

COMMISSION ON SCHOOL REFORM

Absence & Attendance in School

Commission on School Reform Briefing

When 90% isn't good enough

More than 100,000 school pupils in Scotland are missing one day of school per fortnight.

It is reasonable to think of 90% achievement in something as a high level – it often is. However, when measuring attendance, 90% should be when alarm bells start to ring and early intervention methods kick in. Attendance of 90% expressed a different way actually means missing one day per fortnight, while attendance of 80% means missing one day per week. Losing this level of schooling can have a huge impact on a child's education.

Too many pupils in Scotland are regularly missing school. In 2018/19, the last fully pre-pandemic school year, 138,312 school pupils were absent at least one day per fortnight and 45,443 pupils were missing at least one day per week.

The issue appears to be most problematic in high school¹:

2018/19	Number of pupils with attendance 90% or less (Missing at least one day per fortnight)	Number of pupils with attendance of 80% or less (Missing at least one day per week)
P1-4	32,397	7,365
P5-7	25,507	6,029
S1-3	43,679	16,332
S4-6	36,729	15,717

There are varying levels across Scotland's local authority areas. In Glasgow alone more than 6,000 pupils were missing one day per week.

Covid has led to increases in the numbers of pupils missing school and it is vital that these patterns change. There are a wide range of reasons behind school refusal and the growing number of pupils who miss more than 50% of school. These will require more complex solutions, including addressing delays within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). However, early intervention can help those beginning to miss school regularly before it becomes a bigger problem and catching up on lost learning becomes harder.

¹ Data from FOI responses from 30 local authority areas. D&G provided only total numbers of pupils and Renfrewshire could not provide the data without excessive costs.

Research

In 2020 our Commission on School Reform highlighted worrying levels of absence in schools, with a growing number of pupils recording attendance of less than 50%.² Our research revealed that nearly 9,000 pupils were absent more than half the time, a figure which had increased by 17% over a two-year period.

We had hoped that highlighting those figures would encourage the Scottish Government to look into the issue of school attendance more broadly, particularly following the impact of the pandemic and the lost learning that occurred then.

Statistical bulletins only publish the overall average attendance levels and even then it is only included every two years, not annually.³ In March 2022 we wrote to the Scottish Government asking:

In each of the past six years, how many pupils have attendance figures of a) less than 90%, b) less than 80%, c) less than 50%, d) less than 75%, e) 0%, broken down by stage of schooling.

We received the following partial response. The distinction between “absent” and “not in school” is the Scottish Government’s and is due to the former coming from an official statistics publication and the latter being based on daily school management information with limited quality checking. With that caveat, the two statements can be compared. However, as the answer notes, the 20/21 data is not comparable due to the pandemic.

“Figures for 2018/19 and 2020/21 show that:

Primary Schools

14.6% of primary pupils were absent more than 10% of the time in 2018/19.

In 2020/21, 25.4% of primary pupils were not in school more than 10% of the time.

0.2% of primary pupils were absent more than 50% of the time in 2018/19.

In 2020/21, 1.0% of primary pupils were not in school more than 50% of the time.

Secondary Schools

29.3% of secondary pupils were absent more than 10% of the time in 2018/19. In 2020/21, 49.6% of secondary pupils were not in school more than 10% of the time.

2.0% of secondary pupils were absent more than 50% of the time in 2018/19. In 2020/21, 4.0% of secondary pupils were not in school more than 50% of the time.

Figures from the 2020/21 daily management information are not directly comparable to the 2018/19 National Statistics due to differences in collection methods, the level of quality assurance undertaken and COVID-19 related school closures in 2020/21.”

We went on to ask whether future Scottish Government absence publications could record the data requested. The response was “not held”.

In 2018 there were 400,276 primary school pupils and 286,152 secondary pupils.⁴ Therefore, the Scottish Government’s response would suggest that about 58,000 primary school pupils and 84,000 secondary school pupils were missing at least one day per fortnight - a statistic that should be alarming.

² <https://reformscotland.com/2020/10/scotlands-lost-pupils-2/>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland-no-10-2019-edition/pages/7/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland-no-10-2019-edition/documents/>

As the Scottish Government was unable to give time series data we asked local authorities about attendance levels of less than 90% and 80% for the last six years broken down by smaller stages of schooling.⁵ Not all the responses were comparable, nor did they cover the same school years. Renfrewshire Council said that they couldn't provide the data due to excessive costs in doing so, while Dumfries and Galloway only provided total pupil figures. The following tables highlight the responses received from the 30 other local authority areas and cover the years 2017/18 to 2020/21. We have focused on the 2018/19 data as latter years have been impacted by Covid in different ways and are not directly comparable.

Table 1: Number of pupils with less than 90% attendance

	P1-4				P5-7				S1-3				S4-6			
	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21
Aberdeen City	1632	1509	1907	1380	965	932	1207	1000	1411	1467	1600	1330	1170	1109	1204	1012
Aberdeenshire*	1036	1074	1427	783	864	838	1139	726	1772	1789	1924	1181	1372	1478	1740	1091
Angus	589	642	910	522	521	581	725	446	1026	956	1110	883	1000	1004	1044	983
Argyll and Bute	350	297	416	286	300	283	359	266	463	473	537	397	415	388	483	357
Clackmannanshire	521	502	341	598	324	390	279	422	469	529	352	579	350	336	264	427
Dundee City	1163	1132	1934	1026	930	900	1464	943	1601	1555	1865	1554	1337	1238	1447	1092
East Ayrshire	937	961	996	895	670	691	745	773	1288	1230	1228	1188	1051	1031	1131	913
East Dunbartonshire	360	329	340	232	305	294	442	270	593	677	788	454	496	540	656	519
East Lothian	516	505	756	485	437	425	563	458	904	965	1123	884	866	879	1030	886
East Renfrewshire	382	347	535	335	326	339	498	311	681	638	803	496	784	739	1041	767
Edinburgh City	2802	2711	3892	2666	1956	1914	2705	1890	2651	2605	3307	2488	2327	2186	2741	2703
Eilean Siar	78	85	105	40	97	89	106	52	148	194	266	130	172	220	290	165
Falkirk	990	984	1193	764	850	873	1036	767	1296	1297	1583	1190	1319	1270	1336	1016
Fife	2094	2161	2760	1751	1425	1653	2122	1565	2102	2173	2556	2118	1597	1783	1923	2073
Glasgow City	5663	5697	6843	5507	4253	4323	5093	4626	4975	5105	5642	4585	3909	3887	4484	3513
Highland**	1435	1435	1115	1115	1142	1142	1057	1057	2150	2150	2097	2097	2016	2016	2726	2726
Inverclyde	572	511	659	379	445	434	564	340	772	759	824	493	831	857	863	524
Midlothian	693	670	841	545	541	464	625	512	1010	1019	1039	870	806	770	802	801
Moray	515	493	670	359	447	440	583	356	729	729	847	601	565	538	662	603
North Ayrshire	1047	1048	1239	878	860	805	961	825	2206	2093	2214	1750	804	812	830	701
North Lanarkshire	3199	2958	2928	2671	2494	2410	2316	2383	4572	4789	4568	3607	4416	4006	4032	4023
Orkney Islands	81	92	105	49	103	83	99	46	131	156	170	94	169	168	136	85
Perth & Kinross	791	780	1103	691	573	653	883	635	1084	1188	1362	1064	1074	1127	1161	1327
Scottish Borders	515	450	1135	372	402	375	857	307	910	927	1013	658	939	859	877	678
Shetland Islands	106	124	124	48	88	81	101	49	154	165	168	87	157	130	164	127
South Ayrshire	600	611	782	560	487	522	631	553	1098	1046	1153	950	1150	1039	1125	875
South Lanarkshire	2120	1955	2495	1680	1814	1690	2100	1656	3279	3277	3503	2897	2785	2744	2802	2676
Stirling	434	389	561	278	310	337	463	305	738	750	845	545	657	705	712	537
West Dunbartonshire	785	674	874	590	626	618	727	576	1105	1173	1271	992	1131	1027	1020	971
West Lothian	1365	1271	1715	1208	1030	928	1344	969	1826	1805	2241	1538	1864	1843	2068	1599
TOTAL	33371	32397	40701	28693	25585	25507	31794	25084	43144	43679	47999	37700	37529	36729	40794	35770

*Aberdeenshire council said that figures could include those who remain on the school role but have left the school.

**Highland council could only provide the data for every two years. To give an approximation for 2017/18 and 2019/20 to enable a total figure to be derived, the figure for 2018/19 was used for 2017/18 and the figure for 2020/21 was used for 2019/20

⁵ P1-4;P5-7;S1-3;S4-6

Table 2: Number of pupils with less than 80% attendance

	P1-4				P5-7				S1-3				S4-6			
	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21
Aberdeen City	390	364	501	498	216	209	311	381	526	551	613	575	492	474	511	440
Aberdeenshire*	198	181	266	218	152	172	202	202	533	618	619	387	534	622	693	413
Angus	102	135	203	171	131	126	183	133	355	354	419	342	401	394	424	399
Argyll and Bute	56	82	84	61	41	63	82	73	154	161	196	151	199	221	244	185
Clackmannan-shire	80	125	101	144	76	88	82	123	195	221	118	242	147	146	88	204
Dundee City	219	202	635	281	209	187	489	248	642	671	842	599	623	567	714	476
East Ayrshire	193	211	235	268	137	169	193	253	469	464	469	484	429	442	501	384
East Dunbartonshire	29	40	53	46	37	43	54	56	155	159	202	131	165	215	234	161
East Lothian	82	91	146	124	79	85	108	119	316	362	469	384	370	408	499	343
East Renfrewshire	49	52	82	101	47	73	61	72	151	146	187	123	228	198	305	206
Edinburgh City	605	639	1096	835	399	425	764	552	888	888	1125	899	920	879	1102	774
Eilean Siar	11	7	12	10	13	12	18	12	38	59	83	41	55	83	104	61
Falkirk	207	181	273	215	199	203	245	229	474	508	550	448	550	514	546	380
Fife	562	633	932	784	388	453	700	671	1141	1160	1389	1133	887	993	1256	1057
Glasgow City	1557	1641	2098	2104	1198	1207	1581	1733	1869	1949	2136	1841	1531	1584	1928	1420
Highland**	295	295	346	346	254	254	348	348	778	778	912	912	869	869	1208	1208
Inverclyde	94	87	123	77	80	80	99	65	254	249	266	141	352	354	373	201
Midlothian	152	138	191	170	126	109	142	142	416	438	418	339	383	350	389	307
Moray	96	108	157	113	97	94	133	107	216	251	323	248	228	211	260	262
North Ayrshire	192	189	284	285	180	185	201	250	822	769	799	580	363	356	394	274
North Lanarkshire	717	712	642	855	602	622	525	710	1657	1760	1651	1395	1922	1755	1804	1535
Orkney Islands	11	16	22	16	22	15	22	21	39	52	50	45	66	64	63	41
Perth & Kinross	165	149	251	235	115	141	189	209	400	454	494	435	460	501	530	494
Scottish Borders	91	81	532	113	80	64	365	91	329	375	373	255	435	366	362	307
Shetland Islands	15	20	26	7	14	17	26	15	53	52	43	32	47	58	57	49
South Ayrshire	108	118	153	166	89	134	124	153	380	345	443	321	478	411	478	333
South Lanarkshire	461	438	576	528	381	388	507	495	1129	1191	1208	1047	1080	1046	1140	981
Stirling	75	74	84	53	<81	71	<95	<82	266	269	281	158	281	328	334	186
West Dunbartonshire	161	148	213	197	133	136	179	176	394	442	480	380	507	436	498	452
West Lothian	237	208	334	353	205	204	269	304	583	636	768	653	800	872	985	765
TOTAL	7210	7365	10651	9374	5700	6029	8202	7943	15622	16332	17926	14721	15802	15717	18024	14298

*Aberdeenshire council said that figures could include those who remain on the school role but have left the school.

**Highland council could only provide the data for every two years. To give an approximation for 2017/18 and 2019/20 to enable a total figure to be derived, the figure for 2018/19 was used for 2017/18 and the figure for 2020/21 was used for 2019/20

Table 3 below highlights the number of pupils in each stage in each local authority area and the proportion of each stage of schooling with attendance levels of less than 90% and less than 80%.

Table 3: Percentage of pupils with less than 80% and less than 90% attendance in 2018/19⁶

	P1-4			P5-7			S1-3			S4-6		
	number of pupils	% less than 90% attendance	% less than 80% attendance	number of pupils	% less than 90% attendance	% less than 80% attendance	number of pupils	% less than 90% attendance	% less than 80% attendance	number of pupils	% less than 90% attendance	% less than 80% attendance
Aberdeen City	8,178	18.5%	4.5%	5821	16.0%	3.6%	5,093	28.8%	10.8%	3832	28.9%	12.4%
Aberdeenshire*	11,913	9.0%	1.5%	9109	9.2%	1.9%	8,310	21.5%	7.4%	6299	23.5%	9.9%
Angus	4,922	13.0%	2.7%	3895	14.9%	3.2%	3,572	26.8%	9.9%	2868	35.0%	13.7%
Argyll and Bute	3,301	9.0%	2.5%	2557	11.1%	2.5%	2,403	19.7%	6.7%	2017	19.2%	11.0%
Clackmannanshire	2,269	22.1%	5.5%	1798	21.7%	4.9%	1,391	38.0%	15.9%	1094	30.7%	13.3%
Dundee City	6,107	18.5%	3.3%	4590	19.6%	4.1%	4,262	36.5%	15.7%	3102	39.9%	18.3%
East Ayrshire	5,245	18.3%	4.0%	3892	17.8%	4.3%	3,697	33.3%	12.6%	2872	35.9%	15.4%
East Dunbartonshire	5,185	6.3%	0.8%	3982	7.4%	1.1%	4,102	16.5%	3.9%	3531	15.3%	6.1%
East Lothian	4,950	10.2%	1.8%	3711	11.5%	2.3%	3,290	29.3%	11.0%	2517	34.9%	16.2%
East Renfrewshire	5,270	6.6%	1.0%	4025	8.4%	1.8%	4,038	15.8%	3.6%	3718	19.9%	5.3%
Edinburgh City	17,963	15.1%	3.6%	12920	14.8%	3.3%	10,592	24.6%	8.4%	8489	25.8%	10.4%
Eilean Siar	1,051	8.1%	0.7%	824	10.8%	1.5%	815	23.8%	7.2%	663	33.2%	12.5%
Falkirk	7,143	13.8%	2.5%	5677	15.4%	3.6%	4,990	26.0%	10.2%	3857	32.9%	13.3%
Fife	16,421	13.2%	3.9%	12755	13.0%	3.6%	11,625	18.7%	10.0%	8724	20.4%	11.4%
Glasgow City	24,099	23.6%	6.8%	17371	24.9%	6.9%	14,671	34.8%	13.3%	11398	34.1%	13.9%
Highland*	9,719	14.8%	3.0%	7630	15.0%	3.3%	7,395	29.1%	10.5%	5846	34.5%	14.9%
Inverclyde	3,014	17.0%	2.9%	2329	18.6%	3.4%	2,312	32.8%	10.8%	1993	43.0%	17.8%
Midlothian	4,537	14.8%	3.0%	3101	15.0%	3.5%	2,940	34.7%	14.9%	2173	35.4%	16.1%
Moray	3,968	12.4%	2.7%	3118	14.1%	3.0%	2,742	26.6%	9.2%	2062	26.1%	10.2%
North Ayrshire	5,714	18.3%	3.3%	4515	17.8%	4.1%	4,368	47.9%	17.6%	3408	23.8%	10.4%
North Lanarkshire	15,236	19.4%	4.7%	12046	20.0%	5.2%	11,520	41.6%	15.3%	9102	44.0%	19.3%
Orkney Islands	882	10.4%	1.8%	697	11.9%	2.2%	697	22.4%	7.5%	507	33.1%	12.6%
Perth & Kinross	5,910	13.2%	2.5%	4555	14.3%	3.1%	4,126	28.8%	11.0%	3302	34.1%	15.2%
Scottish Borders	4,577	9.8%	1.8%	3593	10.4%	1.8%	3,553	26.1%	10.6%	2866	30.0%	12.8%
Shetland Islands	1,060	11.7%	1.9%	810	10.0%	2.1%	799	20.7%	6.5%	581	22.4%	10.0%
South Ayrshire	4,343	14.1%	2.7%	3433	15.2%	3.9%	3,371	31.0%	10.2%	2701	38.5%	15.2%
South Lanarkshire	14,180	13.8%	3.1%	10809	15.6%	3.6%	10,536	31.1%	11.3%	8389	32.7%	12.5%
Stirling	3,723	10.4%	2.0%	2877	11.7%	2.5%	3,243	23.1%	8.3%	2702	26.1%	12.1%
West Dunbartonshire	3,992	16.9%	3.7%	3161	19.6%	4.3%	2,958	39.7%	14.9%	2260	45.4%	19.3%
West Lothian	8,808	14.4%	2.4%	6788	13.7%	3.0%	6,247	28.9%	10.2%	4875	37.8%	17.9%
TOTAL	213680	15.2%	3.4%	162389	15.7%	3.7%	149658	29.2%	10.9%	117748	31.2%	13.3%

Next Steps

The Commission on School Reform is alarmed and concerned by the growing number of pupils who are losing school education. Education is vitally important and there is great potential for early intervention to address a 90% attendance rate before it slips further. We need to recognise there is a problem and seek to remedy it.

This is not about punishing parents for taking children on term-time holidays – this level of absence cannot be explained by holidays – nor is it about introducing more fines, as is the case in England. Rather, it is to find effective early intervention which can help address some pupil absence before it becomes a bigger issue.

⁶ Pupil numbers taken from Pupils in Scotland 2018 data published by the Scottish Government

Data: As is too often the case with education we lack comprehensive and authoritative data. While we have tried to draw attention to an important issue, we have also had to highlight issues around comparability and a lack of historic data. As a result, the first step must be for the Scottish Government to conduct a proper investigation into the problem, to identify what are the potential triggers and how these can be addressed. Are there problems of engagement or implementation, are there local variations or similar problem across the board? We need to better understand the problem in order to develop solutions. As well as conducting this investigation, the Scottish Government needs to commit to publishing the number of pupils with less than 90%, less than 80% and less than 50% attendance annually as part of its summary school statistics series.

Parental support: School education is supposed to be compulsory and that requires enforcement. This should not mean punitive measures, but if parents need support in ensuring their child attends school, that help must be accessible. Continued contact and tailored support measures are required. As the 'The Promise' states "*families must be given support together to nurture that love and overcome the difficulties which get in the way.*"⁷

Online resources: Although the number of children missing school was increasing prior to Covid-19, the pandemic led to vast amounts of lost education. We are disappointed that Education Scotland did not take the opportunity to develop more online resources which could have helped pupils isolating then, but could now be used to help pupils struggling with non-attendance in the future.

Where Education Scotland failed, many schools and teachers did manage to test different ways we can stay in touch with pupils and their families and support their education during difficult times. We need to learn from what worked and ensure that there are online resources available to maintain educational provision when pupils are not attending school. Rather than each school having to pull together what is required, this is the sort of task that a central education body should be providing.

CAMHS: The Australian Council for Education Research published a study in 2019 which highlighted that students with mental health problems had lower school attendance than those without. The study suggested that better prevention, early intervention, treatment and management of such disorders may lead to significant improvements in school attendance.

The Scottish Government has a target that 90% of children and young people should start treatment within 18 weeks of referral to CAMHS. While the pandemic may have made this target more difficult to achieve, many health boards were failing to meet it with increasing waiting times long before the impact of Covid-19 was felt.

In June 2018, 196 patients had been waiting more than a year for CAMHS treatment, by June 2019 this had reached 643.⁸ At the end of 2021 the number had reached 1,570.⁹

⁷ <https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Mental-Health/Publications/2019-09-03/2019-09-03-CAMHS-Waiting-Times-Tables.xlsx>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-60750321>

Conclusion

“Attending and taking part in learning - wherever learning takes place - is fundamental to making sure that our young people become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.”

Scottish Government¹⁰

Attendance at school matters. School education is compulsory because we know it offers the best start in life for our young people. Missing a lot of school impacts learning, relationships and well-being. Unfortunately, the global pandemic has brought home many of these issues.

However, schools in Scotland were seeing worrying levels of absence before Covid. In 2020 the Commission on School Reform highlighted the concerning rise in pupils missing more than 50% of school. While there are a range of measures required to tackle school refusal, identifying problems early can also help.

Too many pupils are missing significant amounts of learning, levels which can impact their future achievement. We cannot afford to keep ignoring this problem.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/guide-parents-school-attendance/pages/1/>