
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICY REVISION

Report by Director of Education & Children's Services

EDUCATION SUB-COMMITTEE

23 April 2024

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 **This report proposes the approval of the revised Scottish Borders Council School Attendance Policy. The current Policy from 2013 required updating to align with national guidance and best practices for promoting school attendance.**
- 1.2 The revised Attendance Policy sets out the positive approaches, partnerships, and expectations to promote engagement and attendance in Scottish Borders schools. It details the procedures for responding to attendance concerns and provides guidance on flexible attendance arrangements to ensure Scottish Borders Council is getting it right for every child. The Policy was developed through extensive consultation with key stakeholders, including school staff, partner agencies, children, young people, and families. It incorporates national legislation, guidance, and research on effective practices for improving school attendance.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 **I recommend that the Committee:**

- (a) Approves the revised Scottish Borders Council Attendance Policy as set out in Appendix 1;**
- (b) Agrees that the Policy will take effect from the start of the 2024/2025 school year; and**
- (c) Notes that a communication and engagement strategy will be implemented to raise awareness of the policy among staff, partners, children, young people, and families.**

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Scottish Borders Council School Attendance Policy was last updated in 2013 and required revision to align with updated national guidance and incorporate evidence-based practices for promoting school attendance.
- 3.2 Regular attendance is essential for children and young people's academic attainment, achievement, social development, safety, and wellbeing. Attendance continues to be a challenge for schools both nationally and within the Scottish Borders, with a declining picture nationally since 2012/13 and persisting gaps for children impacted by poverty and care experience. The attendance rate fell for every Local Authority between 2020/21 and 2022/23. Overall school attendance in Scottish Borders for academic session 2022/23 was 91.5% which is above the national average of 90.2% and the Family Group average of 90.8%. When ranked, this places Scottish Borders 8th out of 32 Local Authorities.
- 3.3 In the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, all Local Authorities in Scotland have included attendance as a core plus stretch aim. Scottish Borders Council is committed to working with schools, families, and partners to ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to attend school regularly and fulfil their potential.

4 POLICY REVISION PROCESS

- 4.1 The revision of the Attendance Policy was undertaken by a working group with representation from key stakeholders, including primary and secondary school leadership, home-school link workers, school attendance officers, educational psychology, inclusion and wellbeing, pastoral staff, and business support.
- 4.2 The revision process involved seeking out good practices and national documentation, creating an initial working draft, and engaging in consultation with various groups, including the Education Community of Practice, Business Support, Children and Families Social Work, cluster leads, and officers.
- 4.3 A crucial component of the revision was a consultation with children, young people, and families to gather their views and ideas on what helps with school attendance. The consultation involved 247 participants across 18 schools, with representation from those who struggle with attendance. Key themes from the consultation included the importance of supportive relationships, engaging learning activities, flexibility, and communication between school and home. Quotes from the consultation have been incorporated throughout the Policy to illustrate the perspectives of children, young people, and families.
- 4.4 The revised Policy incorporates national legislation and guidance, including the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) approach, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the Scottish Government's Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1 guidance. It also draws upon research and evidence-based practices for promoting attendance, such as nurturing approaches, parental engagement, and

curriculum flexibility. The Policy also draws evidence from Education Scotland's recent report: Improving Attendance: Understanding the Issues.

- 4.5 The Policy outlines roles and responsibilities for promoting attendance, procedures for monitoring and addressing attendance concerns, and guidance on alternative attendance arrangements such as flexi-schooling and modified timetables. It emphasises an integrated, child-centred approach that addresses barriers to attendance and provides support to children, young people, and families.
- 4.6 Following approval, a communication and engagement strategy will be implemented to raise awareness of the Policy and support its implementation. This will include engagement events with staff, partners, children, young people, and families, as well as a targeted social media campaign. Schools will engage with the Policy and undertake self-evaluation to identify areas for improvement in their attendance practices.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial

There are no direct financial implications associated with the approval and implementation of the revised Attendance Policy. Any costs related to training, communication, or resources to support the policy implementation will be met within existing budgets.

5.2 Risk and Mitigations

- (a) The risks associated with not updating the Attendance Policy include:
- i. Inconsistency in attendance procedures and practices across schools.
 - ii. Failure to align with national guidance and incorporate best practices for promoting attendance.
 - iii. Continued challenges with attendance and persistent gaps for vulnerable groups.
 - iv. Negative impact on educational outcomes, wellbeing, and life chances for children and young people.
- (b) These risks will be mitigated through the approval and implementation of the revised Policy, which:
- i. Provides clear guidance and procedures for promoting and managing attendance.
 - ii. Incorporates national guidance and evidence-based practices.
 - iii. Emphasises early intervention, partnership working, and support for vulnerable groups.
 - iv. Includes a robust communication and engagement strategy to raise awareness and support implementation.
- (c) The Policy will be regularly monitored and reviewed to assess its effectiveness and identify any further areas for improvement. Schools will be supported to engage with the Policy and undertake self-evaluation of their attendance practices. Ongoing collaboration with key stakeholders will ensure that the Policy remains responsive to local needs and priorities.

- (d) While the Policy aims to promote consistent and effective practices, there remains a risk that some schools may face challenges in implementation due to local circumstances or resource constraints. This will be mitigated through ongoing support, training, and sharing of good practices across the Local Authority.

5.3 **Integrated Impact Assessment**

A full Integrated Impact Assessment has been completed and is included as an Appendix.

5.4 **Sustainable Development Goals**

Following completion of the Sustainable Development Goals Checklist, the following areas are noted:

- (a) Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The Policy aims to identify and tackle barriers to school attendance, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised children and young people.
- (b) Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries. The Policy seeks to align resources and support to boost attendance and attainment for children from the most disadvantaged communities.
- (c) The Policy also indirectly supports several other goals by aiming to improve children and young people's overall wellbeing, life chances and future employability, which can contribute to reduced poverty (Goal 1), improved health (Goal 3), sustainable economic growth and decent work (Goal 8), and more peaceful and inclusive societies (Goal 16).
- (d) While not a specific focus, the engagement and planning processes involved in developing and implementing the Policy also align with elements of Goals 16 and 17 around participatory decision-making, community responsiveness, and partnership working.

5.5 **Climate Change**

- (a) The revised Attendance Policy has been assessed against the Climate Change Checklist.
- (b) The Policy itself does not have any direct impacts on energy use, waste, or biodiversity. However, there are some potential indirect positive impacts in terms of promoting sustainable transport and active travel to school, as the Policy recognises transport challenges as a potential barrier to attendance and promotes working with partners to ensure safe and accessible travel options. The Policy also supports the provision of local services like breakfast clubs that can enhance amenities and promotes a community-based approach to supporting wellbeing and attendance that may contribute to overall community resilience.
- (c) Ongoing partnership working referenced in the Policy to ensure transport access to school will be important to adapt to any future climate related disruptions. No other specific climate change adaptations are required for the Policy at this stage. While the

climate change impacts of this Policy are relatively limited, there may be opportunities in the implementation stage to further promote active travel and local community resilience building approaches that can support both attendance and wider climate objectives.

5.6 Rural Proofing

- (a) The revised Attendance Policy has been assessed against the rural proofing checklist. Key points:
 - i. The Policy aims to promote a consistent approach to supporting attendance across all Scottish Borders schools, while allowing flexibility based on local context. It is not expected to negatively impact availability of services in rural areas.
 - ii. The Policy recognises potential barriers to attendance in rural areas related to transport and connectivity. It promotes working with partners to ensure accessible travel options and appropriate communication methods.
 - iii. Supporting attendance through the range of approaches in the Policy may have some additional delivery costs in more remote rural areas. While the Policy does not specifically address this, any additional costs would need to be met within overall budget allocations.
 - iv. More broadly, the Policy aims to have a positive impact on employability, economy, and disadvantaged groups in rural areas by supporting long term attendance and attainment for all pupils.
- (b) While the Policy allows for some flexibility based on school size and circumstance, Officers will continue to engage with smaller rural schools during implementation to understand and address any specific challenges they may face in delivering on Policy aims. Overall, the Policy is expected to have a neutral to positive impact on rural areas.

5.7 Data Protection Impact Statement

There are no personal data implications arising from the proposals contained in this report. This assessment is based on the following considerations:

- (a) The Policy sets out general principles, expectations, and procedures for promoting and managing attendance. It does not involve any new or changed processing of personal data.
- (b) The Policy refers to the use of existing school data management systems (SEEMiS) to record and monitor attendance. This would be covered by existing data protection arrangements and privacy notices for these systems.
- (c) The consultation process summarised in the Policy appendix involved gathering views and experiences from pupils, parents and staff but is anonymous with no personal data collected.
- (d) In implementing the Policy, schools will continue to follow existing data protection legislation and best practice when handling any personal data related to attendance monitoring, referrals or support.

5.8 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

- (a) The revised Attendance Policy introduces a new procedure for managing persistent absenteeism, referred to as the Cluster Attendance Panel (CAP). This replaces the previous School

Attendance Sub Group process outlined in the 2013 Attendance Policy.

- (b) The Scheme of Delegation will need to be updated to reflect the roles and responsibilities within the CAP process. Based on the information provided in Appendix 3 of the Policy, the following changes are proposed:
- i. Education Functions: "Consider referrals of persistent absenteeism in line with the Cluster Attendance Panel procedure outlined in the Scottish Borders Council Attendance Policy."
 - ii. Delegation to Officers add under Director of Education: "Make referrals to the Cluster Attendance Panel in cases of persistent absenteeism where school-level interventions have been unsuccessful, in line with the Cluster Attendance Panel procedure outlined in the Scottish Borders Council Attendance Policy."
 - iii. Delegation to Officers add under Headteachers: "Initiate the Cluster Attendance Panel process for pupils with persistent absenteeism, following the procedure outlined in the Scottish Borders Council Attendance Policy."
- (c) The Scheme of Delegation will need to be updated to include the authority of the Cluster Attendance Panel to consider persistent absenteeism referrals, and the roles of the Director of Education and Headteachers in making referrals and initiating this process, in line with the procedure set out in the revised Attendance Policy.
- (d) These proposed changes to the Scheme of Delegation may require approval by the full Council as part of the Policy approval process.

6 CONSULTATION

6.1 The Director (Finance & Procurement), the Director (Corporate Governance), the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Director (People Performance & Change), the Clerk to the Council, the Finance Business Partner and Corporate Communications have been consulted and any comments received will be incorporated into the final report.

6.2 The Director of Public Health, the Director (Social Work & Practice), the Director (Education & Children's Services) and the Director (Resilient Communities) have also been consulted and any comments received will be incorporated into the final report.

Approved by

Lesley Munro

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