Scottish Policy Forum

Focus on the future

STAGE 2 CONSULTATION PAPER

Supporting pupils with additional support needs, youth mental health, attendance and behaviour in schools

Scottish Labour

1. Understanding the challenge

Recent years have seen an acceleration of several trends which are negatively affecting the children and young people of Scotland, their families and carers, and the staff who work in our educational settings and communities to support their learning and wellbeing.

This includes the challenges of worsening attendance rates and behaviour in schools, insufficient support for children and young people with additional support needs, and declining youth mental health.

Insufficient action is being taken to address the known causes, improve understanding of these challenges, or to advance effective solutions with the potential to mitigate these rising trends, which are negatively impacting the educational development and wellbeing of Scotland s children and young people, holding back their potential.

Scottish Labour wants to have an education system that nurtures and values every young person, with a broader and more diverse array of opportunity to allow children and young people to develop, with parity of esteem for different pathways, that supports positive mental health.

2. Decreasing school attendance

There has been an alarming decrease in school attendance rates. The causes of this are complex and can include numerous interlinked factors involving the child or young person, their family, peers, and school (FVWL Improvement Collaborative, 2022). Particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, there are many accounts of pupils struggling to return to school in part due to anxiety or other wellbeing barriers (McDonald et al., 2023).

This highlights the importance of addressing the youth mental health challenge outlined further on in this paper. In 2023-24, more than 40% of Scotland s secondary school pupils were regularly not attending school, compared to 26.7% in the 2012-13 school year (Scottish Government, 2024). In primary schools, the rate of persistent non-attendance was 23.9% in 2023-24. Data around the detailed reasons for school non-attendance is

not published by the Scottish Government, hindering efforts to understand the underlying causes (Reform Scotland Commission on School Reform, 2023).

It is recognised that there is a gap in existing research around effective interventions to increase attendance (Education Endowment Fund, 2022). Absence at any educational stage lowers academic progress (UK Government, 2022) and has a negative impact on school leavers' attainment (Klein and Sosu, 2023). A poverty-related gap in attendance is also evident in national statistics (Education Scotland, 2023), demonstrating that this is a challenge that must be addressed as part of a strategy to restore the power of education as a vehicle for social mobility and economic prosperity.

3. Disruptive and violent pupil behaviour in schools

It has also been reported that disruptive and violent behaviour have become more widespread among pupils of all ages in our schools. Rates of classroom disengagement and low-level disruptive behaviour are increasing, impacting on pupils' learning at all stages (Scottish Government, 2023).

In 2006, 10% of primary school teachers reported encountering pupil violence and aggression towards other pupils at least once a day; in 2023 this proportion had risen to 20% (Scottish Government, 2023). According to figures from NASUWT's Behaviour in Schools report, 37% of staff have experienced physical abuse or violence from pupils in the last 12 months; 89% of respondents reported feeling that the number of pupils exhibiting violent and abusive behaviours has increased (NASUWT, 2023).

This negatively impacts on other pupils, and creates a more challenging and stressful environment for school staff. Many staff do not feel well supported following incidents of violence, and reference staffing pressures, lack of resources, training and local authority support, as factors which do not help to address violence and aggression in schools (EIS, 2023).

School staff and local authority representatives have identified several underlying reasons for instances of distress and dysregulation among

young people who struggle to cope and to learn in the school environment, including: a perceived lack of consequences for pupils who engage in serious disruptive behaviour, a lack of support for pupils with ASN, changes in society and parenting such as increased use of mobile phones and social media, and poor mental health among pupils (Scottish Government, 2023).

Moreover, disruptive and violent behaviour in schools is associated with societal factors such as experiencing poverty and deprivation, challenges associated with the home environment such as adverse childhood experiences, and a lack of support for those with ASN (Scottish Government, 2023). This is in addition to in-school factors such as school ethos and teachers confidence in responding to violent behaviour.

4. Supporting pupils with Additional Support Needs (ASN)

Another trend in the school-aged population is the increasing proportion of children and young people with additional support needs (ASN). This includes various forms of neurodiversity and disability. Figures released in 2023 by the Scottish Government show that pupils with ASN represent 36.7% of the pupil population, which is almost a doubling in numbers since 2013. It should be emphasised that this rise itself is not the challenge, rather the lack of sufficient support for pupils, school staff, and families.

Resources and service provision have not been expanded to keep pace with demand, often to the detriment of pupils' wellbeing and educational attainment (Scottish Children s Services Coalition, 2023). A recent report by the Accounts Commission highlights that the Scottish Government has failed to plan effectively for its inclusive approach to additional support for learning and that current gaps in data mean it is unclear whether all children's rights to have an education that fully meets their needs have been met (Accounts Commission, 2025).

Despite a promise from the current Scottish Government that there would be no reduction in the proportion of pupils receiving co-ordinated support plans (CSPs), there has been a 59.8% drop in pupils with CSPs from 2013 to 2023. CSPs require education, health, and social work services to work

together to support children and young people with complex or multiple ASN.

School staff report stress and professional anxiety over not having the right support to meet the needs of their pupils, with 98% reporting that teacher training does not adequately prepare them for teaching children and young people with ASN (Enable, 2017). Staff report time pressures, large class sizes, limited resources and ASN support, and a lack of ASN specific training (in both CPD and initial teacher training) as factors contributing to a lack of confidence in their capacity to effectively meet the needs of pupils with ASN (EIS, 2019). Support staff experience the greatest number of physical aggression and violent incidents. More needs to be done to debrief staff following incidents.

In part due to an increased awareness and identification of additional support needs and improved understanding of neurodiversity, this trend is expected to continue in years to come. This demonstrates a need to ensure pupils with ASN are supported, by enabling their schools, families/carers, and communities to do so effectively.

5. Youth mental health

Finally, this paper also considers the challenge of our children and young people s mental health. Rates of poor mental health amongst children and young people have risen in recent years; in the 2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study in Scotland, a third of young people reported anxiety, and over a third were classified as having either low mood or risk of depression (HBSC, 2022).

This rise has affected children and young people across Scotland; however higher numbers of girls reported anxiety than boys, and young people from more deprived backgrounds are more likely to experience poorer mental health (Inchley et al., 2023).

In addition to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (Public Health Scotland, 2022), it is also reported that school-related pressures (Högberg, 2022), and increased social media use (Inchley et al., 2024) are broader

trends that are having a detrimental impact on the mental wellbeing of Scotland s young people.

Mental health concerns are also reportedly a major contributor to levels of absence from school (Education Scotland, 2024) and can have a cyclical impact where absence creates further anxiety or emotional distress (Scottish Division of Educational Psychology, Education Scotland 2023).

In addition, access to mobile phones with social media access is strongly associated with poorer mental wellbeing outcomes (Sapien Labs, 2023). Smartphone Free Childhood have highlighted the detrimental impacts on children and young people, including exposure to harmful content, grooming, cyberbullying, and also addiction, academic distraction, and mental illness.

At the same time, it has become more challenging for young people to access the necessary services required to support them. When preventative measures and early interventions are not sufficiently available, young people struggling with their mental health require more intensive support later (Mental Health Foundation Scotland, 2019). This comes at greater cost to both their wellbeing and public health services.

There is also evidence to suggest disparities in mental health between urban and rural areas, with young people living in regions such as the Highlands facing deprivation and challenge accessing essential services (Centred, 2022). Access to support is also more challenging in the most rural regions of Scotland; in NHS Highland, more than 13% of children and young people waited more than 53 weeks for treatment, in contrast to a Scotland-wide average of only 1.4% of total patients waiting that length of time (Change Mental Health, 2024).

6. Summary of the challenges

A common theme across these four areas is that the trend of negative consequences is rising, causing a detrimental effect on wellbeing and opportunity. Some of them are interlinked; for instance there is overlap between pupils experiencing poor mental health and those with additional support needs. Additionally, a lack of support for pupils experiencing such

challenges can produce more disruptive behaviour, or result in poorer attendance at school. Furthermore, children and young people experiencing poverty and deprivation are more likely to experience the negative effects of these trends on their education and wellbeing.

Having reviewed these challenges, with consideration for reported underlying causes and impact on pupils, school staff, and parents/carers, this paper will now outline some of the potential solutions. Mitigating and overcoming these challenges will be key to ensuring that Scotland s children and young people are supported in their educational journey and wellbeing, to help them reach their full potential.

7. Potential responses to address the challenges

This section addresses the challenges of supporting pupils with ASN and youth mental health first, due to their importance as factors in the subsequent challenges of pupil behaviour and school non-attendance. In seeking new approaches to these challenges, it is important to think about how Scottish Labour can improve direct responses and tackle the underlying causes.

The relationship between deprivation and these challenges is widely reported, reflecting the importance of addressing them in restoring the power of education to improve the lives of children and young people across Scotland. Tackling economic insecurity is a thread that runs through all of Labour's work. For instance, educational attainment is affected by poverty and access to nutritional food, including free school meals.

Preventative strategies and early interventions are an investment in our children and young people and a crucial way Scottish Labour can empower them to achieve their potential. (This is also looked at in the Scottish Policy Forum's Stage 2 Early Years paper.)

8. Supporting Pupils with Additional Support Needs (ASN)

Schools need to be supported to meet the needs of pupils with ASN. Though the proportion of pupils in mainstream schools with additional

support needs has increased substantially, teacher training and resource has not received the necessary development or investment to meet this challenge. **Initial Teacher Education (ITE)** must be reviewed to ensure a high standard of understanding across the workforce of how to meet the needs of pupils with ASN, in particular to develop a better understanding of neurodiversity. ITE providers should also be held accountable to ensure the highest standards of evidence-based practice are met.

Moreover, educational staff need to be enabled to engage with meaningful **continual professional development** opportunities. This should be for teaching and support staff at all stages of education, from early years through primary and secondary schools and further and higher education. A proper workforce plan is needed that ensures Scotland has the right staff in the right place, recognises the role of teachers, reduces workload, values support staff and maximises the excellent work that third sector agencies do.

9. **Ensure schools are resourced to meet the needs of pupils with ASN**

In addition, the inclusion of pupils with diverse needs in the mainstream school environment requires **sufficient specialist support** including educational psychologists and pupil support staff. Teachers cannot fulfil all the roles currently expected of them.

The relationship and efficacy of different ratios between pupils with ASN and staff should be explored. Considering future trends in terms of meeting additional support needs should be part of strategic planning and development of the educational **workforce**.

This planning also requires that schools have up-to-date and accurate information about the needs of their pupils. To achieve this, **waiting lists for autism and ADH diagnosis, which have been removed from CAMHS waits,** must be brought down to ensure schools can provide the required support at the earliest possible stage of education.

Education and awareness around neurodiversity and disability for school pupils should also be improved, to enable children and young people to develop more positive understandings of themselves and their peers.

In terms of tackling the increase in pupils with ASN, more work needs to be done on early intervention (as covered in the Scottish Policy Forum Stage 2 Early Years paper), with more work done to support parents and babies, particularly those who live in the most deprived areas, due to the link between ASN and poverty. This upstream work should in the longer term reduce the number of pupils who have ASN.

10. Working with communities and families

The valuable role of **community and third sector organisations** in helping to meet the additional support needs of children and young people should not be overlooked. Positive and collaborative relationships between schools, families, and third sector organisations should be enabled and encouraged.

Family access to speech and language therapists, community child health teams, and other support specialists has become more challenging, resulting in wider gaps in early childhood development before the start of formal education.

Investing in these early forms of support is crucial for identifying children s support needs and tackling the gap in outcomes for children at the earliest possible stage. Plans to ensure sufficient support for children and young people with ASN should include parents/carers to provide them with the necessary resource.

There should also be a structured plan to fully recognise the challenges of delivering service provision in **rural and remote communities**, where distance and limited public transport create additional barriers to accessing support.

11. Youth mental health

Protecting children and young people from the damaging effects of social media is a pressing issue. The factors contributing to the declining mental health of Scotland s young people are complex. However, the detrimental impact of access to social media and the wider internet has

become more apparent over recent years. In addition to **banning smart phones in classrooms** as announced by Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar, a public health campaign should discourage over-reliance on smart devices and encourage access to sports, arts and outdoor activities and safe community spaces for children and young people to play and develop their social skills and relationships.

Evidence around access to **social media for those under the age of 13** should be considered carefully and plans developed to promote the health and wellbeing of all young people. The curriculum could put greater emphasis on children being well prepared for social media use before the age of 13 by including learning opportunities in important health and wellbeing areas such as internet safety, recognising misinformation and identifying and reporting suspicious or harmful behaviour.

Moreover, young people who need it should have access to **mental health resilience support** (such as the *Bloom* and *Resilience* programmes delivered by Change Mental Health or Place 2 Be) that empowers them to develop an understanding of mental health equivalent to physical health. There are evidence-based examples of best practice where this subject has been embedded in Health and Wellbeing programmes to help create a positive culture around mental health.

While working to develop parity of esteem for physical and mental health, Scottish Labour should also strive for **parity between adults and children**. Many mental illnesses are developed at a young age and can have long term implications for an individual s life. With appropriate consent and agreement, CAMHS should work with schools to assist them in providing trauma informed support to pupils.

Waitlists for CAMHS are such that many children and young people do not receive diagnosis or support until they are at crisis point, by which stage it becomes far more challenging to provide the care they require. Scottish Labour should reform the referral and triage process to ensure no-one is turned away without support.

Early interventions are more effective for improving our children and young people s wellbeing and should be viewed as an investment that can help reduce public service costs in the longer term.

Scottish Labour should work with partners to explore options for **social prescribing**, in which non-medical community resources and activities support the practical, social, and emotional needs of children and young people. **Community Link Workers** can effectively support access to necessary local resources in a timely manner; this service should be expanded to include access for schools and through schools. This would be facilitated by Scottish Labour s plan for **Family Network Hubs**, in which Family Wellbeing Coordinators will connect families with the support and services required to meet their needs.

Creating an education system with a broader and more diverse array of opportunities for children and young people to develop, with parity of esteem for different pathways, would also support an improvement in young people s mental health. Scottish Labour should build on the findings of the Hayward Review and the recommendation for the Scottish Diploma of Achievement. Creating an **engaging curriculum with more varied forms of assessment** would empower all learners to find motivation and satisfaction in learning, and to build their confidence and self-esteem by pursuing their strengths and interests. Exams, where appropriate, will also remain a key feature of assessment.

12. School non-attendance

When schools are unable to meet pupils' additional support needs, and when young people are increasingly struggling with poor mental health, it follows that school attendance will suffer. In addition, the negative impact of poverty cannot be understated. These factors are significantly correlated with school non-attendance.

However, it was noted in several submissions to the Commission that **better evidence and data** is required to properly understand the root causes and the recorded increase in these rates. As such, improving understanding of the specific underlying causes will be essential in identifying the most effective responses.

Some non-attendance takes the shape of 'informal exclusion', where families of young people are asked to collect them from school on a regular basis and reduced timetables are put in place for pupils with ASN. These can sometimes be used when schools are not properly resourced to support their needs. This needs to be systematically recorded and reported in order to plan and respond effectively with inclusive and diverse education pathways.

Where schools achieve success in improving their attendance rates, they should be encouraged to **share their learning** and effective solutions with others who might benefit from implementing new strategies.

Tackling school non-attendance is a challenge that requires co-operation, the setting of expectations and requirements. Approaches that utilise **community and third sector relationships** where there is trust, flexibility, and creativity are often more effective than generalised lettering and tracking systems. It is also worth exploring and valuing opportunities to **listen to young people** themselves about their experiences and ideas.

The school environment needs to be supportive, engaging, inclusive, and empowering for all children and young people. Previously made suggestions around improving specialist support and resource for pupils with ASN, empowering young people to have improved mental health resilience, building on the recommendations of the Hayward review, and creating a more engaging curriculum which offers opportunities for all young people to develop their skills and potential, can all help to make schools more inclusive and reduce disengagement from education.

Every school community is unique and faces different challenges, including varied reasons for non-attendance. Headteachers should lead their education and support staff on the learning provision within their schools to meet the needs of all pupils and be clear about what the school expects and requires from pupils in terms of attendance and behaviour. Decision-making should allow schools and school leaders to decide how best to respond to these challenges and create a positive school culture and ethos. There should also be encouragement for collaboration between schools to support ongoing learning and development.

13. Disruptive and violent pupil behaviour in schools

Schools must be safe and supportive environments for children and young people to learn, and for staff to work. In the same manner as tackling non-attendance, **headteachers should be empowered** to lead on behaviour management within their schools. The assumption that one-size-fits-all results in well-intentioned local authorities implementing a standard policy or initiative across their areas, in which challenges may look very different from one school to the next. Headteachers should be empowered to make decisions that work for them and their school.

Headteachers should set standards and measures for improvement in pupil behaviour and ensure that these are enforced. The school management should be held accountable for delivery.

Making PEF permanent would help schools to directly make longer term decisions and ensure they are **sufficiently resourced**.

School leaders should be able to access **evidence-based resources and training** for their staff that is suitable for tackling what they have identified to be the specific challenges of their schools. The creation of new **ways to support staff in education to continue their professional development consistent across** the whole of Scotland, that supports best-practice and garners insights from universities, training providers, trade unions and former teachers should be made available, including through easy digital access. This could be achieved in a variety of ways and various options, including the introduction of a national CPD service should be explored. Ensuring consistent standards could be achieved by holding school leaders accountable through an independent inspectorate.

Understanding disruptive and violent behaviour from pupils as a way of communicating emotional distress is an important starting point. However, funding cuts have undermined the availability of **wraparound support**, including access to specialists such as educational psychologists, and community-based resources and support. Within schools, staff require support, and crucially time, to make use of evidence-based best practice for behaviour management policies.

In addition to properly resourcing schools to enable conflict resolution, there needs to be a far greater action emphasis on **preventing** disruptive and violent pupil behaviour. The impact of smart phones and access to the digital world for children and young people is strongly associated with a deterioration in behavioural standards.

Previously suggested actions to tackle the **impact of social media access** to improve youth mental health would also support improving behavioural outcomes. Scottish Labour should explore developing a **multi-agency public health approach** to tackling violent behaviour in schools, learning from successful initiatives such as the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit.

Addressing the lack of resources for children and young people with additional support needs and those facing mental health challenges is also central to improving behavioural standards. As mentioned previously ensuring sufficient specialist support within schools can contribute to mitigating this rising trend to improve staff and pupil wellbeing. **Confronting the crisis in CAMHS waitlists** is essential, as the longer families wait for diagnosis the harder it can become to address challenging behaviours and disengagement from school.

14. Conclusion

These are challenges that are increasing in prevalence and impact across Scotland, with detrimental effects on both the development of the next generation and on the wellbeing on the educational workforce.

Schools should be inclusive and engaging environments in which all children and young people are empowered to develop and learn. The measures outlined above which draw on submissions from a range of organisations and those with directly relevant experience, offer effective responses to mitigate and combat these trends. It is important to emphasise the necessity of investing in prevention and early interventions. Later interventions come at a higher cost to the public purse, and to children and young people s wellbeing.

Addressing these challenges offers an opportunity to restore the effectiveness of education as a vehicle for social mobility, and to empower Scotland s young people to achieve their potential.

QUESTIONS

1. What can be done to protect children (including those under the age of 13) from the harmful effects of social media?

2. How can we best empower headteachers to have more appropriate authority over their schools? What is the role of local authorities in decision making in schools?

3. What can be done to reduce CAMHS waiting lists now and in the longer term?

4. What can be done to ensure early years providers and schools provide well paid, unionised and safe work places?

SUBMISSIONS

This paper draws out areas that we wish to seek specific evidence and opinions on and we hope to encourage submissions that focus on these questions. However, we welcome responses that are not raised explicitly in the paper.

Submissions should be sent to: **scottishpolicyforum@labour.org.uk**

Please give your name, organisation name (if relevant) and a contact email address.

The deadline for submissions is Saturday 28 June 2025.

Thank you.

Scottish Labour

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