



School Attendance Literature Review

Final Report

February 2024

Topics: Education & Skills, Equality

1. Executive Summary

Regular school attendance is viewed as a key element of a successful education, providing pupils with access to learning opportunities and social interactions with peers.

Analysis has been requested to examine the current picture of school absenteeism and to determine the root causes of non-attendance, prioritising the secondary school picture where possible.

Analysis of key National and Local data helps to show the current picture in Fife. The Fife secondary school attendance trend tracks the Scottish picture but has shown a steeper decline since 2014/15. The Fife decline continued to 2021/22 but there was some recovery reported in 22/23. Attendance in secondary school fluctuates throughout the year, generally decreasing throughout a term, before increasing at the start of a new term. December is the lowest month for attendance, the authorised absence “off sick” is by far the most reported category during this month.

Attendance is related to deprivation levels. In 2020/21 in Fife the attendance gap between SIMD quintile 1 and 5 equated to 3 days more lost per pupil over a 10-week term for the most deprived than the least. (Attendance and Equity Report, 2023).

As a group, pupils with an Additional Support Need (ASN) have poorer attendance than those with no ASN in both primary schools and secondary schools. The family group of emotional and mental health issues, which covers six ASN categories (substance abuse, family issues, young carers, mental health problems, social, emotional, and behavioural problems and bereavement), all have poor attendance rates nationally (Attendance and Equity Report, 2023).

Review of available research into causes that affect school attendance confirms that this is a complex, multifaceted area that can encompass, individual, peer, family and school. Research identifies that these issues can occur across broad categories, which are not in isolation to each other.

Diagram 1. Vulnerable Groups¹

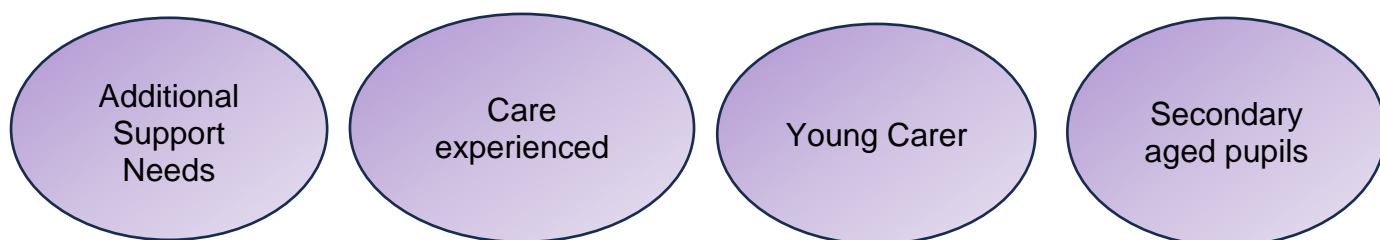


Table 1. Root Causes of Non-Attendance

Barriers	Individual	Disengagement	Systems
Illness	Mental health	Parent/Carers' perception of the importance of attendance	Consistent implementation of attendance policies and procedures
Low Income	Anxiety		
Deprivation	Pressures of school environment	Where the need to work conflicts with being at school	
Socioeconomic factors	Attention from parents / care givers		
	Parents under stress		
	Social difficulties		

To inform work in this area, Diagram 1 illustrates groups indicated from research who have some vulnerability to attendance issues. To provide insight into root cause(s) Table 1 groups factors established from literature under broad headings. Children and young people's attendance can be affected by more than one of these issues at the same time or at different points in their school career.

Methods to tackle non-attendance can take many forms, but one common theme is that absenteeism cannot be successfully addressed in isolation. Pupils, parents and schools all have a part to play, with the most successful approaches recognising this. Consistent recording of attendance figures and absence variables has a key role in informing key decision making in this area.

¹ 'Care experienced' - Referring to pupils living in a care experience setting at some point during their school education.

Further Qualitative Research

As a starting point broad themes that would be useful for further exploration in conversations with young people and families in Fife include;

- How the Covid-19 Pandemic has affected attitudes to school
- Relationships between schools, families and young people
- How young people / families in Fife are doing
- How can school / partners support young people and their families
- Impact of working from home
- School attendance processes and interventions
- Incentives for attendance
- The role of technology in acting as both an incentive and deterrent for attending school
- Whether the day of the week plays any part in absence from school

2. Introduction

Regular school attendance is viewed as a key element of a successful education, providing pupils with access to learning opportunities and social interactions with peers. While there will be a variety of circumstances that can affect an individual's school attendance (including health issues, blended learning and planned absences such as family holidays), available data indicates that there has been a sustained decrease in school attendance rates since the COVID-19 pandemic.

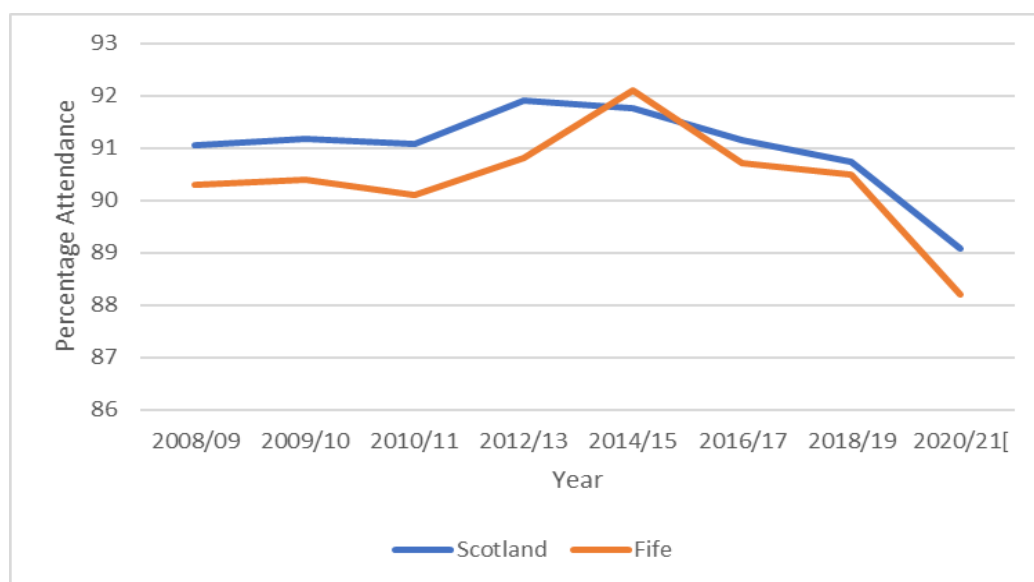
Analysis has been requested to examine the current picture of school absenteeism and to determine the root causes of non-attendance, prioritising the secondary school picture where possible. This will include a literature review of key studies and an analysis of relevant data, with the Scottish picture prioritised. Where studies into absenteeism are from other parts of the world, such as the USA, these will be considered in context, accounting for any location-specific factors.

Where possible, data and best practice will be linked to individual Fife schools, recognising that the makeup of pupils, the bespoke school approach taken, and specific demographic factors are all likely to affect levels of attendance.

3. The Fife Picture

Analysis of key data helps to show the current picture in Fife. Trend data over the long-term is complicated by the fact that data collection was affected in 2019/20 and 2020/21 due to school closures and the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1. Secondary School Attendance Scotland and Fife Comparison



Source: School Attendance and Absence Statistics, Scottish Government

It should be noted that attendance figures published nationally for secondary schools in Fife for 2020/21 is 88.2%, which is different from the internally monitored figure of 86.8%. The Scottish Government introduced numerous additional attendance and absence codes to assist with monitoring the impact of Covid-19. The grouping of these codes differed in Fife from collation nationally resulting in differences in figures. To compare nationally we have cited these published figures above.

Schools were closed to most pupils for two main periods during the pandemic: between March and September 2020, and between Christmas 2020 and Easter 2021. In session 2018/19 (the last full session prior to the pandemic), secondary school attendance was 90.2%.

While the Fife secondary trend tracks the Scottish picture, it has shown a steeper decline since 2014/15 (Figure 1). The Fife decline continued to 2021/22 but there was some recovery reported in 22/23. Internal Education and Children Service data outlined that in the two years of full attendance (2021/22 and 2022/23), attendance was 86.8% and 87.3%.

Vulnerable Groups

Table 2. Fife attendance by pupil group, 2022/23

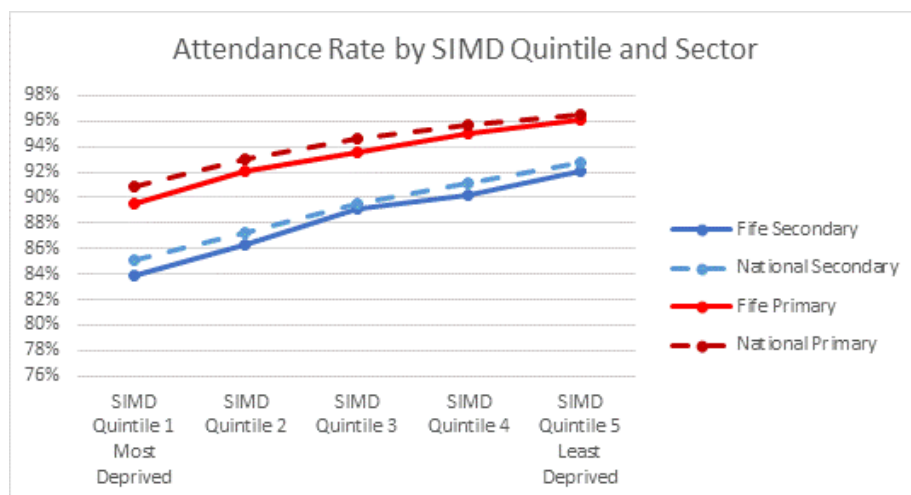
	All	FSM (Free school meals)	SIMD Quintile 1	LAC (Looked after child)	ASN (Additional support needs)	Armed forces	EAL (English as additional language)	Young carer
Primary and secondary schools	89.5	83.1	85.6	87.6	85.5	92.0	88.3	82.0
Primary schools	91.3	85.9	87.8	90.9	88.5	92.7	88.9	86.6
Secondary schools	87.2	78.8	82.5	83.4	83.8	90.8	87.3	80.9

Source: Attendance report – Session 22/23, Fife Council Education Scrutiny Committee

Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement is a reliable indicator of absence at both primary and secondary schools. Secondary schools are particularly affected, with those eligible for free school meals having an attendance rate of 78.8%, compared with a whole-school figure of 87.2% (Table 2).

Young carers are also likely to have reduced levels of attendance, at 86.6% for primary school and 80.9% for secondary (Table 2).

Figure 2. Attendance rate by SIMD Quintile



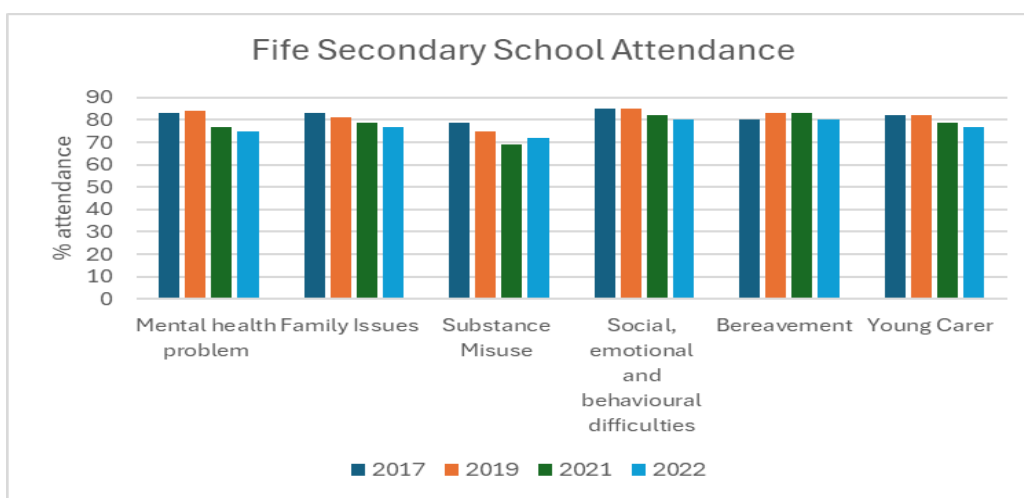
Source: Attendance and Equity Report, Education and Childrens Services, 2023

Attendance is closely related to deprivation levels (Figure 2). In 2020/21 the attendance gap between SIMD quintile 1 and 5 was 6% which is 3 days more lost per pupil over a 10-week term for the most deprived than the least. (Attendance and Equity Report, 2023). Consideration should be given to the continued monitoring of attendance and associated gaps across quintiles.

As a group, pupils with an ASN do have worse attendance than those with no ASN in both primary school and secondary schools. In 2022/23 the Fife Attendance Rate for secondary pupils with no additional support needs was 90% compared to 84% for those with at least one additional support need (SEEMIS).

The ASN category is broad with some ASNs directly relating to having poor attendance. Many of the ASNs have attendance rates that are at or close to the average for all pupils. However, the group of Family, emotional and mental health issues which covers six ASN categories (substance abuse, family issues, young carers, mental health problems, social, emotional, and behavioural problems and bereavement), all have poor attendance rates nationally (Attendance and Equity Report).

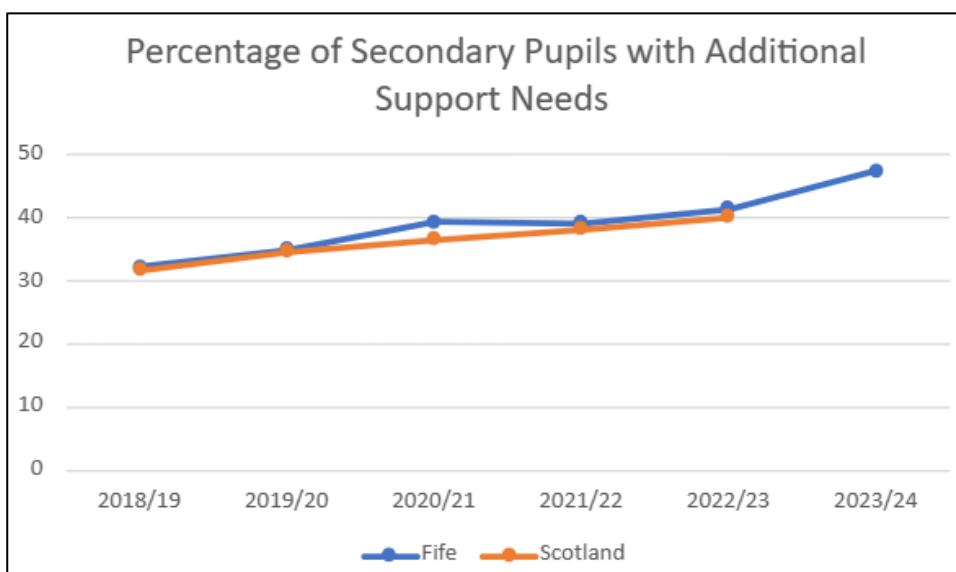
Figure 3. Fife Secondary School Attendance ASN Group Family, emotional and mental health issues



Source: Attendance and Equity Report, Education and Childrens Services, 2023

Please note all Figure 3 is based on the period from Summer – Christmas (Term 1) in each year to avoid the worst impacts of lockdown.

Figure 4. Percentage of Secondary Pupils with ASN Needs

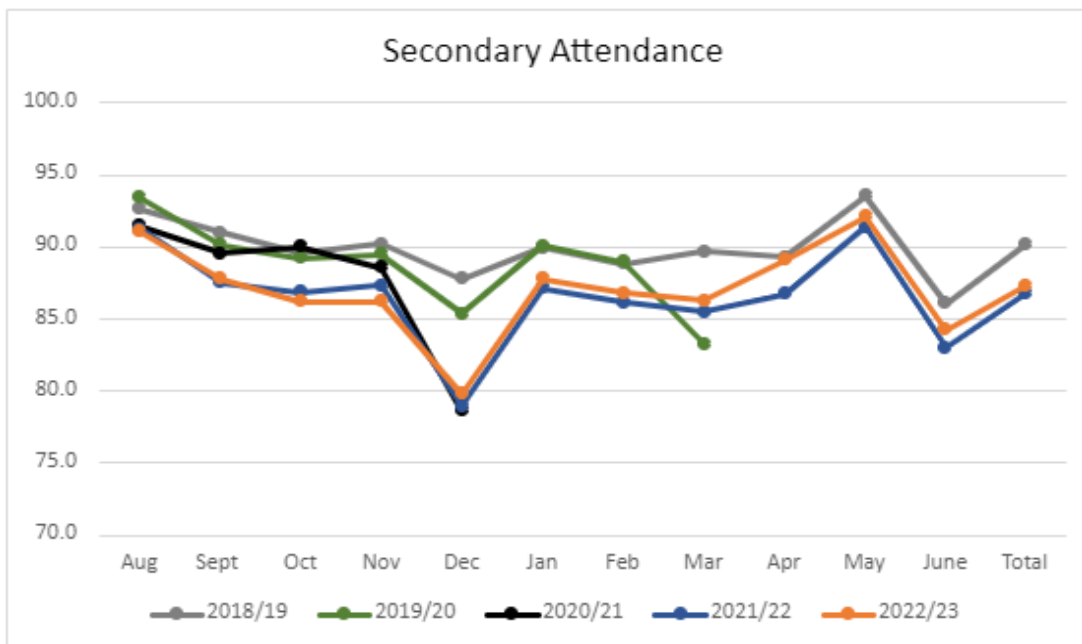


Source: SEEMIS, Pupil census and supplementary statistics 2023

The number of pupils with at least 1 additional support need has increased by 4,052 in the last five years, a 15.2% increase. The rate of pupils with additional support needs in Fife secondary schools is approaching 50%. Available data shows that Fife tracks the Scottish picture at a slightly higher rate, 2022/23, data is not yet available nationally. Consideration should be given to continual monitoring of ASN trends, families groups and key underlying variables that may influence school attendance. Concerns have been discussed regarding variability in school recording practices.

Trends over time

Figure 5. Timeline of Secondary Attendance



Source: SEEMIS

Attendance at secondary school fluctuates throughout the year, generally decreasing throughout a term, before increasing at the start of a new term. December is the lowest month for attendance, with the authorised absence “off sick” by far the most reported category during this month. Attendance rates in June also decrease, the largest authorised reasons reported for this is “off sick” and other attendance out of school. Attendance is worse post Covid-19 pandemic, although it was declining before then. By stage, S3 pupil attendance tends to be the lowest in the secondary sector in 2022/23 this was 85% compared Fife average of 87.3% (SEEMIS).

4. Data collection and use

There is some debate around the usefulness of **Scottish data collection**, and whether it is sufficiently robust to enable the interventions required. TES research finds that while Scottish figures tend to deal with attendance rates, those in England and Wales also include the proportion of pupils absent, making it easier to assess trends. This difference is compounded by the Scottish practice of submitting absence data fortnightly, capturing a snapshot in time (TES, 2023)

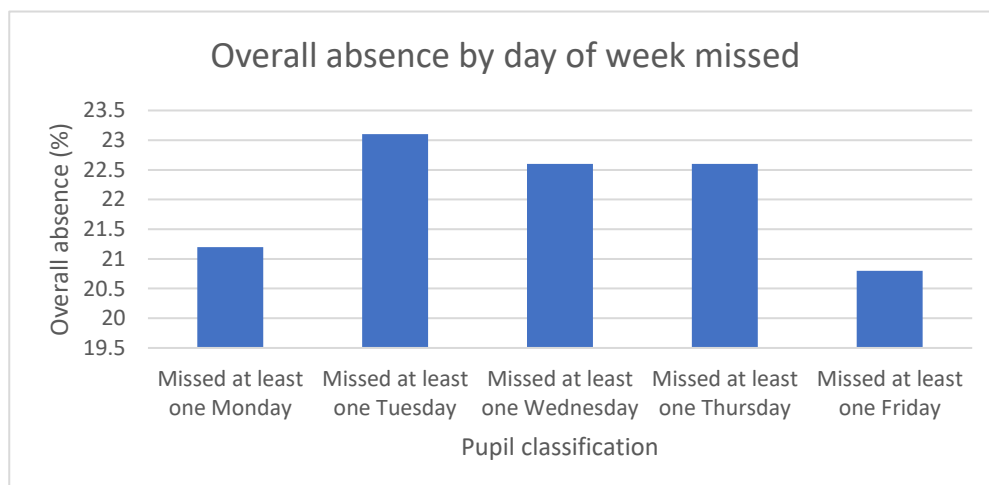
Overall, when considering the information available for the monitoring of attendance at a Fife level there is a large amount of data at a high level. Consistency and robustness of recording practice is an issue as is SEEMIS system capabilities. Consideration should be given to the regular reporting of key areas with accompanying narrative to highlight and track areas of improvement/concern. Appropriate drill down information should be included where possible to provide additional insight.

The monitoring and reporting of the impact of school level interventions to improve attendance in the past and currently was found to be a gap. This information would be useful to inform attendance trends and facilitate learning across the school community.

The Research Team were unable to look deeper into patterns of attendance/nonattendance across the week. The issue of **data collection** matters because the pattern of absence – including the regularity and specific days absent – is key to assessing an absence profile, deciding a response, predicting behaviour and acting to prevent non-attendance where possible.

Research by the Children’s Commissioner in 2022 found that children who missed the second, third and fourth day of a new term were predicted an overall absence of around 43%, or 30 days across the term, significantly more than their peers who attended those first few days. It also found that children who missed mid-weekdays (Tue-Thursday) were more likely to be habitually absent from school (Children’s Commissioner, 2022), as figure 6 highlights.

Figure 6. Overall absence by day of the week missed for an unauthorised reason Source: Children’s Commissioner, *Back into School* (July 2022)²



² The attendance data covers three multi-academy trusts, encompassing primary, secondary and all-through schools.

5. Thematic areas

With a large body of studies and official statistics to consider, the research has been structured to focus on key areas that link to questions of interest. These are detailed below, alongside an overview of the type of information available.

The nature of this topic means that there will be a degree of overlap between themes, highlighting that attendance is a multifaceted issue with many factors contributing to it.

Table 3. Key areas of focus

Themes	Description	Information type
Legal obligations for school attendance	School statutory obligations for the recording of attendance, and actions taken for non-attendance. Parental responsibilities for school attendance.	National policies and guidance.
Factors affecting school attendance	Impact of Covid-19 on attendance trends, by age group and school stage.	UK, Scottish and Fife level data. Qualitative studies and reports.
	In-school factors (including peer pressure, bullying, relationships – Pupils and staff, transition and school support)	Reports and articles
	Environmental and social factors, including deprivation and family attitudes.	Deprivation correlation. Qualitative & quantitative data
	Impact of non-attendance and non-attendance type	UK, Scottish and Fife level data and reports.
Interventions	Methods being used to prevent and minimise non-attendance – school, council and national level.	School and council policies.
	Evaluation of relationship-based approaches, reward schemes and whole-school approaches.	Reports and evaluations.

6. Legal obligations for school attendance

The **legal obligation** for parents to ensure that their children attend school is clearly set out in the *Education Scotland Act*, and within briefing material supplied to parents by local councils and individual schools.

The Scottish Government, in *Included, Engaged and Involved part 1*, clearly set out the responsibility of schools to record and use absence data effectively. This is integral to the approach in Fife, where attendance at school is recognised as a key **protective factor** for children and young people who are potentially vulnerable.

Guidance for Fife recommends that school attendance data should be entered into **SEEMIS** daily (at least twice per day), with period by period recording for secondary school pupils. Every school should have access to a Group Call to alert parents to any unauthorised absence, with a clearly defined protocol in place for vulnerable learners who are absent.

In line with the ethos that school attendance is the responsibility of all, Fife schools are encouraged to have **clearly defined attendance responsibilities** for each member of staff. The council's recommended intervention strategy sets out defined absence levels for specific interventions. This ranges from communication with home when a learner's attendance drops to 90%, to additional measures when this drops to 85%. This may include a meeting with the pupil and their family, an assessment of barriers to attendance, and the link to a Child Wellbeing Pathway. Table 4 on the following page outlines example of school attendance roles and responsibilities for Fife Council Education Service.

While parents are advised of the importance of regular school attendance, there is a degree of flexibility in how schools deal with **absence requests**. This is particularly the case for the approval of term-time absences, which are increasingly requested by parents.

While Fife guidance suggests how often data should be entered into SEEMIS, the **recording of data** is subject to interpretation from individual schools as to what constitutes an unauthorised absence. This may particularly be the case for term-time holidays.

The use of – and effectiveness of – **parental fines for non-attendance** is a matter of some debate. A government bill proposing potential national thresholds for fixed penalty notices was informed by a two-month consultation in 2023, but no concrete proposals emerged (Commons Library Research Briefing, 2023). Further research by the House of Commons Education Select Committee (2023) found that fines for non-attendance could be counterproductive by adding to difficult financial circumstances.

Table 4. Example of school attendance roles and responsibilities

Admin Team	Teaching Staff	Subject PTs (Secondary)	Guidance Staff (Secondary)	DHTs	HT
Registration alerts, reminders.	Registration of pupils for all openings-primary am/pm Secondary period openings	Absence discussion at DMs-standing item	Daily scrutiny of TBCs	Scrutiny of absence and interventions.	Scrutiny of absence and interventions.
Preparing absence reports.	Query discrepancies and raise SLT awareness of patterns	Scrutiny/Support/Encouragement/Challenge	Scrutiny/Support/Encouragement Challenge	Support and challenge for incomplete registers.	Support and challenge for incomplete registers
Managing GroupCall	Attendance analysis of own class(es)	Pupil Interventions. Parental contact	Attendance tracker. Pupil Intervention	Pupil interventions Parental Contact	Pupil interventions Parental Contact.
	Scrutiny/Support/Encouragement/Challenge for learners.	Support and challenge for incomplete registers.	Parental Contact	DHT's Pupil Support to monitor attendance of pupils in ASN provisions.	Link with cluster colleagues to identify familial issues
	Discussion with parents as part of parent meeting		Partnership support.		

Source: Fife Council Education service

7. Factors affecting school attendance

Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on school attendance

Table 5 and 6 clearly show the effect of the pandemic on school attendance (partial school years highlighted). In 2018/19, attendance was 94% in primary and 90.2% in secondary schools. Post-pandemic attendance remains below these figures, with a particular increase in authorised absences.

Nationally, in 2020/21, 25.4% of primary pupils and 49.6% of secondary pupils were absent from school more than 10% of the time. 1.0% of primary pupils and 4.0% of secondary pupils were absent from school more than 50% of the time (Reform Scotland, 2022).

In **England**, the pandemic has seen the continuation of existing absence trends, with unauthorised absences increasing in primary settings since 2005, and in secondary settings since 2015. Severe absence, missing 50 percent or more sessions in secondary schools has been gradually increasing since 2013 and has further accelerated in the aftermath of the pandemic (Education Policy Institute, 2023).

Table 5. Fife Secondary school attendance rates, 2017/18 - 2022/23

Year	Attendance %	Absence total %	Authorised Absence %	Unauthorised Absence %	Exclusions %
2017/18	90.30%	9.70%	5.90%	3.80%	0.05%
2018/19	90.20%	9.80%	5.70%	4.10%	0.04%
2019/20	88.90%	11.10%	6.30%	4.80%	0.03%
2020/21	91.10%	8.90%	4.70%	4.20%	0.03%
2021/22	86.80%	13.20%	7.70%	5.50%	0.04%
2022/23	87.06%	12.94%	7.27%	5.63%	0.04%

Source: Attendance report – Session 22/23, Fife Council Education Scrutiny Committee

Table 6. Fife Primary school attendance rates, 2017/18 - 2022/23

Year	Attendance %	Absence total %	Authorised Absence %	Unauthorised Absence %	Exclusions %
2017/18	94.30%	5.70%	3.60%	2.20%	0.01%
2018/19	94.00%	6.00%	3.70%	2.30%	0.01%
2019/20	93.00%	7.00%	4.30%	2.70%	0.01%
2020/21	94.10%	5.90%	3.30%	2.60%	0.01%
2021/22	90.70%	9.30%	6.00%	3.40%	0.01%
2022/23	91.27%	8.73%	5.47%	3.25%	0.01%

Source: Attendance report – Session 22/23, Fife Council Education Scrutiny Committee

Demographic trends in Attendance across the UK

Female pupils in 2022/23 saw the largest decrease in attendance between primary and secondary school: a decrease of 5% against the male figure of 3.9% (Scottish Government, 2022).

By **ethnicity**, white-Scottish pupils saw the greatest deterioration in attendance between primary and secondary school (from 92.4% to 87.4%). This sharp decrease led to white-Scottish pupils being the worst performing ethnic group for Scottish secondary school attendance, whereas they were the third highest for primary school attendance. While the attendance of every ethnic group fell between primary and secondary school, African/Black/Caribbean pupils saw the smallest decrease, while Asian pupils remained the best performing (Scottish Government, 2022).

2023 research in England (Hill) found a particular increase in non-attendance among pupils with **special educational needs**, with almost 50% of special school pupils found to be persistent absentees. **ASN pupils** are regularly linked with higher rates of non-attendance, but the value of this field for targeted research is questionable as there appears to be a degree of subjectivity involved in whether a pupil is recorded as having a particular ASN, while it is also at a school's discretion when such markers may be removed. In Fife, attendance rates for pupils with ASNs were slightly lower than the national figure for primary and secondary, and slightly higher for special schools.

There is some evidence that pupils with **English as an additional language**, or **migrant pupils**, face some specific barriers to attendance, particularly pupils from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) community (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2023)

Analysis of data from four Scottish local authorities - Falkirk, West Lothian, Stirling and Clackmannanshire – reveals that **pupils with care experience** are more likely to have higher rates of absences across the term (Robinson, Speedie, MacDonald and Maclean, 2023). A research report from Who Cares? Scotland found that the majority of Scottish local authorities formally and informally exclude Care experienced pupils, with many using short or reduced timetables as a way of reducing formal exclusions for this group. This raises the issue of whether such alterations to attendance – along with care experienced pupils being taken out of education to attend social work meetings and hearings – still have a negative effect on attainment (Who Cares? Scotland, 2024).

Environmental, social and school factors affecting attendance

Deprivation

There is published evidence that **deprivation** does affect school attendance – particularly in secondary school - with pupils in the most deprived areas having an absence rate 7.7% higher than those in the least deprived areas. However, care should be taken when using SIMD as an indicator of disadvantage, due to individual socioeconomic circumstances being much stronger risk factors for school absence. FSM eligibility is also linked to persistent absence across the UK nations, with a significant divide between FSM eligible and not, noted in English schools, where 40% of FSM eligible secondary pupils were persistently absent during the 2021/22 autumn term (Scottish Government, 2022; Major and Eyles, 2022; The Centre for Social Justice, 2023).

All dimensions of socioeconomic background were found to increase the risk of being absent from school. Klein and Sosu (2023) found that young people from socially rented households and households with no qualifications were the most likely to be absent from school, with these characteristics consistently associated with specific reasons for being absent from school (sickness, truancy, temporary exclusion). Such socioeconomic inequalities were similar across boys and girls, as well as urban and rural areas.

Klein and Sosu (2022) are among the authors to argue that pupils from areas of **higher deprivation** are linked with higher absence rates. The authors suggest that improving family finances and combating child poverty are therefore key issues in encouraging school attendance. A report by Midlothian Council (STV News, 2023) found that some secondary pupils were taking on almost full-time jobs to support their families with the cost-of-living crisis, dramatically affecting their attendance at school. Pupils as young as S3 were found to be concerned about finding jobs to help support their families. Ofsted found similar issues in England (Ofsted, 2022), noting how pupils' concerns during the pandemic included seeing their parents under stress, and worries about financial hardship.

Pupils from certain groups are more likely to be at risk of absence. These include those in care, in receipt of FSM or with an ASN (Robinson, Speedie, MacDonald and Maclean, 2023). **Low income** was recognised as a particular barrier to attendance, especially regarding cost pressures posed by uniform and transport costs, and health difficulties linked to this. Recognising the significance of this, the House of Commons Education Select Committee recommended that measures to tackle child poverty should be considered as part of the Department for Education's approach to improving attendance (Department for Education, 2023).

Young carers have been identified as having a higher rate of absence, with an estimated 27% of young carers aged 11-15 missing school or experiencing educational difficulties. Support provided to young carers in school varies (Department for Education, 2016), with caring responsibilities – particularly when not known by schools – often being a hidden cause of non-attendance (Family Action, 2012).

Parental attitudes

Regardless of the age of a pupil, **parental attitudes** are an important part of ensuring that pupils attend school on a regular basis and that any absences are successfully addressed. Multiple studies have shown that since the pandemic there has been a shift in parental attitudes towards the importance of attendance – shaped by both financial necessity and perception of need. Home learning signalled to some that pupils did not need to be in school to learn (Ofsted, 2022), while increased homeworking (The Times, 2023) and a shift in social attitudes (Burtonshaw and Dorrell, 2023) have also played a part.

Conversely Nesta (2023) found that in a study of English local authority data where more people report working from home, levels of school absences were actually *lower* not higher (analysis did not isolate home working from other associated factors such as socio-economic status etc.). It was also reported that the increase in Friday absences is not a uniquely post-pandemic phenomenon, having been on the rise in secondary schools since 2015/16.

Mental health

The **mental health** of young people has been found to play an important part in determining levels of attendance, and their parents' willingness to make them attend. An increase in pupil anxiety was noted in English schools between summer term 2021 and autumn term 2021, with particular concerns around family illness, seeing parents under stress, and experiencing financial hardship (Ofsted, 2022). Emotionally based school avoidance (Lockhart, Gos, and Hewlet, 2023) was also found to be a recurring factor, particularly fuelled by concerns about bullying in school. Suggested interventions and strategies to address this include avoiding negative emotion, strengthening key relationships, offering tangible rewards, and working towards inclusion.

The 'Big Ask' surveyed nearly half a million children between the ages of six and seventeen about the impact of the pandemic and found particular concern for the **mental health of girls** aged 16–17, including an increase in reported eating difficulties. Young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) were especially adversely affected by the pandemic as well as those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Poverty, cramped housing, lack of spaces to exercise, and reduced access to technology contributed to **inequality in homeschooling as well as overall wellbeing**. The Office for National Statistics reported that 41% of parents felt that the wellbeing of the child or young person in their care was negatively affected by trying to continue education at home, while 33% reported that this was also negatively affecting the relationships between members of the household. Many families did not feel they had the skills or knowledge to homeschool effectively and were reluctant to force their child to do schoolwork (Roffey, 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a documented effect on many young people's mental health, particularly their **anxiety**. In such circumstances, certain points of the education cycle and school year (including year group transitions, exams and whole-school events) may act as trigger points. Glasgow City Council (BBC News, 2023) has responded to this with a targeted approach, using data to identify children attending school less than 60% of the time, who are then visited by community workers and psychologists to help address their concerns.

Mclean and Ward (2023) set out four main reasons why a young person (YP) could be reluctant to attend school. These included:

- YP avoiding things at school that make them anxious or depressed
- YP wanting to avoid difficult social situations
- YP wanting to gain attention from parents/caregivers
- YP wanting to gain tangible rewards outside of school

While the Forth Valley and West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative (2022) categorise the main causes of absence as: individual, peer, family and school, stating that 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.

Technology

While technology has typically been identified as a valuable tool to engage pupils in school-based learning (Scottish Government, 2016), there is little information relating to its impact on absenteeism. Further research is required to identify whether this is a significant factor.

Factors impacting length and impact of non-attendance

School Strategies

Research into seven Scottish local authorities highlights that while schools all followed local and national guidance regarding absence, this was interpreted in different ways (Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk, 2003). These potentially **divergent approaches** can appear at each stage of the absence process, including headteacher discretion as to whether to authorise termtime holidays, and how schools choose to record absence figures and key variables. This, in turn, has ramifications for the effective analysis of attendance data.

- The authors found that while primary school truants were more likely to cite parental disapproval as a deterring factor, secondary school pupils were more likely to attribute their absence from school to school-related factors.

Teachers highlighted that prolonged absence risked **isolating pupils from their peers**, increasing the risk of further periods of absence. Similarly, teachers have noted the lack of confidence in learning for many absentees returning to school, with this more likely to manifest as disruptive behaviour in secondary school pupils.

Guidance for English schools promoted the use of a three-pronged approach, focusing on prevention, early intervention and targeted support (Department for Education, 2022).

- Expectations for **schools** included the promotion of a whole-school culture, having a clear attendance policy, building strong relationships with families, and working collaboratively.
- Expectations for **local councils** included tracking attendance data to enable a strategic approach; providing multi-disciplinary support for families and taking forward legal intervention where needed.
- An effective **whole-school attendance strategy** has the potential to quickly identify and assist absentees, creating a culture where absence stress points are reduced. This requires buy-in and commitment from every member of the school community, helping to embed prevention, early intervention and targeted support.

8. Interventions

Methods to tackle absenteeism can take many forms, but one common theme is that absenteeism cannot be successfully addressed in isolation. Pupils, parents and schools all have a part to play, with the most successful approaches recognising this.

Case studies from local authorities and schools across the United Kingdom highlight a range of approaches, with various degrees of success. With the acknowledged impact of deprivation on attendance, this suggests that a one-size-fits-all scheme will not be appropriate for every school. What is of more value is an ethos and mindset that considers root causes, methods of intervention, and how the school environment can help address any issues found.

The Education Endowment Foundation, in a 2022 study of absenteeism, found eight categories of school-based intervention:

Table 7. Categories of school-based intervention

Category	School-based intervention
Mentoring	Mentoring interventions involve pairing young people with an older peer or adult, who acts as a positive role model. Mentoring typically aims to build confidence and relationships rather than to develop specific academic skills or knowledge.
Parental engagement	Interventions that involve parents in supporting and encouraging their children to attend school.
Responsive and targeted approaches	Methods that are responsive to the reason for low attendance by individual pupils.
Teaching of social and emotional skills	Building social and emotional skills known to be linked with school attendance.
Behaviour interventions	Aim to reduce absence by solving school behaviour issues which may lead to more positive relationships at school.
Meal provision	School breakfast or lunch programmes where these meals are provided to pupils at no cost.
Incentives and disincentives	Interventions that encourage pupils to adopt certain behaviours by offering rewards for good behaviour (incentives) or punishment for poor behaviour (disincentives).
Extracurricular activities	Activities – both athletic and non-athletic - that provide additional educational opportunities outside of the regular curriculum.

The level of data available for each category in a UK context differs greatly, but where possible relevant information has been sorted into the most suitable category. The Education Endowment study found that there was not enough evidence to reach a conclusion for the efficacy of mentoring or behaviour approaches. While mentoring interventions are therefore not included in this report, behavioural interventions are included in other categories where appropriate.

Parental Engagement

In the years before Covid-19, **parent-approved absence** was the largest category of school absence, potentially encouraging persistent absenteeism (Sheppard, 2007). The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic has only strengthened this trend, with a 2023 Public Trust study finding that some parents believed it was no longer their responsibility to ensure their child attended school every day (The Guardian, 2023). This makes it vitally important that parents are made part of any attempt to tackle absence, ensuring buy-in and making them aware of the consequences of persistent absence.

Parental engagement was one of the attendance areas judged as having a positive impact on absence in a study by the Education Endowment Foundation (albeit with a small sample size and most studies used being non-UK). A key component of these interventions was found to be building effective partnerships between schools and parents, through discussions, meetings and conferences. The nature of any contact with parents is crucial to the success of the intervention. While fines for non-attendance can alienate parents (The Guardian, 2023), multi-agency support (Manchester City Council, 2022) and keeping parents informed of the consequences of persistent absence (Durrington Research School, 2018) are among measures to be deemed more successful.

Suggestions for engaging parents have included:

- A flexible approach to meetings to allow parental involvement to fit around their schedules. Consideration of how to make school contact a welcoming experience for parents whose own experience of school may not have been positive (Durrington Research School, 2018)
- Use of Education Welfare Officers to engage and work with parents, including at parent evenings and pastoral support meetings, and assisting with stage transitions (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011)
- Recruitment of home school liaison workers to improve relationships between families and schools, allowing a targeted approach (Stirling Council, 2019)

Responsive and Targeted approaches

The targeting of groups known to be at heightened risk of non-attendance has been found to be an effective measure. In Lincolnshire, this includes those at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system, pupils struggling with emotional wellbeing, ethnic minorities and travelling communities, and those with behavioural concerns (Lincolnshire County Council, 2023). In Manchester, multi-agency teams in schools work with identified pupils, while data sharing is used to help schools work with social workers and other frontline services (Manchester City Council, 2022).

Robust attendance data tracking and monitoring systems in schools allow targeted interventions to be put in place and help schools to monitor the effectiveness of any interventions they have implemented (Durrington Research School, 2018). England appears to have seen particular success in this area, with the Department for Education introducing a range of measures designed to boost attendance. This includes new guidance for schools, trusts and local authorities, and a national attendance data dashboard. A regional attendance hubs programme is designed to support schools through the sharing of best practice, helping to ensure consistency of approach (Department for Education, 2023).

The importance of **early intervention** to tackling absenteeism is increasingly recognised. This approach recognises and is alert to risk factors, seeks to understand difficulties and works to improve emotional wellbeing through preventative measures (Cunningham, Harvey and Waite, 2022)

The Children's Commissioner, recognising the problem of increased attendance at key stage 4, stressed the benefits of a **multi-agency approach**. This included data sharing and shared best practice, driven by the school Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and underpinned by a culture of regular attendance. Fundamental to this was the requirement for the right support, including reintegration plans for returning children, and personalised catch-up plans (Children's Commissioner, 2023).

Falkirk High School introduced the RAAD programme (Raising attainment, attendance, and destinations). This found that low attainment in S4 was strongly linked with poor attendance, truancy, and behaviour incidents. A targeted approach – including targeting every student with below 50% attendance – involved personalised packages of attainment and support. As well as a significant increase in attainment the scheme also led to a 25% increase in attendance (Bradley and McLaughlin, 2023).

Teaching of Social and Emotional skills

Multiple schools have recognised that a **whole-school approach** to wellbeing is a crucial component in encouraging attendance. An honest evaluation of a school's strengths and weaknesses is important in recognising what factors are encouraging absenteeism and how these can be addressed (Mills, Howell, Lynch and Dungan, 2019). This may lead to bespoke approaches depending on a pupils' circumstances or age.

Durrington Research School (2018) has trialled **nudge theory techniques** to encourage attendance including directly texting students with poor attendance records, explaining why they do not want them to miss school and framing it in the context of lost learning opportunities. This had an effect size of 0.4, suggesting the approach was having some impact.

Manchester City Council has produced and disseminated an **anxiety-based school avoidance pathway**. This tool sets out early indications of anxiety-based school avoidance and a graduated response for schools (Manchester City Council, 2022).

Tailored support for pupils at heightened risk of absence forms a significant part of successful absence interventions. Stirling Council has established a **Virtual Head Team** to support care experienced children, investigating what supports can be put in place to meet their social and emotional needs (Stirling Council, 2019).

Successful school approaches understand the importance of improving **emotional wellbeing**, both as a preventative measure and as a response to identified concerns.

Increasing feelings of safety and comfort may involve the creation of ‘safe spaces’ in schools or classrooms, as well as interventions such as kitbag and play therapy that give pupils the opportunity to express their feelings (Cunningham, Harvey and Waite, 2022).

Meal Provision

While the link between free school meal eligibility and increased absence has been shown in absence data, the positive effect of **school breakfast and lunch programmes** is less clear. The Education Endowment Foundation study found a null or small positive effect of school breakfast clubs on pupil attendance, while recognising that further research, with clearly defined parameters, was required to provide further insight.

Incentives and Disincentives

There is little evidence to prove that **sanctions** help address attendance issues. Fines for non-attendance can add to difficult financial circumstances and alienate parents. Furthermore, suspensions and exclusions have limited benefits in acting as a deterrent to poor behaviour and may have a significant impact on attainment. Attainment figures for pupils in S4-6 revealed that pupils who had been excluded were at substantially higher risk of achieving no qualifications, or qualifications at a lower level (Scottish Government, 2017). Experience of use in Portsmouth also found limited benefits, with reduced timetables likewise having limited benefits if extended for longer than six weeks (Portsmouth Education Partnership, 2023). Part of the issue may be that such measures risk increasing the social and academic isolation of pupils, heightening the challenge of reintegration into the student body.

In-school reward schemes can take many forms, with Hammersmith & Fulham Council among the authorities to encourage their use. These include:

- **Star charts** – Primarily for primary school age children, the class with the highest percentage of attendance becomes the ‘star class’ and can be celebrated in assembly, with class treats etc.
- **Attendance information displays** – These can communicate information about attendance and trends, while children could have involvement in maintaining the boards. A ‘roll of honour’ could be displayed in spotlighting children with the best weekly attendance.
- **Reward systems** – Details suggestions for rewards that can be used as an incentive to improve attendance, including stickers, treats, certificates, awards, etc. The recognition of 100% attendance in assemblies is suggested, along with end-of-year treats/recognition for individuals and classes with the best attendance.
- **School attendance raffle** - Each child who has 100 per cent attendance for a full week or term is given a raffle ticket and there is a draw in assembly. Prizes are awarded to the winners of the raffle.

While such schemes are traditionally used to encourage and reward good attendance, they risk **demotivating others** – particularly those who have been absent through illness or unavoidable circumstance (Scottish Government, 2019). A more sustainable approach may be to focus more on embedding a whole-school ethos, including displays promoting the benefits of good attendance, regular communication with parents, and early intervention with pupils (Children’s Commissioner, 2023; Crieff High School, 2020).

Extracurricular Activities

The Education Endowment Foundation study found little evidence that **extracurricular activities** increased attendance, while noting the small sample size (seven studies) and the fact that all studies were from the US.

It is likely that the nature and availability of extracurricular activities will differ between primary and secondary school, particularly with regard to the **involvement of parents** (permission, pick-ups, etc).

Stirling Council provided an alternative path, in response to identified concerns. Recognising that many pupils became more disengaged during s4-6, the Ready for Work programme was created, focusing on **employability skills** (Stirling Council 2019).

Steps for the future

The Labour Party has set out several measures relating to school attendance that they intend to introduce should they become the party of government. These include free breakfast clubs for primary school pupils, a national register of home-schooled pupils, increased funding for early speech and language interventions, and the extension of the English attendance-hub scheme. Proposals include the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to spot trends in absence by linking with records in other services, such as social care (BBC News, 2024).

A compulsory national register of home-schooled children was in the 2022 Schools Bill put forward by the UK government, before the legislation was withdrawn. It is unclear if this will be reintroduced before the forthcoming general election.

9. Conclusion

Review of available research into causes that affect school attendance confirms that this is a complex, multifaceted area that can encompass individual, peer, family and school. Research identifies that these issues can occur across broad categories, which are not in isolation to each other.

Diagram 2. Vulnerable Groups³

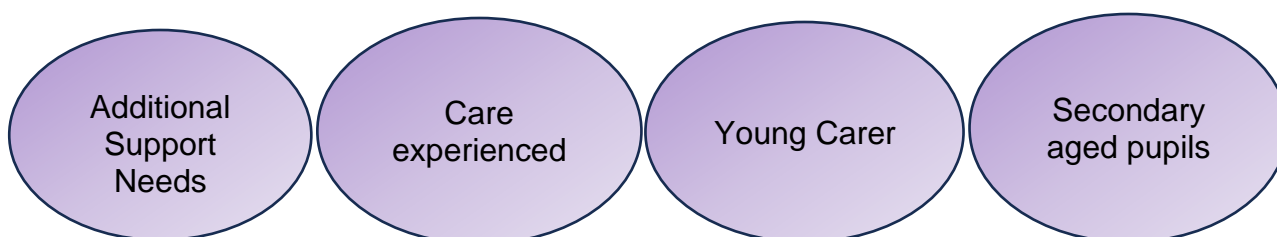


Table 8. Root Causes of Non-Attendance

Barriers	Individual	Disengagement	Systems
Illness	Mental health	Parent/Carers' perception of the importance of attendance	Consistent implementation of attendance policies and procedures
Low Income	Anxiety	Where the need to work conflicts with being at school	
Deprivation	Pressures of school environment		
Socioeconomic factors	Attention from parents / care givers		
	Parents under stress		
	Social difficulties		

To inform work in this area, Diagram 2 outlines groups indicated from research who have some vulnerability to attendance issues. To provide insight into root cause(s) Table 8 groups factors established from literature under broad headings. Children and young people's attendance can be affected by more than one of these issues at the same time or at different points in their school career.

Methods to tackle non-attendance can take many forms, but one common theme is that absenteeism cannot be successfully addressed in isolation. Pupils, parents and schools all have a part to play, with the most successful approaches recognising this. Consistent recoding of attendance figures and absence variables has a key role in informing key decision making in this area.

³ 'Care experienced' - Referring to pupils living in a care experience setting at some point during their school education.

10. Further qualitative research

As a starting point, broad themes that would be useful for further exploration in conversations with young people and families in Fife include;

- How the Covid-19 Pandemic has affected attitudes to school
- Relationships between schools, families and young people
- How young people in Fife/families are doing
- How can school/partners support young people and their families
- Impact of working from home
- School attendance processes and interventions
- Incentives for attendance
- The role of technology in acting as both an incentive and deterrent for attending school
- Whether the day of the week plays any part in absence from school

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About this report

Fife Council Research and Insight Team works on prioritised projects to deliver strategic insight for the Council and community planning partners in Fife. We aim to deliver engaging high-quality general insight for those involved in delivering public services across Fife.

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Important Notes on this Report

1. This report summarises the findings from a literature review of school attendance
2. It has been produced for Fife Council's Education Directorate to support improvement work around attendance.