

Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) in a Scottish Local Authority Context

Executive Summary



ABSAIL

Addressing Barriers to School Attendance to Improve Long-term Outcomes

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Background

Approximately 229,409 pupils were 'persistently absent' (missing more than 10%) from school in 2022/23¹. While the factors underpinning extended school non-attendance behaviours are complex and multifaceted, emotional barriers to school attendance are a significant driver of persistent and severe absence². EBSNA is an overarching term used to describe extended school non-attendance due to emotional or psychosocial factors e.g. neurodevelopmental profiles, anxiety or other mental health difficulties. Despite increasing rates of EBSNA post-pandemic, there is limited research available in the Scottish context surrounding EBSNA intervention and support³. This report aimed to map current policy approaches to EBSNA across Scotland to understand the broader context and identify any gaps in support.

Methods

Through a policy document and content analysis, we mapped EBSNA-related guidance from all 32 Local Authorities (LAs) across Scotland. The search took place from September to November 2024 and yielded 109 documents: 42 documents from a total of 26 LAs met inclusion criteria for analysis.

Key findings

Four themes were identified across LA policies and guidance:



- Two-thirds (68%) of LAs had specific EBSNA guidance or resources available. The scope and comprehensiveness of these varied.
- Across LAs, guidance typically takes a wellbeing-focused approach to EBSNA management, as opposed to a punitive approach. This was reflected in choice of language, consideration of complex and systemic risk factors for EBSNA,

emphasis on relational-approaches and key principles underlying interventions and support.

✦ In line with 'Getting It Right For Every Child' (GIREFC), young people, parents, school staff and multi-agency staff were identified to have unique roles and responsibilities within EBSNA support. Collaboration between stakeholders appeared important for effective support. Strong policies highlighted the importance of including the voices of young people within policy and guidance development.

✦ There is a major gap in the effective recording of EBSNA-related absences, with limited and inconsistent guidance on how to record EBSNA at school level. Only 46% of LAs had specific guidance for recording EBSNA-related absences. Use of attendance 'SEEMiS codes' varies widely between LAs and, in some cases, current practices may mask the extent of EBSNA within schools and LAs.

Conclusion

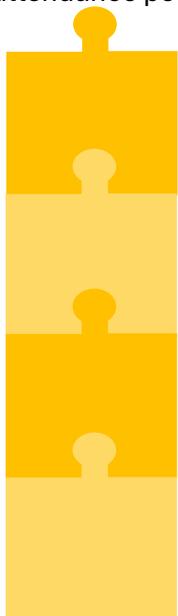
In facilitating the understanding of the broader context of EBSNA support, this report has several implications for the provision of effective EBSNA support. Most importantly, national and local policy should prioritise the development of consistent guidance for the recording of EBSNA-related absences. Given that research has highlighted the importance of early identification and intervention, a focus on more effective systems for recording and managing EBSNA data would ultimately have an impact on other areas of EBSNA support, including more targeted support due to increased understanding of the local context⁴, improved outcomes for young people due to earlier identification and intervention³, and better resource allocation to LAs and schools particularly in need⁵.

Whilst EBSNA guidance typically adopted a wellbeing-focused approach, future research exploring the implementation of EBSNA guidance in Scottish LAs would allow further insight into how these frameworks are embedded in schools. This is particularly important in the post-pandemic context, where known risk factors to EBSNA (e.g. poverty, anxiety) have been amplified alongside a decrease in service and resource accessibility⁶.

Available EBSNA Guidance across LAs

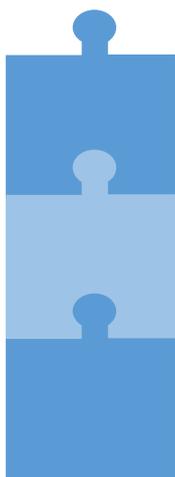
22%

embedded EBSNA guidance into the LA general attendance policy.



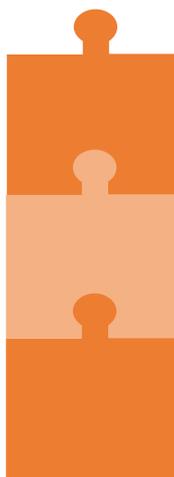
19%

produced an EBSNA-specific guidance document.



19%

had no clear EBSNA guidance.



1. Scottish Government (2024). School Attendance and Absence Statistics, Attendance and Absence 2022-23. *Learning Directorate*.
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3. Kearney, M., Rae, D., Short, B., Bowness, J., Mitchell, K., & Ward, J. (2023). *Attendance: The next pandemic? The Psychology of school attendance*. Scottish Division of Educational Psychology
4. Kearney, C. A., & Childs, J. (2023). Improving school attendance data and defining problematic and chronic school absenteeism: the next stage for educational policies and health-based practices. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 67(4), 265-275.
5. Heyne, D., Keppens, G. A., & Dvořák, D. (2024). From Attendance Data to Student Support: International Practices for Recording, Reporting, and Using Data on School Attendance and Absence. *ORBIS SCHOLAE*.
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