



**COMMISSION
ON SCHOOL
REFORM**

Challenge Paper

Scotland's lost pupils

October 2020

Membership of the re-convened Commission on School Reform is as follows:

- **Keir Bloomer (Chair):** Education Consultant and former Director of Education
- **John Barnett:** University Court Member, retired finance professional and former Parent Council Chairman.
- **Helen Chambers:** Deputy Chief Executive of Inspiring Scotland
- **Jamie Cooke:** Head of RSA Scotland
- **Carole Ford:** Former Head teacher
- **Jim Goodall:** Former Head of Education and Community Services at Clackmannanshire Council and current Lib Dem councillor at East Dunbartonshire Council
- **Anna Hazel-Dunn:** Headteacher Royal High Primary
- **Frank Lennon:** Former Head of Dunblane High School
- **Cllr Paul McLennan:** SNP Councillor in East Lothian
- **Ross Martin:** Economic Agitator with experience in a variety of roles in education-including school teacher, voluntary tutor, chair of local education authority, member of college board & university court, Chair of a charity, and, most importantly, a parent and former student.
- **Lindsay Paterson:** Professor of education policy in the School of Social and Political Science at Edinburgh University
- **Lesley Sutherland:** Board member, the Centre for Scottish Public Policy

Please note that all members of the commission participate in an individual capacity and that the views of the commission do not represent the views of any other organisation to which the individual members belong.

Too many children across Scotland are neglected by our education system. While the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed the issue of missed education up the political agenda, it is, unfortunately, a problem that has been facing too many pupils for too long.

Through Freedom of Information requests the Commission on School Reform (CSR) and Reform Scotland asked local authorities how many pupils had less than 50% school attendance. While as a percentage of the school roll these numbers may seem low, the total affected across Scotland is alarming. We have established that **8,542** pupils had less than 50% attendance in 2018/19. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that these figures are rising as waiting times for CAMHS also increase.

This is not a new problem as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but an underlying situation that is likely only to deteriorate. The CSR therefore offers some possible ways forward, and hopes that this paper can contribute towards stimulating a much-needed debate.

Introduction

There are many reasons why a pupil may be absent from school for long periods, including poor health, family disruption, changing local authority area during the school year and problems at home, including neglect. These causes have always existed. But, as the figures illustrate, the number of children missing a substantial amount of their schooling is growing at a worrying rate. Pupils struggling to access help for underlying mental health issues can also result in a great deal of missed time.

¹ Aberdeen City Council stated “We do not hold this information as it is not something that we would routinely report on. We would have to undertake additional calculations on raw data and create new information to answer this question.” As a result, information from that

Parent Gillian Bell [wrote about her own struggle](#) finding support for her daughter in a personal article for Reform Scotland’s Melting Pot Blog. She noted: “*It has taken 5 years to get a consultant appointment for my daughter still not to be ‘formally’ diagnosed as Aspergers.*”

Hers is not an isolated case. The aim of this paper is to highlight this growing problem, consider the causes and examine how they might potentially be addressed.

Non-attendance at school

Reform Scotland asked all local authorities in Scotland, for each of the last five years available, how many pupils in Scotland had less than 50% attendance and how many, if any, prosecutions there had been for non-attendance at school.

The CSR has previously highlighted the problems created by the lack of consistent and authoritative education data in Scotland, and this has proved to be the case again. Some local authority areas only had three or four years’ worth of data. While some provided figures for 2019/20 (up to schools closing in March), we have not included this in our findings as it will have been impacted by the beginning of the pandemic.

Given the wide variations in the answers received, there may also be differences in the way data is recorded.

The results for all local authorities, apart from Aberdeen City & Midlothian,¹ giving details of the findings for 2016/17- 2018/9, can be viewed in the table below.

The Freedom of Information answers illustrate that while the proportion of all pupils with less than 50% attendance is very low, it still accounts for a significant number, and is growing. Across the three years from 2016/17 to 2018/19 the number of pupils with less than 50% attendance increased by more than 1,000.

area is not included in the table. Midlothian Council did not respond to the FOI request nor our follow up.

While not all of these pupils will necessarily have complex issues that need addressed, many will. We cannot ignore these forgotten pupils.

Pupils with less than 50% attendance at school, by local authority area.

	2016/17		2017/18		2018/19	
	number	%	number	%	number	%
Aberdeen City	Does not hold information					
Aberdeenshire	317	0.89%	370	1.04%	424	1.18%
Angus	153	0.98%	164	1.06%	144	0.93%
Argyll and Bute	18	0.17%	16	0.16%	23	0.22%
Clackmannanshire	71	1.02%	74	1.05%	63	0.90%
Dumfries and Galloway	81*	n/a	81	0.43%	114	0.61%
Dundee City	276	2	349	2	323	2
East Ayrshire	287	1.8	284	1.80%	295	1.8
East Dunbartonshire	65	0.3%	60	0.3%	66	0.3%
East Lothian	128	0.9	163	1.1	209	1.3
East Renfrewshire	77	0.45%	67	0.38%	84	0.48%
Edinburgh City	354	0.7%	457	0.9%	419	0.8%
Eilean Siar	12	1%	25	1%	36	1%
Falkirk	203	0.9%	224	1%	250	1.1%
Fife	719	1.4%	780	1.5%	799	1.50%
Glasgow City	886	1.3%	1,016	1.5%	1,020	1.5%
Highland	558	1.78%	493	1.57%	499	1.59%
Inverclyde	138	1.4%	112	1.1%	127	1.3%
Midlothian	Did not respond to FOI request					
Moray	141	1.2%	133	1.1%	130	1.1%
North Ayrshire	278	1.5%	286	1.5%	251	1.3%
North Lanarkshire	789	1.6%	980	2.0%	1,137	2.3%
Orkney Islands	20	0.7%	15	0.5%	29	1%
Perth & Kinross	205	1.1%	197	1.1%	232	1.2%
Renfrewshire	240	1%	267	1%	283	1%
Scottish Borders	110	0.74%	97	0.76%	116	0.78%
Shetland Islands	25	0.77	23	0.71	27	0.84
South Ayrshire	131	0.9%	156	1.1%	182	1.3%
South Lanarkshire	351	0.8%	353	0.8%	399	0.9%
Stirling	140	1.13	155	1.24	184	1.46
West Dunbartonshire	174	1.4%	n/a*	n/a	233	1.8%
West Lothian	329	1.21%	412	1.50%	444	1.61%
Total	7,276*		7,809		8,542	

*Dumfries & Galloway could not give a figure for 2016/17 so we used the 2017/18 for that year so as not to overestimate the growth. West Dunbartonshire could only provide the figures for every second year, which is why 2017/18 is missing.

A few authorities were able to give information covering a longer period. For those who were able to supply every year from 2014/15 to 2018/19 the following increases had occurred:

- East Ayrshire increased from 230 to 295;
- Eilean Siar from 10 to 36;
- Fife from 481 to 799;
- North Lanarkshire from 497 to 1,137;
- South Lanarkshire from 303 to 399.

Six local authorities also provided responses broken down by stage. As the table of those results highlights below, the problem of high non-attendance would appear to be far more prevalent in secondary, as opposed to primary settings. However, the trend is increasing in each:

	Stage	2015/16		2016/17		2017/18		2018/19		2019/20	
		number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
East Ayrshire	primary	26	0.30%	47	0.50%	41	0.40%	45	0.50%	n/a	
	secondary	221	3.20%	238	3.50%	236	3.60%	249	3.70%	n/a	
Glasgow City	primary	293	0.7%	303	0.7%	366	0.9%	336	0.8%	443	1.1%
	secondary	546	2.2%	583	2.3%	650	2.6%	684	2.6%	789	2.9%
Moray	primary	11	0.2%	21	0.3%	28	0.4%	26	0.3%	26	0.4%
	secondary	94	1.8%	120	2.4%	105	2.1%	104	2.1%	132	2.6%
Orkney Islands	primary	1	0.06%	0	0.0%	1	0.06%	2	0.12%	4	0.25%
	secondary	10	0.85%	20	1.67%	14	1.17%	27	2.14%	32	2.57%
Perth & Kinross	Primary	28	0.3%	26	0.2%	30	0.3%	29	0.3%	37	0.3%
	Secondary	191	2.5%	179	2.3%	167	2.2%	203	2.6%	231	3.0%
South Ayrshire	Primary	13	0.2%	10	0.1%	16	0.2%	22	0.3%	21	0.3%
	Secondary	112	1.8%	121	1.9%	140	2.2%	160	2.6%	179	2.8%

Every child in Scotland has the right to an education. It is the duty of the local authority to ensure that adequate and effective education is available in their area and it is the duty of the parent or carer to provide that education, either by sending the child to the local authority school, an independent school or by home-schooling.

Therefore, Reform Scotland also asked in the Freedom of Information requests how many prosecutions each council had brought for non-attendance at school.

26 local authorities confirmed that they had brought no prosecutions for non-attendance while two did not have the data available.

Only Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow have pursued action through the courts in the past five years.

- Aberdeen had one case in 2018 and one in 2019;
- Edinburgh had “less than five cases” in the past five years;
- Glasgow had 148 cases in 2016; 206 in 2017; 150 in 2018; 44 in 2019; and 1 in 2020.

That is not to say prosecution is the answer to the problems behind the figures or that it should be the preferred route. It does, however, show the extent to which action taken by local authorities is in line with what the current legislation suggests. We would also not suggest that the figures indicate that the problem is behaviour based. Indeed given the range of reasons behind non-attendance and the involvement of potentially vulnerable children, a welfare based approach would be better.

Although there will be a range of reasons behind the figures, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that waiting times to access CAMHS have been growing over this period.

CAMHS waiting times

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are multi-disciplinary teams that provide assessment and treatment/interventions in the context of emotional, developmental, environmental and social factors for children and young people experiencing mental health problems.²

The Australian Council for Education Research published a study in 2019³ which highlighted that students with mental health problems had lower school attendance than those without. The study

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-nhs-scotland-national-service-specification/>

³ Australian Journal of Education 2019, Vol. 63(1) 5–21

suggested that improving prevention, early intervention, treatment and management of such disorders may lead to significant improvements in school attendance.

According to Public Health Scotland the number of referrals continues to rise year on year, with seasonal variation related to school terms.⁴

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

increasing before the impact of Covid-19 was felt. Our table illustrates the growth in waiting times, and particularly the growth in those waiting more than 52 weeks.

The most recent figures in this table are from April 2020⁵ and highlight a dramatic increase in those waiting longer than 52 weeks. While April 2020 was during lockdown, it is worth remembering that most of that 52+ week wait will have been prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. In April 2017, 40 young people had to wait over a year for treatment. Two years later that number was more than ten times higher at 470, reaching 1,670 by April 2020.

CAMHS Waiting Times - Number of patients waiting during the month by Health Board

Green box highlights where the Scottish Government waiting target has been met.

	Apr-17				Apr-18				Apr-19				Apr-20			
	0-18 weeks	%	Over 52 weeks	%	0-18 weeks	%	Over 52 weeks	%	0-18 weeks	%	Over 52 weeks	%	0-18 weeks	%	Over 52 weeks	%
Scotland	5,596	83.8	40	0.6	6,217	75.1	127	1.5	6,811	68.3	470	4.7	5,042	44.6	1,167	10.3
Ayrshire & Arran	311	95.4	1	0.3	343	93.5	-	-	362	91	-	-	240	26.4	384	42.2
Borders	137	100	-	-	154	69.4	-	-	131	89.1	-	-	119	73.9	-	-
Dumfries & Galloway	154	100	-	-	170	96.1	1	0.6	114	100	-	-	n/a	-	-	-
Fife	431	70.8	21	3.5	522	59.3	33	3.8	424	52.6	108	13.4	227	49.1	42	9.1
Forth Valley	408	98.8	-	-	447	81.6	-	-	547	92.2	1	0.2	447	46.1	-	-
Grampian	703	80.2	-	-	758	83.2	-	-	685	82.9	1	0.1	273	59.1	23	5
Greater Glasgow and Clyde	1,004	99.1	-	-	1,375	91.7	-	-	2,048	82.5	-	-	1,593	42.8	197	5.3
Highland	273	73.8	5	1.4	205	67.2	9	3	262	60.1	28	6.4	201	38.1	88	16.7
Lanarkshire	623	88.5	-	-	669	78.1	-	-	794	72.3	-	-	606	55.7	6	0.6
Lothian	964	66.2	13	0.9	1,036	57.6	84	4.7	1,112	45.9	332	13.7	1,042	41.5	427	17
Tayside	545	95	-	-	472	74.2	-	-	258	45.6	-	-	262	60.9	-	-
Islands	43	100	-	-	66	89.2	-	-	74	89.2	-	-	-	-	-	-

⁴ <https://beta.isdscotland.org/media/5657/2020-09-01-camhs-waiting-times-report.pdf>

⁵Data for Apr 19 & 20 - <https://beta.isdscotland.org/find-publications-and-data/conditions-and-diseases/mental-health/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times/>

Table 1b

Data for Apr 18 - <https://beta.isdscotland.org/find-publications-and-data/conditions-and-diseases/mental-health/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times/3-september-2019/>

Table 1b

Data for Apr 17 - https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Waiting-Times/Publications/2017-12-12/CAMHS_Waiting_Times_Tables_December_2017.xlsx?

Table 1b

Published data prior to this included only information for numbers over and below 18 weeks.

In April 2017 seven of the health board areas met the Scottish Government's waiting times target for CAMHS. An additional two, and the Scottish average, were within 10% of it. By April 2019 that had fallen to only three health board areas, with an additional four within 10%.

CAMHS delays will not be the only reason why a growing number of children are missing so much school, but forcing children to wait for increasingly long periods of time to get the help they need will undoubtedly be a contributing factor.

Angela Morgan's report for the Scottish Government published in June 2020, 'Support for Learning: All our children and all their potential',⁶ highlighted that 30.9% of Scotland's school age population face additional barriers to learning. The report notes that "There has been a significant increase in the number of children and young people identified as having additional support needs" and that the complexity of needs has also increased.

Next Steps

The Commission on School Reform is alarmed and concerned by the growing number of pupils who are losing school education. We hope that this paper draws attention to the issue and results in an investigation by the Scottish Government. There will be a wide variety of reasons behind the trend and we have outlined some policy suggestions which we believe would help.

Data: As is too often the case with education we lack comprehensive and authoritative data. While we have tried to draw attention to an important issue, there are too many holes in the data. However, it is clear that there is a growing number of pupils who are missing more than 50% of schooling. These figures pre-date the global

pandemic, which is only likely to make the situation worse. As a result, the first step must be for the Scottish Government to conduct a proper investigation into the problem, to identify what are the potential triggers and how these can be addressed. Are the problems of engagement or implementation, of provision or ideology? Or are the problems spread across the board. We need to better understand the problem in order to develop solutions.

The difficulties surrounding data were also highlighted in the Independent Care Review, *The Promise*⁷:

"The way Scotland collects data and evidence is not always helpful in understanding the experiences of children...Furthermore, data is often captured and held by a range of different agencies in varying formats and not readily shared."

Parental support: School education is supposed to be compulsory and that requires enforcement. This should not mean punitive measures, but if parents need support in ensuring their child attends school, that help must be accessible. Continued contact and tailored support measures are required. As the 'The Promise' states "*families must be given support together to nurture that love and overcome the difficulties which get in the way.*"⁸

Referral to CAMHS isn't enough: While the increasing waiting times for children needing to access CAMHS must be dealt with, there should also be stop-gap measures whereby schools are able to provide parents and pupils with support ahead of diagnosis.

Online resources: Although the number of children missing considerable amounts of school was increasing prior to Covid-19, it is likely that the situation will get worse. While pupils missing school for isolation or safety reasons are separate

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/independent-report/2020/06/review-additional-support-learning-implementation/documents/support-learning-children-potential/support-learning-children-potential/govscot%3Adocument/support-learning-children-potential.pdf>

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

⁸ <https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf>

from the problem identified in this paper, the pandemic enables us to test different ways we can stay in touch with pupils and their families and engage with them through other means. It is clear that the virus isn't going to disappear, therefore we should be developing ideas such as online content that can be accessed by those not in school. Doing something now which can potentially help all school children as we navigate the pandemic has the potential to create a legacy that could help pupils struggling with non-attendance in the future.