

## Policy briefing: Additional support for learning – Attendance

August 2025



### Introduction

Giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish is at the heart of everything we do. By bringing together a network of people working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced, and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support, and develop positive change across all areas affecting children in Scotland.

We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children's rights. Our range of knowledge and expertise means we can provide trusted support on issues as diverse as the people we work with and the varied lives of children and families in Scotland.

[Children in Scotland](#) manages several national additional support for learning (ASL) services. [Enquire](#) is the national information and advice service for additional support for learning, [Resolve](#) is a provider of independent mediation services, and the Children's Views service independently gathers the views of children with additional support needs in formal processes. Enquire and the **Children's Views** service are also partners in [My Rights, My Say](#), a service that supports 12- to 15-year-olds with additional support needs to fulfil their right to be heard in decisions about their education.

Improving the delivery of additional support for learning is a key policy priority for Children in Scotland. The children and young people we engage with, including those involved in the [Inclusion Ambassadors](#), regularly highlight the different ways that a lack of support or consideration to additional support needs in schools affects their lives. Additionally, several of our members deliver additional support for learning in schools and other education settings.

Our belief in the right for all children to access suitable support in order to fulfil their rights to education is embodied by our Inclusion Ambassadors vision statement which sets out what the pupils with additional support needs we work expect from their 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.”*

Inclusion Ambassadors vision statement



## Policy context

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 provides the basis for current Scottish Government policy on additional support for learning in Scottish schools. This act sets out the duties of education authorities to identify, provide for and review the additional needs of their pupils.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the Scottish Government commissioned an independent review of the implementation of the act, recognising growing concern for the lack of availability and effectiveness of support for pupils with additional support needs in Scotland's schools.

The subsequent 'Support for Learning: All our children and all their potential' report delivered a series of recommendations for stakeholders to improve the delivery of additional support for learning in Scotland. The Additional Support for Learning Action Plan set out a series of actions to ensure recommendations from the independent review are met.

Current legislation states that education settings must follow a 'presumption of mainstreaming' under the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act (2000), meaning that all pupils must be educated within mainstream schools unless certain exceptions apply.<sup>2</sup> In practice this means that unless certain circumstances laid out in the act arise, schools are required to provide appropriate additional support for pupils who require it.

As a children's rights-based organisation, we fully believe that all children in Scotland have a right to an education (Article 28) and that this education should develop the child to their fullest potential (Article 29) under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>3</sup> A lack of appropriate and accessible support for pupils with additional support needs therefore presents a clear challenge to the rights enshrined in the convention, and conflicts with Scotland's legal obligation to uphold children's rights under the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024.

While Scottish pupils' right to an education was already enshrined in Scots law prior to incorporation of the UNCRC, the 2024 act has placed additional responsibilities on the Scottish Government and public authorities to uphold and report on children's right to an education under article 28 of the convention.<sup>4</sup> Article 28 makes clear that state parties must 'take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools' and that failing to do so would conflict with a child's right to education.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act (2000)

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF UK (1989), [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

<sup>4</sup> Children's right to an education and right to an education directed to the child's fullest potential were included in the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act (2000).

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF UK (1989), [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – Article 28](#).

Our participation work with children and young people with additional support needs, in combination with insights we hear from those who access our services, gives us a unique national perspective on the persistent and emerging issues in the delivery of additional support for learning. Children in Scotland is also a member of the Additional Support for Learning Project Board and Network, giving us additional insight into the challenges facing stakeholders to deliver the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan.

We have developed this policy briefing to bring together the range of evidence and insights we gather on additional support for learning, and to contribute to the discussion on how Scotland's education system can best support and uphold the rights of pupils with additional support needs. We will consider developing similar briefings as required.



## Why attendance?

Issues related to school attendance were raised in 32% of all helpline enquiries to our Enquire service between April 2022 and March 2025. Data from the Scottish Government on school attendance further demonstrates that issues relating to attendance disproportionately affect pupils with additional support needs, showing that pupils with additional support needs had a lower overall attendance rate (87.45%) than pupils without (91.6%) in 2023.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the available quantitative data, experiential evidence from staff managing our My Rights, My Say service suggests that attendance is an issue for a high proportion of the children they've worked with. Pupils involved in our Inclusion Ambassadors project have also discussed in depth the issues they have experienced in school that can contribute to school absence, including relationships with peers and staff, anxiety about school and lack of support.

Attendance is a persistent issue for pupils with additional support needs that well predates the available data from our services. Responding to issues relating to school attendance in 2007, the Scottish Government published guidance on the management of attendance, absence and exclusions in schools that stated all pupils should be 'Included, Engaged and Involved' in education.<sup>7</sup> Part 2 of this guidance was published in 2017 reiterating the government's commitment to preventing exclusions.<sup>8</sup>

In 2018, Children in Scotland, Scottish Autism and National Autistic Society Scotland responded to the lack of progress on improving attendance for pupils with additional support needs, specifically autistic children, with the publication of the Not Included, Not Engaged and Not Involved research report. The report considered pupils' experiences of exclusions, part-time timetables and not attending school for any reason other than common childhood illness. The report found that support needs were not being met leading up to or following a child's exclusion or absence from school and that part-time timetables were likely being used as a means of managing support needs.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government (2023), [Summary statistics for schools in Scotland 2023](#).

<sup>7</sup> Scottish Government, (2007), [Included, engaged and involved part 1: Attendance in Scottish Schools](#).

<sup>8</sup> Scottish Government, (2017), [Included, engaged and involved part 2: Preventing and managing school exclusions](#).

<sup>9</sup> 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](#).

Anxiety, refusal to attend school, and unsuitable placements were also noted as reasons that autistic pupils were missing out on their right to education.<sup>10</sup>

In September 2019, the Scottish Government commissioned an Independent Review of the implementation of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, recognising growing concern for the lack of availability and effectiveness of support for pupils with additional support needs in Scotland's schools. The review, led by Angela Morgan, was published in 2020 with a set of recommendations across nine themes that the Scottish Government should implement to improve additional support for learning practice and address some of the underlying issues related to lower attendance rates in pupils with additional support needs.<sup>11</sup>

The Additional Support for Learning Action Plan was published by the Scottish Government in 2020 to set out a range of actions to address the findings of the Support for Learning: All our Children and their potential – Independent Review.<sup>12</sup> The most recent progress report on the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan published in November 2024 indicated that around half of the total actions had been completed.<sup>13</sup> While not all of these actions are specific to improving school attendance, we would expect actions seeking to address the factors we know are related to attendance (e.g. support and relationships) to also improve attendance.

However, we also know that completion of some of these actions will not directly lead to immediate improvements in the educational experience of pupils with additional support needs. And despite the progress made to deliver actions since 2020, insights from our services and engagement with pupils with additional support needs tells us that attendance and its associated issues remain a significant barrier to accessing education.

In May 2024, the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee published their Additional Support for Learning Inquiry 2nd Report, which heard evidence from various education stakeholders about the lower attendance rates for pupils with additional support needs across Scotland in the post-pandemic context.<sup>14</sup> Recommendations from the report stated that the Committee considers issues around attendance to be about unmet needs and urged the Scottish Government and COSLA to improve data gathering on exclusions and the use of part-time timetables among pupils with additional support needs.

We are at a pivotal stage in the delivery of the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan, and the persistence of low attendance as an issue disproportionately affecting pupils with additional support needs is a cause for concern. Recommendations from the 2024 committee inquiry report draw further attention to the need for clear and concerted action to take place at pace to improve the educational experience of pupils with additional support needs and address many of the issues related to their lower attendance rate.

Moreover, some recent local authority campaigns aiming to address declining attendance rates by engaging families and encouraging pupils to come to school suggest

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Government, (2020), [Support for Learning: All our Children and their Potential – Independent Report](#).

<sup>12</sup> Scottish Government, (2020) [Additional Support for Learning: Action Plan](#).

<sup>13</sup> Scottish Government, (2024), [Additional Support for Learning Review: Action Plan – Update](#).

<sup>14</sup> Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee, (2024) [Additional Support for Learning Inquiry, 2nd Report](#).

that the factors contributing to low attendance are not currently well understood.<sup>15</sup> As this briefing will demonstrate – and is recognised in the recent Committee report – the factors that affect many pupils’ attendance are often based on unmet needs and should not be considered the responsibility of children or their families.

In this context, a deeper understanding of the barriers pupils face when coming to school is necessary to respond appropriately and support all pupils with additional support needs in Scotland to meet their right to an education. As the latest review of the Scottish Government’s Included, Engaged and Involved guidance is undergoing, there would be value in returning focus to attendance as a signifier of ongoing issues in the delivery of additional support for learning. This would help ensure that necessary actions are being taken by all relevant duty bearers who hold responsibility for fulfilling pupils with additional support needs’ right to an education.



Data from our Enquire service helpline presented in this briefing is based on issues recorded from April 2022 to March 2025. The methods for recording data changed substantially in April 2022 making prior issues recorded before April 2022 incomparable.

Data recorded through our Enquire helpline is not intended to be representative of all the issues faced by pupils with additional support for learning in Scotland. Data included in this briefing is only representative of the issues experienced by pupils with additional support needs and their families who have accessed our services.

Views from pupils involved in our Inclusion Ambassadors project and My Rights, My Say service are recorded as quotes from direct engagement.

The data and insights presented in this briefing will highlight the most common issues faced by pupils and families who access our services and report attendance as an issue. It will consider where gaps in additional support for learning provision are contributing to low attendance and will consider how current policy approaches adopted by the Scottish Government could take steps to increase the profile of attendance as a significant issue facing pupils with additional support needs and address the factors that influence it.



## Our data & evidence

The insights from our service data and the voices, views and experiences of the children and young people we work with, allow us to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that could contribute to a pupil with additional support needs feeling and being unable to attend school.

From the period April 2022 to March 2025, our Enquire helpline received 4,614 enquiries from pupils with additional support needs and their families. Of these, 1,468

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<sup>15</sup> Glasgow City Council, (2025), [Attendance Matters Every Day](#).

enquiries (32%) recorded attendance as a main issue reported. Of all the enquiries about attendance, 59% were from pupils in secondary school, 33% were in primary school and 2% were in early years settings.

Of those who raised attendance as the main issue of their enquiry, 61% identified autism as a factor giving rise to the child's additional support need. 43% of contacts to the helpline identified anxiety as a factor and 21% identified other mental health issues. A further 22% identified ADHD as a factor giving rise to a child's additional support need.

Autistic pupils, those with ADHD and those who report specifically anxiety and other mental health issues as a factor giving rise to their additional support needs, emerge from our data as key groups who report attendance as a barrier to accessing their education. However, we know that a combination of different factors can give rise to an individual pupil's additional support needs, so these groups should not be viewed as mutually exclusive.

This briefing presents key findings based on the main reasons and issues raised on our helpline in relation to attendance and considers how these affect a pupil's ability to attend school. It also provides quotes in relation to the findings from children and young people we engage with to ensure that the voices, views and experiences of pupils with additional support needs are centred. Our findings are based on the following four topics or issues related to attendance:

- School-related anxiety and other mental health issues
- Support for learning and relationships in school
- Part-time timetables
- Out of school education provision.



## School-related anxiety and other mental health issues

Within all enquiries that reported attendance as a main issue, 45% reported school-related anxiety as a reason for their absence. A further 23% of enquiries also mentioned other mental ill-health as a reason for pupil absence.

The fact that almost half of all attendance-related enquiries raised anxiety as an issue makes clear that pupils' mental health concerns in relation to school present a significant barrier to accessing their education. It also indicates that appropriate support for school-related anxiety and other mental health issues is not being met for a significant proportion of pupils both in and out of school.

Insights from our participation work with children and young people consolidates the findings from our helpline on school-related anxiety and attendance for pupils with additional support needs. Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors have previously told us how anxiety and mental health issues can prevent pupils from feeling or being able to attend school.

***“[Anxiety] It can make you feel unable to step outside your house.”***

***“A particularly bad panic attack can make you lose your confidence.”***

***“I did want to go to school but I just couldn’t.”***

***“You get worried and nervous about doing things you don’t think you’ll be good at.”***

Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors

For some members of the Inclusion Ambassadors, their anxiety about school or losing the confidence to cope with their anxiety prevented them from attending, even in cases when they wanted to go to school. These insights further demonstrate the significant barrier that school-related anxiety and a lack of suitable support can present to accessing education.

Unsurprisingly, for pupils who said anxiety was a factor giving rise to their additional support needs and who reported attendance as an issue, 68% said school-related anxiety was the reason for their absence from school. For those who identified autism as a factor giving rise to their additional support need, 50% said that school-related anxiety was a reason for their absence, while 45% of enquiries where ADHD was a factor for a pupil’s additional support needs said school-related anxiety was a reason for school absence.

This data reflects much of the findings from the Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved research report, which showed that school-related anxiety was identified as a reason for autistic pupils absence in 63% of respondents.<sup>16</sup> The report also pointed to experience of bullying behaviour and poor relationships between pupils as an important factor contributing to school-related anxiety.

Children supported by our My Rights, My Say service have shared the impact that bullying behaviours in school can have on their experiences of attending school.

***“I didn’t feel safe. Like primary school, I was getting bullied. The teachers wouldn’t take this seriously, so I couldn’t do anything about it. I feel like the teachers didn’t like me, and I would get the blame for someone doing something to me, I wasn’t getting any support. I always got the blame even if it wasn’t my fault. I couldn’t focus on my learning, and the bullying took over.”***

Child supported by the My Rights, My Say service

In combination with the insights shared by children and young people we work with about bullying behaviours in school and anxiety, there is fair reason to suspect that bullying behaviours and poor relationships between pupils are factors contributing to school-related anxiety among pupils with additional support needs.

Bullying and poor relationships with peers has been a topic discussed by the Inclusion Ambassadors on several occasions, supporting our understanding of how bullying behaviours can increase factors related to anxiety and in turn impact a pupil’s ability to attend school. Members have spoken about feeling anxious about their safety and the impact of bullying behaviours on their self-esteem.

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<sup>16</sup> Scottish Government, (2020), [Support for Learning: All our Children and their Potential – Independent Report](#).

***“Hateful comments can put your confidence down.”***

***“Bullying and fights with other pupils definitely stressed me out. It makes you feel unsafe.”***

Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Guidance and support for schools to address anxiety-related absence for pupils with additional support needs is available, however, the scale of enquiries where anxiety-related absence is an issue suggests this is not yet being effectively implemented in many schools.<sup>17</sup>



## **Support and relationships in schools**

The evidence and insights from all our policy work, services and participation with children and young people makes it clear that supportive relationships between school staff and the detailed understanding of individual support needs that these relationships facilitate, are central to providing adequate support for pupils with additional support needs.

Without these trusting relationships between staff, pupils and their families, support needs can be misunderstood leading to inappropriate or inadequate support. We know that inadequate support often results in negative experiences in school or other education settings.

The data from our services suggests that a lack of appropriate support and positive relationships with trusted adults is, in a significant proportion of cases, actively contributing to pupils with additional support needs absence from school. Of all enquiries that reported attendance as an issue, 32% reported the level of support a pupil was receiving as an issue. Moreover, a lack of understanding of a child's additional support needs was raised as an issue in 26% of these enquiries.

We hear often from children and young people about the impact that inadequate support can have on their experience in school. Misunderstanding additional support needs and failing to deliver agreed support plans is discussed regularly by members of the Inclusion Ambassadors. Views on this topic have been gathered and presented in the Inclusion Ambassadors' support planning [briefing paper](#).<sup>18</sup>

***“Eventually, you get tired of explaining yourself.”***

***“Some teachers don't even look at your support plan – if you say you're going to do something you should follow through on what you say.”***

***“If you want a student to do their best in school, you have to make an environment that supports their needs.”***

Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors

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<sup>17</sup> Education Scotland, [Improving attendance in Scotland](#).

<sup>18</sup> Children in Scotland, (2023), [Inclusion Ambassadors: Support planning](#).

The picture is also concerning when we consider relationships between school staff, pupils and their families. Relationship difficulties between school and home were mentioned as an issue in 19% of attendance enquiries, while communication issues with staff were reported in 27% of enquiries.

The Inclusion Ambassadors have told us how poor relationships with particular staff negatively impacts their experiences in school and how supported they feel.

***“Why do you [school staff] think you can scream at me and expect me not to want to walk away?”***

***“Staff should not be talking down to us [pupils with additional support needs], we aren’t different to any other student.”***

***“Teachers shouting makes us feel bad, it’s bad for our confidence.”***

Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Moreover, children and young people supported through our My Rights, My Say service have shared how not feeling listened to by school staff impacts their experiences in school and contributes to feeling their support needs were misunderstood by staff.

***“My school used to assume what support I needed without listening to me. It made me feel rubbish and I ended up not going into school as much.”***

***“It doesn’t meet your needs when you’re not listened to. One of the aspects of not meeting people’s needs is not listening to them and just going ahead with what you want to do.”***

Child supported through the My Rights, My Say service

For pupils with the support needs highlighted above, featuring particularly highly in attendance-related enquiries, issues around level of support and lack of understanding of needs are frequently raised. A lack of understanding of a child’s support needs was raised in 35% of enquiries about pupils with anxiety, 24% for pupils with other mental health needs, 29% for autistic pupils, and 36% for pupils with ADHD. The level of support being received was cited as an issue in 30% of enquiries about pupils with anxiety or mental health needs, in 33% for autistic pupils, and in 39% for pupils with ADHD.

Our data tells us that for pupils with support needs related to anxiety and mental health issues, autism and ADHD, a lack of adequate support and understanding of their support needs is likely to be contributing to their absence from school. This further demonstrates how integral relationships and support provided in education settings are to ensuring children can attend school and access their education.



## Part-time timetables

Undoubtedly, part-time timetables can be used appropriately as a means of best meeting a pupil’s additional support needs in certain circumstances, including

prolonged illness or as a temporary measure during a change of support or placement. When this is done in agreement with pupils and their families, part-time timetables can be administered in a fair and appropriate manner. However, we also know from evidence from our services that there can be disagreements around whether they are always used in the best interests of the child, and there can be inconsistency and lack of clarity of practice in this area.

Part-time education was recorded as the reason for absence in 31% of enquiries where attendance was a main issue. Of those enquiries where a child was attending part-time, 32% said that home and school were in agreement about its use, however 49% said there had been a disagreement about the ongoing use of this arrangement and 19% said there had been a disagreement about its initial introduction.

Disagreements about part-time timetables have been raised by children working with staff on the My Rights, My Say service. These insights make clear that when part-time timetables are not used in agreement with children and families, it can negatively impact a pupil's experience of attending school.

***“S1 was OK for most of the year. But then all my tapping and singing was distracting and everything, so I kept getting sent out and then my mum had to come up to school. I don't like that. It's embarrassing. Mum didn't agree with them anyway about this part-time timetable [...] I would like my S1 classes back and those teachers. I want to be back in full time.”***

Child supported through the My Rights, My Say service

Of pupils who said anxiety was a factor giving rise to additional support needs and who reported part-time timetables as a reason for absence, 44% agreed about its use whilst 56% were not in agreement with their use. For enquiries where mental health issues were a factor contributing to their additional support needs and who reported part-time timetables as a reason for absence, 47% agreed with their use whilst 53% were not in agreement.

Disagreements about the use of part-time timetables appear to be more of a concern in enquiries where autism and ADHD were factors contributing to a pupil's additional support needs. For those who said autism was a factor giving rise to additional support needs and said part-time timetables were a reason for absence, 31% said they agreed with the use of a part-time timetable, while 69% disagreed with their ongoing use or introduction. For those who said ADHD was a factor and who said part-time timetables were a reason for absence, 29% agreed with their use and 71% disagreed.

Findings from the Not Included, Not Engaged and Not Involved research report showed that in 2018 part-time timetables were being used by schools to manage pupils' support needs – as opposed to being used as a means of meeting their support needs. The report included concerning findings about the prolonged use of part-time timetable on some occasions, further highlighting their inappropriate use as a method of managing diverse and unique additional support needs.

For parents who agreed to the use of part-time timetables, the report showed that in most cases this option was suggested by the school rather than the families of pupils with additional support needs, and that some parents did so because they believed it was their only option.

The Inclusion Ambassadors tell us that they are aware when relationships are strained between school and home. They recognise that this relationship should be positive to ensure they are getting the best support. Anecdotally, we know through our work with the Inclusion Ambassadors that difficult relationships between school and parents can lead to pupils feeling uncertain and suspicious of school staff, contributing to a sense of mistrust between home and school.

***“[We] need to have a good relationship between school and my parents.”***

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Given the level of disagreement about the use of part-time arrangements by many of our helpline users, it is clear that they are not always adequately meeting pupils’ needs. The use of part-time timetables in this way can negatively impacts a pupil’s attendance by limiting the amount of time they can access school to learn. This has clear and harmful implications for realising the child’s right to education and their right to be heard in the decisions that impact their life.



## Out of school education provision

Children in Scotland knows from our work that school may not be the best setting for all children and young people with additional support needs. There is an important distinction to be made between attending education and attending school. We know that out of school education provision is necessary for some children to fulfil their right to education and their right to feel safe and supported. These alternative education settings include but are not limited to online schooling, self-directed learning, outreach education services and provision at local colleges.

Scottish local authorities have a legal duty to provide education to pupils who are unable to attend school due to ill health (including mental ill health), however, we know there are significant gaps in the delivery of this across Scotland. Regrettably, this means many pupils who are unable to physically attend school are not accessing an education. Insights from the shift to online/flexible learning made during the coronavirus pandemic tell us that these models can work well for pupils unable to attend school. There could be value in offering these models of learning to pupils with additional support needs unable to attend school for a variety of reasons, ensuring they are able to fulfil their right to education.

The recent education report by Scotland’s Children and Young People’s Commissioner highlighted that in order to fulfil the rights of all learners, education must be a holistic endeavour, rather than a top-down focus on academic success.<sup>19</sup>

We are aware of incidents where an individual’s low attendance in a formal education setting has been used to unfairly penalise them and prevent them from accessing their education through stopping them sitting exams. This example demonstrates too much focus on attendance becoming problematic and preventing a pupil from accessing education.

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<sup>19</sup> Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland. (2025), [Education Reform Report](#).

We believe Scotland's education system should prioritise a child's wellbeing and that doing so can help support pupils to succeed in ways other than just academic achievement. As the findings in this briefing demonstrate, participation in the formal education setting is not supporting the wellbeing of some pupils with additional support needs.

While all school settings should be able to provide adequate support that helps pupils participate in their education, we recognise that alternative and out of school education provision will be able to better provide for some pupils' additional support needs. In these circumstances, children, young people and families should be supported to engage with alternative education provision. In addition to the findings on school-related anxiety and support and relationships, our helpline data shows that of all enquiries where attendance was said to be a main issue, 19% said the school learning environment was a contributing factor in the pupil's absence and 17% said the suitability of their current placement was one of the contributing factors.

When we look at enquiries where autism or ADHD was said to be a factor giving rise to additional support needs, 22% said learning environment was one of the reasons for their school absence. For those who said anxiety or mental health issues were a factor giving rise to their additional support need, 24% and 20% respectively said learning environment was one of the contributing reasons for their school absence.

The negative impact of an unsuitable learning environment on a pupil's experience of attending school has been raised in conversations with children supported by My Rights, My Say. Children have told My Rights, My Say staff how aspects like noise and overcrowding can make the school environment incompatible with their additional support needs.

***"[I struggled] just being there [in school] overall, it's so loud and busy. I can't go back there if I miss anything. The people are not kind, the same as primary school. It's so big and everything is far apart.***

***"I find it hard to pay attention, so that makes it hard to do the schoolwork. This means I lose focus, and when I lose attention, I don't learn anything for the rest of the lesson."***

Child supported by My Rights, My Say service

Our evidence tells us that when the school setting is not working for some pupils, it can contribute to a pupil feeling unable to attend school. On these occasions, it is important to explore how the learning environment can be amended to be more supportive of a pupil's additional needs. For some pupils this may mean seeking education provision outside of school and appropriate support should be provided when this is the necessary response. For others, this will involve considering how the learning environment negatively affects their educational experience and what steps can realistically be taken to change this in addition to their wider support provision.





## Discussion

The data and insights included in this briefing demonstrate the multiple factors that can contribute to a lower attendance rate among pupils with additional support needs in Scotland. Fundamentally, low attendance is a clear signifier of unmet needs, which has a direct impact on a child or young person's right to access their education.

It is the responsibility of all duty bearers – those named under the UNCRC (Incorporation) Act (Scotland) as responsible for adhering to children's rights as laid out in the convention – to ensure that all children and young people in Scotland can access and enjoy their right to an education. It is therefore the responsibility of these duty bearers to understand the factors that contribute to a pupil not attending school and address these factors appropriately.

Approaches to improving attendance by encouraging or attempting to motivate pupils to attend school fundamentally misinterpret the reasons that a pupil with additional support needs may be unable to attend school. This also unfairly places responsibility on families to support their child into a learning environment where their needs are not met.

Greater focus must be placed on understanding the unique support needs of pupils who are not attending school and ensuring that these needs can be met either within a formal education setting or through alternative provision.

Data from our helpline and the insights from children and young people we work with also indicate that appropriate support for school-related anxiety and other mental health issues is not being provided for pupils both in and out of school. The failure to provide this support can contribute to a pupil's low attendance.

Guidance and support to address anxiety-related absence is available from Education Scotland and guidance for supporting autistic pupils has been developed by the National Autism Implementation Team.<sup>20</sup> However, these guides appear to be underutilised in schools and should be promoted widely by key public sector stakeholders to ensure practice is consistent across Scotland.

Moreover, existing advice on supporting pupils with mental health concerns may also not always be applicable to pupils with different support needs, including neurodivergent pupils. Bespoke guidance to support the mental health and wellbeing of pupils with different support needs should be developed to ensure that schools can access appropriate support for these pupils when mental health concerns like anxiety arise. Schools must feel supported and equipped to turn guidance into practice and do so while maintaining clear communication with families and pupils themselves.

Our data and insights also show that a lack of trusted relationships and the support that they facilitate are significant contributing factors in a pupil with additional support need's ability to attend school. We know that positive relationships between pupils and staff is key to understanding the unique support needs of pupils, and that these

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<sup>20</sup> National Autism Implementation Team, (2020), [Anxiety related absence: a guide for practice](#).

relationships are integral to children and young people feeling supported and safe. According to our helpline data, this support being inadequate or support needs not being well understood can contribute to a pupil's low attendance.

The Scottish Government should make clear links to improving attendance as it delivers the remaining actions in the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan. Improving attendance rates among pupils with additional support needs would provide a valuable indicator for measuring the delivery of better support in a national measurement framework.

We also understand that while part-time timetables can be used effectively to support a pupil with additional support needs to attend education in a way that is manageable to their unique circumstances, these timetables can be used inappropriately as a method of managing support needs. Enquiries to our helpline have told us that there are many cases where their use has not been established in agreement between families and schools, reflecting much of what we learned in the 2018 Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved report.

Where part-time timetables are used inappropriately, pupils with additional support needs and their families must have access to clear routes to challenge this decision and ensure additional support needs are met in line with current additional support for learning legislation. Clear guidance for schools to appropriately administer part-time timetables in a manner that respects the rights of the child, and their family, should be provided. To avoid adding new guidance to a crowded landscape, using part-time timetables appropriately should be included in comprehensive and streamlined guidance for schools to address the issues related to pupil absence and low attendance.

The evidence shared in this briefing aims to demonstrate the clear links between unmet needs and school absence among pupils with additional support needs. It offers a valuable addition to the ongoing policy discussions around school attendance which, unfortunately, often do not address the issues in policy and practice that contribute to pupils feeling unable to attend school.

The below calls to action offer a starting point for key decision makers and duty bearers to address these issues and reach our shared goal of ensuring all children and young people can enjoy their right to an education that supports them to reach their full potential.



## Calls to action

1. The Scottish Government and Additional Support for Learning Project Board should include the monitoring of attendance in its national measurement framework as part of the additional support for learning action plan delivery. This would ensure that the combination of factors that affect attendance rates are being adequately addressed and appropriate support for pupils to access their right to education is met.
2. Changes to how absences are recorded by schools via SEEMIS should be introduced allowing for improved insights to be gathered on the reasons for pupil absence, beyond the catch all category of 'authorised/unauthorised absence'.

3. Public awareness campaigns about school attendance should share clear messaging about the various factors that could contribute to a pupil feeling unable to attend school and signpost to relevant sources of support and guidance.
4. The Scottish Government should continue to work closely with stakeholders on the Additional Support for Learning Project Board as it works to refresh Included, Engaged, Involved, providing a streamlined and comprehensive guidance document for schools addressing the key issues related to low attendance, including:
  - Supporting pupils experiencing school-related anxiety
  - Appropriately using part-time timetables
  - The school learning environment and alternative education provision.
  - Accurately recording and responding to persistent school absence
  - Communicating effectively with pupils who are absent from schools and their families
5. As part of the Scottish Government's broader education reforms, greater investment and resources should be directed to establishing out of school education provision that provides safe and supportive environments to learn. This provision should be used to support pupils whose needs are not met in formal education settings to access their right to education. We encourage the Scottish Government to reflect on the successful provision of online/flexible during the coronavirus pandemic and consider how this might support pupils to access their right to education.