilience factors should also be discussed with individual children and young people and families.

The flowchart on the below also provides a simple process which puts families at the centre.
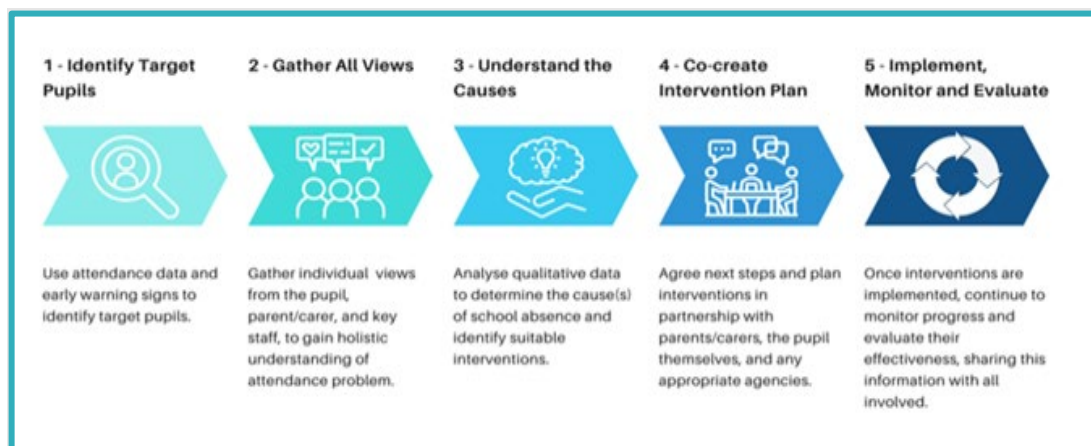
Forth Valley West Lothian RIC, 2022

Schools should consider the push factors (those that push children and young people away from school) and pull factors (those that pull a child towards home/community). For example, a young carer may want to be at home (pull away) to care for a family member however, the more classwork they miss the more anxious they are about returning to school (push away). Strong relationships between home and school, and friendships encourage the young carer to attend school (pull towards school).

What practice is improving attendance and reducing absence in schools?
Across the country, schools are trialling approaches to improving attendance. Eight case studies (Appendix 2) from LAs outline some of the approaches that are improving attendance at individual school level. Case studies from two secondary, five primary and one LA were gathered. Key themes that featured in the case studies include:
- trusted relationships with families and children and young people are vital
- communication and explanation of impact of not attending is shared
- varied support packages bespoke to each situation has the most impact

- regular reviewing of data and tracking the impact of individualised support packages
- alternative education packages explored with families and young people
- nurture provision within each establishment is based on needs analysis
- consideration of cost of the school day and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis
- working in partnership with other services and/or third sector providers is important

What support is available where attendance is not improving?

Existing attendance data should be used as indicators of those regional areas or LAs who may benefit from the offer of a range of supports and interventions to achieve improved attendance rates. LA progress towards the achievement of attendance stretch aims in 2022-23, as reported in September 2023, would provide a more current view of where attendance rates remain static or are falling.

What supports are available to LAs?

There is currently a range of supports available to all LAs. These include, but are not limited to:

- attainment advisor advice and guidance in relation to the use of Attainment Scotland Fund to support attendance
- support from ES's Inclusion, Wellbeing and Equalities team
- attainment advisor professional learning resource on Improving Attendance
- National Action Enquiry Programme (Education Scotland, 2023c) advice on supporting attendance and engagement
- guidance available includes:
  - **Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: A Positive Approach to the Promotion and Management of Attendance in Scottish Schools** (SG, 2019a). This national policy provides the framework for the promotion and management of attendance and absence.
  - **Forth Valley and West Lothian RIC Attendance Toolkit (2022)**. An interactive attendance toolkit, created by FVWL Regional Improvement Collaborative, is freely available. This piece of work was designed and launched in 2022 and quality assured by colleagues at Strathclyde University. It provides a mix of watch me first videos, self-evaluation toolkits, resources and research.
  - **Promoting Attendance: self-reflection questions for educational settings.** This resource provides self-reflection questions for schools to further explore and implement practices which will encourage good attendance. (ES, 2023a).

Where more bespoke support is needed schools and LAs should work with partners to evaluate barriers to improving attendance and develop a strategic plan.

ES can help schools and LAs to:

- analyse attendance data to show trends and patterns of absence and to set meaningful targets at LA and school level
- identify the 'vital few' causes of absence at LA and school level and to develop, implement and monitor the impact of appropriate interventions
- analyse LA attendance policy to identify opportunities for improvement
- gather the views of children and young people on current approaches to promoting attendance and support their involvement in designing new approaches

An approach to identifying LAs who could be offered bespoke support has been trialled successfully using 'Improvement Methodology' to implement locally designed tests of change.

Local supports such as educational psychologists, third sector partners and counsellors in secondary schools can also support improved attendance. 17 of the 18 schools sampled already have, or would like to have, a post with an attendance focus; for example, home-link workers, coaches, mentors or appropriate practitioners.

Understanding data

Understanding how well data collection, analysis and presentation are supporting LAs and schools can help us fully understand and address attendance issues.

What are the key messages about data?

Interventions which focus on absence should consider the underlying reasons for children and young people being absent from school in line with Included, Engaged and Involved: Part 1(2019a). Different reasons behind absences were uniquely associated with academic attainment. This finding suggests that health, behavioural or psychosocial pathways should be important considerations for designing interventions. Knowledge of specific reasons will aid the design of successful interventions to improve attainment by incorporating support that addresses the underlying reasons for absenteeism (Klein et al, 2022). Using the right data is critical.

What data is available nationally?

National comparison data is currently available in two formats:

1. School attendance and absence statistics - gov.scot (www.gov.scot) is published biennially (ie every other year) where comparisons between attendance and absence are available for:
   - full year* attendance and absence
   - comparisons in individual reason codes
   - information on pupils' sex, ethnicity, national identity, school stage and SIMD
   - school level data* is also available

> * Percentage attendance and absence relates to the total number of possible attendances. The number of possible half days attendance will differ for each pupil enrolment, depending on the length of time the pupil is on the roll of the school and the number of half day openings the school operates. Most schools operate 10 half-day sessions a week (e.g., morning and afternoon). However, some schools operate 9 longer half-day sessions (e.g., there is no Friday afternoon opening). Therefore, the % attendance and absence figures shown here are based on the % of half day openings (not the % of pupils).

> "We need more frequent accrued national data to allow us to see if everyone is having the same issues."
>
> LA

2. SG collect and currently publish fortnightly School Attendance Information 2023-24. This management information data is a fortnightly snapshot of attendance across LAs on a single day in the week (usually a Wednesday). This data is comparable with the same date from the previous year. Data available by School Stage, Sex, Ethnic Background, and SIMD includes:
   - percentage of attendance and absence at national and authority level
   - percentage absence in authority schools by reasons
   - percentage of opening showing pupils were absent due to sickness with no education provision

- percentage of openings showing pupils were absent due to unexplained absence, including truancy
- percentage of opening showing pupils were absent for any other reason

Although the fortnightly data can be used to identify patterns/trends on a particular day against other individual days, this measure will not fully reflect overall attendance throughout the entire school year (for example, previously gathered daily data shows attendance in schools was generally highest on Wednesdays and lowest on Fridays). Further analysis of the robustness of this data can take place when the biennial 2022-23 school attendance and absence statistics are published in December 2023.

What data do schools and LAs use?

All LAs have access to attendance data via SEEMiS, enabling analysis of data using a range of demographic filters, as contained with the programmes. LAs can extend this further and use programmes such as PowerBi or dashboards to allow further analysis, however this is variable across Scotland.

From the schools sampled the frequency of analysis ranged from weekly to termly. There was also variation in thresholds that initiate support. The majority of schools and LAs recognise there is an attendance gap between children and young people living in Quintile 1 compared to those living in Quintile 5. However, almost all authorities suggested stretch aims have improved the quality and frequency of dialogues regarding LA attendance data. (ES, 2022). Of the LAs sampled four requested further support with effective use of data.

> 'Cluster attendance pilot worked with the LA's improvement service and senior leaders to conduct robust analysis of data from Pupil Tracking, which directly links with SEEMiS. Schools were able to intersect attendance data with other pastoral information to fully understand gaps and begin to tackle root causes. This was facilitated using the data driven dialogue approach.'
>
> school leader

From school inspections in 2022-23, HM Inspectors noted a common challenge which impacts attendance levels in schools is a weakness in monitoring procedures, particularly in secondary schools. This is compounded by inaccurate tracking of young people's attendance and late coming. However, there was also evidence of good practice. In the best examples of attendance monitoring, staff had robust systems in place to monitor and track attendance and lateness, with well-planned supports for children and young people whose attendance falls below expected levels. In the strongest examples, schools track children and young people's attendance and analyse this data carefully to plan effective strategies to improve attendance.

In a few inspection reports, where attendance was beneath national average, systems of tracking attendance throughout the day were not in place. Reference was also made to examples of practice which negatively impact attendance and learner progression in general such as:

- a need to challenge late-coming
- improve period-by-period attendance
- ensure the use of part-time timetables for identified young people is strictly monitored and regularly reviewed
- ensure that clear processes to register attendance and challenge absence or late coming are understood and enacted by all staff

These references are in line with Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1 (SG, 2019a).

How do schools gather the reasons for absence?

Current guidance on reason codes is available in Included, Engaged and Involved: Part 1 (SG, 2019a). How these codes are applied varies, leading to inconsistent use across the country. Phase 1 of a project, led by SG, to review attendance codes, in collaboration with LAs has recently concluded.

Actions for consideration:

With all LAs having set a stretch aim for 2023-26 to improve attendance there is a clear commitment to support children and young people to prevent missed learning opportunities. Suggested actions for consideration are for LAs, ES, SG and relevant partners.

1: LAs should carefully monitor their strategic and implementation plans for improving attendance or develop a plan where one is not in place.

In reviewing or developing plans, LAs should evaluate how effectively Included, Engaged and Involved: Part 1 (SG, 2019a) is implemented in schools and how well all stakeholders understand their role. The extent to which schools are using evidence-based approaches to improve attendance should also be monitored to understand what is working well in each context. LAs should also consider how well schools are implementing changes to improve the culture, systems and practices to address absence. Plans should also consider the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, and these should be promoted alongside the support that families can expect to receive to allow them to meet expectations.

ES can support this work and where attendance is improving, positive practice should be gathered and shared. ES should facilitate the sharing of practice across the system.

2: Put children and young people's views at the centre of refreshed approaches.

Build on the consultation, 'What I need to learn' currently being undertaken by Young Scot. Consider what other information is required directly from children, young people and families to ascertain reasons for attending and not attending school. These views should inform LAs and schools' approaches to promoting attendance and reducing absence.

3: ES, working with stakeholders and partners should provide bespoke support for areas where improving levels of attendance remains a challenge.

Where levels of attendance remain a challenge, ES, working in partnership with LAs, will identify where bespoke support can accelerate progress. Draw on the expertise of teams from ES and for SG Improvement Advisors to implement locally designed changes.

4: Approaches to effective tracking and monitoring attendance should be collated and shared.

Sample schools and authorities indicated variations in when and how they tracked and monitored data. Thresholds for initiation of support also vary. Building on tracking and monitoring attainment guidance (ES, 2023b), ES should work with LAs to identify effective exemplification of tracking and monitoring of attendance and absence and share these widely. This should outline the types of data, demographic information, and frequency of analysis that may support schools.

Thresholds can be used as a trigger for initiating support, but any absence should be considered as a concern. Practice shared should include how schools and LAs are assessing the reasons for absence: what is pushing the child or young person away from school and pulling them towards home? What pull factors would support improvements in attendance? Risk and resilience factors should also be considered with individual children and young people and families.

5: ES and SG should collaborate with the wider system to bring coherence to the work on improving attendance.

Attendance is a concern that is being tackled by several groups independently. ES and SG colleagues should work collaboratively with the wider system to ensure endeavours are coordinated and impact maximised.

Appendix 1

LAs or the LA schools sampled

Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Angus Council, Argyll and Bute Council, Dundee City Council, East Ayrshire Council, East Lothian Council, Fife Council, Inverclyde Council, North Ayrshire Council, North Lanarkshire Council, Perth & Kinross Council, Renfrewshire Council, South Ayrshire Council, South Lanarkshire Council, Stirling Council, The Highland Council, West Dunbartonshire Council and West Lothian Council.

Questions asked of all LAs:
1. Has average attendance improved from 2021-22 to 2022-23 in the primary sector?
2. Has average attendance improved from 2021-22 to 2022-23 in the secondary sector?
3. Has average attendance improved from 2021-22 to 2022-23 in the ASN sector?
4. Is there a strategic plan in place for attendance?
5. When was the LA attendance policy/guidance last updated?

Sampled LAs were asked:
1. Which of the FVWL 'main causes' resonate with LA absence causes?
2. Are there reasons for absence which have emerged or grown since the pandemic?
3. How does the attendance of quintile 1 (or 2) learners compare with the attendance of learners from other quintiles and from previous years?
4. How does the LA use data to support attendance?
5. Will attendance be a focus for stretch aims up to and including 2025-26? If so, will this be for the whole LA, sectors or groups – please state?
6. What do you think is required to support improved attendance?
7. Where improvements are being seen; please complete the case study
8. Are you aware of specific group/s where attendance is an issue, e.g., year groups, gender? Please describe. How did you come to this conclusion?
9. Have you seen an increase in the number of parents/pupils requesting home schooling? What do these requests look like?
10. Any other comments?

Sampled schools were asked:
1. Has attendance improved over the last year (2022-23)?
2. Do the FVWL 'main causes' resonate with the school's absence causes?
3. What attendance concerns have emerged/grown since the pandemic?
4. Has attendance decreased more for those impact by poverty?
5. How does the school use data to support attendance and how is this used?
6. Is attendance on the school improvement plan?
7. What would make attendance easier to support?
8. Are you aware of group/s where attendance is an issue? Please describe. How did the school to come to this conclusion?
9. Have you seen an increase in the number of parents/pupils requesting home schooling? What do these request look like?
10. What support is in place for families to improve attendance. How effective are these?
11. Any other comments?

Appendix 2
Case studies

Case Study 1: Allan's Primary School, Stirling Council

Allan's Primary School is in Stirling. The current school roll is 177 with 66 children living in areas of deprivation.

A poverty-related gap was identified regarding attendance at the school. When data was analysed, it became evident that many children, where attendance was a concern, came from a specific area of the school catchment. Following discussions with families, it was agreed that a walking bus would be established. It was developed to tackle the barriers around attendance and time keeping, and to provide support for some families affected by poverty, Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis. The walking bus is a targeted intervention for communities and families where a walking route is established, and children are picked up at their doorstep and they walk together to school.

The walking bus started in October 2021. By supporting children, families and communities, the school's aim was to improve attendance and engagement at school and build positive, nurturing relationships with families.

A senior management team member and a school learning assistant (funded through Pupil Equity Funding), are responsible for delivering this intervention. The walking bus has a specific route that ensures children and families who would benefit from this support are collected from their home. This provides school staff with an opportunity to build trusting relationships with family members and each child. Being on the doorstep allows school staff to be responsive to family needs. Children who engage in the walking bus arrive at school early and then have their breakfast at breakfast club. This enables the children to feel ready for the day ahead.

Attendance figures dipped in session 2021-22 to 92.1% due to COVID-related absences, however, it has risen to 94% in session 2022-23. Analysis of average attendance demonstrates that children living in SIMD decile 1 now have a higher attendance (95.67%). This can be attributed to the walking bus strategy which has been operating since October 2021.

One child had an attendance record of 66% and through the intervention of the walking bus, attendance has risen to 94%. This has had a positive impact on attainment and the learner reported ... "Before the walking bus, I did not go to school much. Now I go every day and I love it!"

When asking parents who used the walking bus about its impact – 100% parents stated that it was invaluable to their daily morning routine. One parent reported, "The walking bus has been a Godsend as I wasn't well, and I did not know how to get my child safely to school. Using the walking bus lets me know that she gets to school on time, and she is safe."

Case Study 2: West Lothian Council focus on secondary attendance

West Lothian has 13 secondary schools, 11 of which were involved in the LA secondary attendance group project.

In 2021-22 the authority recognised that secondary headteachers were reporting challenges with attendance, and they were aware of growing numbers of young people whose attendance levels were 50% and below.

We made changes to systems.
- most secondary schools chose to employ a family link worker from their PEF (Pupil Equity Funding) funding, with a specific remit around improving attendance for targeted young people
- targets for all schools, regardless of whether they had family link workers (FLW), around improving attendance of young people in SIMD quintile 1, was part of the LA SAC stretch aim
- schools were asked to identify a further group of young people to improve their attendance. This was based on their own contexts
- attendance collaborative sessions were attended by depute headteachers. A FLW upskilled staff in a range of ways and carried out collaborative reflection and planning
- open conversations with a range of partners about how we could work more effectively together
- recognised the importance of gentle pressure, relentlessly applied
- ensured that FLW caseloads were manageable and that they targeted the young people who they can really make a difference with. With young people whose attendance was below 50%, recognition that a partnership approach was required
- the evolution of Power BI system in West Lothian

Working with Educational Psychology Service, developing research into impact with families being supported by Forth Valley and West Lothian, has been developed.

Attendance of targeted young people has been improved with increases in attendance month on month since December 2022 and an increase of 6.9% on average between March and April 2023. At whole school level a 1.9% increase was evidenced.

The authority has not managed to see this improvement in attendance impact at a universal level across all secondary schools and continue to face ongoing challenges in this area.

- working with all Early Learning and Childcare settings, Primary, Secondary and ASN schools and senior officers to develop the West Lothian Attendance Strategy
- focus on culture, systems and practice through a quality improvement officer secondment
- encourage schools to undertake a series of small, yet critical systemic changes, which together will contribute to increased accuracy in recording pupil attendance
- regular review of school roll, review of approaches to recording and amending individual pupil attendance and consistent application of SEEMiS attendance codes
- rigorous, relentless analysis of attendance data followed by timely, proportionate interventions
- focus attention on:
  - why a young person's individual attendance is as it is?
  - why has their attendance dropped?
  - why are they always absent on a Friday?
  - why do they always come in late on a Tuesday morning? etc.

Case Study 3: Neilsland Primary School, South Lanarkshire Council

Neilsland Primary School is in Hamilton. The school roll is 163 children with 109 living in SIMD quintile 1 and 2.

The school recognised that dress down days and Christmas fayres were producing patterns of absence from families most affected by poverty. The impact of the cost-of-living crisis and identifying the hidden poverty within families residing in SIMD quintiles 3-10 were also contributing areas of focus. As the school engaged with a small test of change project with a target group of children it became apparent that a scaled-up universal approach was needed to improve the overall attendance of the school.

A Principal Teacher (PT) of Equity and a Youth Family Community Learning officer were appointed between 2021-22. The PT leads on monitoring attendance through daily monitoring and a digital database that is updated daily by office staff. This, along with a monthly tracker and class registers identifying levels of attendance, assists in recognising developing patterns. As part of the universal approach to attendance, all staff use the information to adapt or change practice in order to support learners. Through this and family engagement feedback the school took the decision to implement various Cost of the School Day preventative measures and supports. These included:

- breakfast club (council funded)
- free extra-curricular clubs and after school activities
- uniform 'rake and take shed,' e.g., uniform, casual clothing, seasonal clothing, i.e., Halloween costumes, Christmas outfits/jumpers
- stationery stations in each class
- an open food bank – this is part of the rake and take shed, updated weekly
- food parcels
- supports through form and application completions thereby supporting family financial situations (supported by South Lanarkshire council wellbeing hub)
- reduced fund raising that will impact school families
- zero costed activities at any fund-raising event e.g., school fayre
- no dress-down days
- school grant applications
- ICT lending library to ensure equitable access to technology
- engagement with agencies to provide outdoor learning, stem, operation play opportunities

This is supported by other nurture approaches taken by the school:

- attendance is part of an ongoing school improvement plan priority
- morning nurture sessions to promote emotional wellbeing and soft starts
- wellbeing sessions for parents and child together
- newsletters with attendance updates and signposts to financial support
- youth family community learning officer implements a wellbeing focus on working with the child
- professional learning for staff – attachment, nurture, Barnardo's taking care of the people I lead, emotional literacy
- staff buddies for children
- ongoing emotional check-ins
- regular self-evaluation with whole school community

SIMD quintile 1(Q1) overall attendance figures increased faster than in any other quintile. Q1 (50% of the school) and free meal entitlement (FME) children's attendance rates rose by 3.67 percentage points (pp) on the previous year compared with an overall rise of 1.97pp for the whole school. As a result, the attendance gap between SIMD Q1+FME and SIMD Q2-5 (with no FME) narrowed by 2.42pp to a level of just 1.78pp. The LA gap between SIMD Q1 and SIMD Q5 was 5.02pp. The school are proud of the very strong progress in tackling poverty-related barriers to attendance.

Case Study 4: Windygoul Primary School, East Lothian Council

Windygoul Primary School is a primary school in Tranent. The current school roll is 630 with 10% of children and young people in receipt of free school meals.

Since the period of lockdown and home learning, the school reported that attendance rates were falling. There were a variety of reasons given by children and families for absence and an increasing number of mental health related incidents which impacted on attendance. Families reported that working from home made it easier for children to stay home on occasions when pre-pandemic they might otherwise have gone to school. The school sensed a change in attitude from parents and carers which reflected a more relaxed approach to attendance. The school felt that periods of time when the school building had been closed, as a result of lockdown and strikes, had contributed to this change. The headteacher also noted a particular increase in families taking holidays during term time.

The school recognised the need for a consistent approach and was ready in January 2022 to embrace the refreshed LA attendance policy which contained clear guidelines for schools. In September 2022, the LA also set ambitious stretch aims to increase average attendance.

The headteacher implemented the new attendance policy and adopted a robust approach to monthly monitoring. At regular meetings between the headteacher and senior business administrator, the attendance for the month and aggregated attendance for the year is analysed. Children who have attendance below 90% for the month are discussed and professional judgement applied. Colour coding is used to support tracking. A standard, initial letter is sent by the headteacher and the relevant depute headteacher makes contact with parents with offers of support.

Support ranges from meetings with a member of the senior leadership team, meetings with the school nurses, support with routines or the implementation of visual timetables to support morning routine.

Where attendance does not improve over time, letter 2 is then sent to parents with further offers of support. The impact of the letters and accompanying offers of support can be seen in the data below.

2021/22 – School Roll – 575	2022/23 – School Roll – 546
83 pupils received Letter 1	77 pupils received Letter 1
17 pupils received Letter 2	28 pupils received Letter 2

The data evidences a decrease in the number and percentage of children falling below 90%, 85% and 80%.

	2021-22		2022-23	
	Number of children	% of children	Number of children	% of children
Total cohort size	586		555	
Att Below 90%	203	34.6%	148	26.7%
Att Below 85%	203	34.6%	70	12.6%
Att Below 80%	44	7.5%	30	5.4%

Attendance across the school has risen by 1.9% from 2021-22 to 2022-23
- attendance % 2021 – 2022 was 89.4
- attendance % 2022 – 2023 was 92.3

The data provides additional information such as that over the course of last session, attendance of children living in Quintile 2 was consistently lower than those in other quintiles at 89.6%.

Attendance figures calculated on 26/09/23

	Temp Excl	Possible	All Absence		Auth Absence		Unauth Abs	
P1	0	26778	1778	6.64%	1482	5.53%	296	1.11%
P2	0	20362	1622	7.97%	1275	6.26%	347	1.70%
P3	2	23629	1700	7.19%	1153	4.88%	545	2.31%
P4	0	24203	1841	7.61%	1445	5.97%	396	1.64%
P5	14	28608	2159	7.55%	1585	5.54%	560	1.96%
P6	3	26836	2069	7.71%	1641	6.11%	425	1.58%
P7	0	28250	2779	9.84%	2200	7.79%	579	2.05%
Totals	19	178666	13948	7.81%	10781	6.03%	3148	1.76%

This table demonstrates that absence is lowest in Primary 1 and highest in P7.

Attendance data August – September 2023

	August – September 2023	
	Number of children	% of children
Total cohort size	538	
Att Below 90%	72	13.6%
Att Below 85%	32	6.62%
Att Below 80%	12	4.6%

In session 2023-24 so far:
- 47% of the children who have attendance below 90% have holidays included in reason for absences
- 24 children across the school were absent before or after (or both) the September holiday
- there are 30 children sitting at below 80% attendance.
- there are 20 1st letters being send this monitoring period with one referral to the Children's Reporter

Case Study 5: West Calder High School, West Lothian Council

West Calder High School is a secondary school in West Lothian. The current school roll is 1135 with 18% young people registered for free school meals.

On returning to school following the second period of Covid-19 lockdown, the school recognised it was experiencing lower levels of school attendance than before the pandemic, particularly for those young people who faced barriers. The school quickly realised that the educational landscape had changed and to make their school a place where every young person belonged, felt valued and included, they had to change the culture.

- the views of young people who experienced significant barriers to school attendance were sought and it was very clear that these young people did not feel as valued or included as those young people who were able to attend school every day
- the school changed their approach, and an Equity and Inclusion strategy was developed. This was a whole school approach which shifted the culture in the school to one where every young person has the right to an educational provision which meets their needs by providing the right support at the right time, regardless of the barriers they face
- through the work of the depute headteacher and her West Calder High School colleagues last year, it was clear that overall school attendance would only improve with a range of marginal gain improvements across the full range of school attendance
- data analysis was undertaken weekly to track the movement of pupils between each incremental stage. This allowed the depute head teacher and the team to identify individual improvements with young people and celebrate these whilst at the same time, intervening when attendance dropped
- not every young person is able to achieve 100% attendance due to health, family or other circumstance, however, this method of analysis enabled the school to monitor gains made, and allowed young people to see their improvements and set themselves targets in small, achievable chunks. It also enabled the school to adapt their provisions and resource to where it was most needed

This action has led to:
- a broadening of the curriculum to ensure that every young person can continue their learning pathway in the curricular areas of their choice
- continual development and improvement of school systems and processes to monitor, track and improve attendance
- expansion of targeted provisions and partnerships to include online learning for those young people suffering from chronic anxiety to intensive provisions both off site in the communities, and within the school
- all of this is part of a staged intervention approach designed to support young people to attend, attain and achieve the best they are capable of at any given time. This has led to 1132 out of 1135 of our young people engaging with us as much are they are able

The relentless focus on finding out why young people's attendance is as it is, followed by appropriate supports to improve, has seen the school start this session showing attendance is 1.5% above where it was at the same point last session. The school is already using last year's data to inform actions for this session in order to avoid, for example, the December dip.

Case Study 6: Millburn Academy, The Highland Council

Millburn Academy is in Inverness. The school roll is approximately 1255 pupils. The current school roll has 21.5% of learners living in SIMD quintile 1, 19.3% in quintile 2, 18.4% in quintile 3, 20.8% in quintile 4 and 19.9% in quintile 5.

Attendance is always a focus for the support team at Millburn. However, the negative impact of the pandemic and lockdown has unquestionably seen a rise in school refusal and concerning attendance habits. The school has made several changes to practice which has resulted in a positive trend in attendance data.

The school has implemented the amended Highland Council's Attendance Policy and alerted all parents/carers of the most significant features of this. As per the policy, staff have started the process of sending standardised letters every four weeks to the parents/carers of young people whose attendance has hit the stated trigger points. These letters are sent only after the pastoral team has reviewed the list of pupils to ensure that full consideration of any extenuating circumstances is taken. They also operate a rigorous three-day absence process whereby a daily report is extracted to identify pupils who have been absent for three days without reason. This report is shared with the pastoral team each day to establish contact with home and ascertain reasons for absence or trigger the child missing from education process. Additionally, attendance is a standing item in fortnightly pupil support meetings. A data dashboard is used and allows for a very quick overview of attendance information by caseload. The pastoral team review this fortnightly which ensures regular engagement with the attendance data of pupils per caseload and considering appropriate interventions, as necessary.

School staff work closely with an array of in-house and external providers so that a range of interventions are available to support young people with the challenges which negatively impact on attendance. The range of partners include; Growing 2gether, Mikey's Line, Rowan Counselling, KOOTH (online counselling), Distress Brief Intervention, Season's for Growth, Primary Mental Health as well as in-school support for learning interventions and nurture. Furthermore, the pastoral team works in partnership with Skills Development Scotland/ Developing the Young Workforce, the Bridge, Highland Virtual Academy, University of the Highlands and Islands and Inverness Kart Race Way to create alternative education packages for those whose attendance in school is very low.

Finally, in-house nurture provision plays a key role in improving attendance. As well as having well-established nurture groups which help young people have an affiliation with the school, the nurture lead offers 'safe spaces' over break times, runs the breakfast club and provides training around adverse childhood experiences and trauma informed practice for teaching and support staff.

This intervention (although not exclusively) targets pupils impacted by poverty with attendance improvement of 8% in the last year. Whole school attendance has also increased by 2% within the last academic school because of work with targeted individuals.

Case Study 7: James Hamilton Primary School, East Ayrshire Council

James Hamilton Primary School is in Kilmarnock. The school roll is currently 348 children and 29% of learners reside in quintile one.

The headteacher and newly appointed home-link worker utilised the available data to recognise and identify that there had been a four-year trend of declining attendance for both the overall cohort and for those residing in quintile one.

A number of actions and approaches have been adopted to support an improvement in overall attendance and the attendance of those residing in quintile one. Approaches included:

- monthly attendance audit with home link worker (HLW) and HT
- when required communication with parents:
    - Week 1: Home-link worker calls
    - Week 2: Home-link worker calls and letters (bespoke letters)
    - Week 3: Senior leadership team contacts family
- walking bus
- multiagency support
- extensive tracking and monitoring of data and supports
- revised school attendance policy
- 1 2 1 HLW pupil check-ins
- 1 2 1 HLW parent/carer check-ins
- whole family relationship modelling sessions
  structure, consistency & routine modelling sessions
- de-escalation & regulation workshops

Regardless of the approach the key successes have been regularly reviewing the data and the impact of any supports provided. This is underpinned by the positive working relationships that have been built between the school, in particular the home-link worker, and families within the school community.

Following a four-year negative trend in attendance for both overall and quintile one learners, there has now been an increase in attendance of both cohorts. Quintile one learners have increased by 4 percentage points to 91%. This is 1% higher than the overall cohort who improved by 1 percentage point. The school firmly believes that the time and effort spent on developing positive relationships with targeted groups of children continues to have an impact on attendance and attainment, as well as enhancing trust with families across the community.

Case Study 8: Newark Primary School, Inverclyde Council

Newark Primary is in Port Glasgow. The current school roll is 427 with 345 children living in areas of deprivation.

The school data showed that low attendance was impacting attainment. The school was also aware that current research indicated that anything less than 90% attendance impacted on attainment. The school data also indicated that the cycle of poor attendance increased as children moved through their school. The reported reasons for absences were varied.

The school decided to focus on primary 1&2 children who, in the previous year, had attendance of less than 90%. They aimed to increase attainment between 5-10% for identified pupils. The principal teacher focused on building positive relationships with a small cohort of identified families. They took a no-blame, problem solving approach. Regular contact enabled them to have discussions surrounding reasons why children were not at school, getting to the root causes. They then created bespoke support programmes, designed individually with each family, based on early intervention and prevention to remove barriers to attendance.

Alongside this work, the school tightened up their tracking systems. Regular flyers were sent out which clearly showed how a child's attendance was progressing, including positive as well as negative trends. A few families commented that they preferred this communication as they worried about phone calls from the school.

Within the small, identified group they saw children achieving attendance levels closer to or above 90%. Only 1 child did not see an improvement in attendance and there was a variety of health issues they were aware of and will continue to support.

Children and families beyond the focus group also benefited from the 'what is working' approaches as parents were supported to remove attendance barriers. The school saw a rise of 2.7% from June 2022 to 91.1% in June 2023.

Parents were very positive about the support in place. One parent said, "The school has really helped me to improve my child's attendance when I wasn't sure how to."

The school have commented that they have more to do but are confident their approach is working for their families. This session they will continue to focus on our Primary 1&2 to ensure their parents are supported to prioritise attendance. They will also extend their focus to our Primary 4 pupils as this is a group of learners who would benefit from this approach.

Education Scotland
Foghlam Alba

ATTENDANCE

There is a system-wide concern about reduced levels of attendance, particularly since the pandemic. National statistics provide evidence that there is a poverty-related gap in attendance. This report which is the result of a deep dive led by Education Scotland, aims to provide understanding of, the issues that impact on attendance and how as a system we might support improvement in attendance.

FINDINGS

ENGAGEMENT is as important as **ATTENDANCE** ✓

All absence impacts on LEARNING

Groups more vulnerable to NON-ATTENDANCE ✗

Poverty
ASN
Young carers
Exclusion

Anxiety
Secondary-aged pupils
Gypsy travellers

SCHOOL →

Support should take place at the EARLY STAGES. Lengthier cases are complex to solve.

Absence can be caused by:
INDIVIDUAL, PEER, FAMILY or SCHOOL factors.
(or a combination of these)
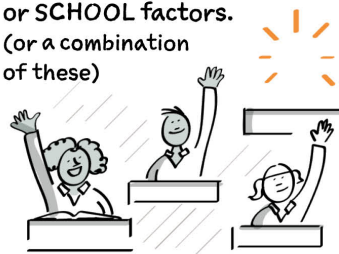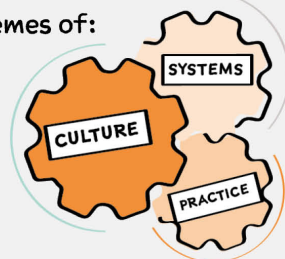
Themes of:
SYSTEMS
CULTURE
PRACTICE
Are **crucial structures** to support Attendance
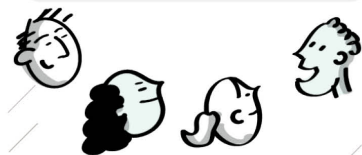
PARTNERSHIP
Schools, families, partners, third-sector; to ensure support and effective communication and secure presence.

All local authorities in Scotland have included attendance as a Scottish Attainment Challenge stretch aim for the next three years

Significant variations across Scotland in how DATA around attendance is used

ACTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Local authorities should carefully monitor their strategic and implementation plans for improving attendance or develop a plan where one is not in place.

2. Put children and young people's views at the centre of refreshed approaches.

3. ES, working with stakeholders and partners should provide bespoke support for areas where improving levels of attendance remains a challenge.

4. Approaches to effective tracking and monitoring attendance should be collated and shared.

5. ES and SG should collaborate with the wider system to bring coherence to the work on improving attendance.

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