

The challenges facing Scottish schools and children's mental health



Introduction

This briefing sets out some of the detail on three big issues facing Scottish education – behaviour in the classroom, pupil attendance rates, and teacher wellbeing. It also highlights how school-based mental health services are a key part of the solution to all three.

Who are Place2Be?

We have worked in Scotland for over 20 years, creating a Place2Be in schools for children and young people aged 4 and up: a safe and creative space in schools for children to open up about their emotions and any difficulties they are facing, so mental health problems don't grow with them.

In 2023 we provided in-school mental health support services in over 70 primary and high schools in Scotland, and outreach services to more than 150 schools – meaning we are available to over 60,000 children and young people.

We also provide 'places to be' for the adults around children of all ages in Scotland to learn, reflect and gain confidence in supporting children's mental health. Through supporting the whole school community, we create systems that help children thrive.

Behaviour in schools

A Scottish Government survey of teachers, teaching assistants and headteachers, found a perception that behaviour in classrooms and around the school has deteriorated [1]. The survey found that 77% of school staff believed behaviour was worse than before the pandemic, with the impact including: disruption to transitions; delays in social / communication skills; disengagement and reduced attendance; and poorer mental health. This is backed up a 2023 EIS (Education Institute of Scotland) Survey, which found that 72% of their branches believed 'violence and aggression' in the classroom had risen in the past five years [2].

For teachers in our partner primary schools in Scotland, after the pandemic there was a marked increase in teachers seeking advice or guidance from our clinician on managing children's behaviour: the issue was raised in 19% of reflective sessions in 2019-20, rising to 29% of sessions in 2022-23. It should be noted, however, that this fell back to 17% of sessions in 2023-24.

While the Scottish Government survey found most types of behaviour got worse by age, violent behaviour was worse in primary schools, particularly in primaries 1 to 3. This underscores the need to support children with their mental health early in primary schools.

School staff and local authority representatives responding to the government survey cited 'poor mental health' and lower resilience as one of underlying causes of challenging behaviour. Equally, increases in spending on support services and statutory services like CAMHS were seen as part of the solution. One secondary teacher cited the need for services to be available to support children early:

"Some of these children, I would say it's been obvious for probably 7 or 8 years that they've needed help. But as everything has been cut back and there are fewer external agencies to rely on yeah, it's been really difficult. Not having a primary mental health worker has been a nightmare."

Our own data highlights the importance of mental health support in improving classroom learning and behaviour. After children had Place2Be support in our partner schools in Scotland, 53% had improved in classroom learning and 59% were causing fewer problems for their teacher or class.

However, while the Scottish Government's new action plan on behaviour and relationships aims to ensure children "understand their emotions, develop communication, co- and self-regulation and social skills", as well as to "be supported in their wellbeing" [3], it fails to set out any new action to improve the mental health of children and young people in schools. Indeed, there is just a single specific mention of the impact of children's mental health – and only as a consequence rather than cause of misbehaviour.

How Place2Be are responding

We work with children from age 4, our school service includes:

- A Place2Be room and embedded-clinician so we can identify need and support children early
- Creativity and a playful approach, including 1-1 counselling, a self-referral service for children, and group work
- Support for the whole school community: providing a reflective space for school staff; training for teachers and senior leaders; and support for families; and school assemblies.

What we need from local and national government

- The protection and continued provision of local budgets for school-based counselling for children aged 10+ and the expansion of support to children in primary schools.
- A national programme for the implementation of the [Whole School Approach Framework](#) in every school, with schools and local authorities being given the resources to do this.
- Long-term government investment so that children have access to a mental health service like Place2Be in every primary and secondary school, to provide support early and prevent mental health problems by embedding a school-based counsellor or mental health practitioner.

Attendance

Attendance in Scotland's schools has declined since the pandemic, with over a third of pupils persistently absent (an absence rate of 10% or more) in 2022-23. Persistent absence is significantly higher in secondary school than primary, rates are higher for children in the most deprived areas and for children with additional support needs. Overall, 32.5% of pupils were persistently absent from school, including 25.6% in primary schools and 41.1% in secondary schools.

Pupil absence has increased in schools across the UK, with Scottish rates broadly comparable to Wales but significantly higher than in England:

Persistent absence rate by UK nation (2022-23) [4]

	Scotland	Wales	England
Primary Schools	25.6%	28.9%	16.2%
Secondary Schools	41.1%	40.1%	26.5%

An Education Scotland deep dive found that pupil and parental mental health were the most frequently cited individual and family drivers of absence cited by local authorities and schools [5].

Mental health support is part of the solution: the University of Cambridge analysed data from 7,400 pupils supported by Place2Be with one-to-one counselling and found that school-based one-to-one counselling has the potential to reduce the odds of persistent absence by 18.5%, and could be most beneficial for children aged 4 to 9 [6]. Where children were more engaged with school after counselling, they also had a greater improvement in attendance and their risk of persistent absence also fell.

How Place2Be are responding

We are delivering a project in South Ayrshire to provide therapeutic support to young people disengaged from school and their families. Crucially, this support takes place in the community. Following a referral from the school, our Community Mental Health Practitioner (CMHP) meets the young person in a library or in a school via a discreet entrance. They take the time to build a trusting relationship with the young person and offer regular counselling sessions to support them back into school or a positive destination. The CMHP also supports their family, and works with the school to remove barriers to the young person entering the school building.

The individual impact is astounding, with stories of young people going on to achieve qualifications, attend college or find work after school. The success of the project has led to us securing community mental health funding to expand the service to Dundee.

What we need from local and national government

- Strategies to improve school attendance should be trauma-informed, recognising, respecting and responding to the deep-seated issues that children, young people and their families face including poverty and mental health.
- There is no one solution to attendance: local authorities need to put in place strategies that bring together support for children's mental health; for their parents; and for children to catch up on schoolwork. These networks of support should foster conversations and provide a space to share learning between education, health and third sector partners.

Teacher wellbeing and burnout

A survey of teachers conducted by the EIS teaching union in 2023, found that most teachers experienced stress at least occasionally and one in five (20%) experienced it all the time [7]. As part of the Scottish Government's Behaviour in Schools research, teachers and support staff reported "high levels of stress and anxiety".

One secondary teacher said:

"I think that we are getting increasingly anxious as teachers. I think there's not enough discussion on the mental health of teachers, but you are starting to see burnout, which is increasing more, anxiety which is increasing more"

In Place2Be partner schools, we provide Place2Think – a safe, confidential and reflective space for school staff. We know that in 2023-24, 'Advice on self-care (e.g. stress in job, feeling overwhelmed)' was raised by teachers at 16% of Place2Think sessions in Place2Be partner schools in Scotland. While this is 14% in primary schools, it rises to 21% across secondary schools [8].

Poor teacher wellbeing has significant impacts for the education system:

- Teacher absence has reached the highest level since local authorities began reporting this in 2010-11, rising by 17% in 2022-23 to 6.8 days [9].
- General Teaching Council for Scotland figures show that 1,337 teachers left the profession within the first five years (in five years from 2018) [10].
- An AHDS (the association for primary school headteachers) survey in September found that 42.3% of headteachers would not recommend the job. One said, "burnout no longer seems to be a possibility but more an inevitable outcome." [11]

How Place2Be are responding

Since 2018 we have been building the capacity of the next generation of Scotland teachers to respond to children's mental health and look after their own wellbeing through our Initial Teacher Education partnerships. We now have an embedded clinician based in the University of Edinburgh; Stirling University; and the University of Glasgow – available to a third of all student teachers.

As well as providing them with access to our Mental Health Champions – Foundation course, our clinician delivers specialist lectures and seminars on children's mental health, and provides Place2Think reflective practice sessions either one-to-one or in small groups.

"On the course, we are expected to self-reflect regularly, but are not given any guidance on how to do this. Place2Think can help guide us in this, as a neutral space where we can gain a better understanding of our experiences of the course, placement, and anything else which might be affecting these experiences." (Student teacher at Moray House supported by Place2Be)

What we need from local and national government

- All student teachers and early phase career teachers should have access to a programme, delivered by a clinician, which gives them the opportunity to learn, reflect and gain confidence in supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing – and their own.
- Local authorities should ensure that all teachers have access to spaces to reflect on their own practice, helping them to support the wellbeing of their pupils, and their own mental health and wellbeing.

References

- [1] Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research, Scottish Government, 2023: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/behaviour-scottish-schools-research-report-2023/pages/1/>
- [2] Survey on Pupil Behaviour, EIS, 2023: <https://www.eis.org.uk/pupil-behaviour/surveyresults>
- [3] National action plan on relationships and behaviour in schools: 2024 – 2027, Scottish Government, 2024
- [4] Scottish Government, 2024: <https://www.gov.scot/news/summary-statistics-for-schools-in-scotland-2023-supplementary-statistics-published/>
- Department for Education, 2023: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>
- Welsh Government, 2024: <https://www.gov.wales/persistent-absenteeism-secondary-schools-september-2022-august-2023> and <https://www.gov.wales/absenteeism-primary-schools-september-2022-august-2023>
- [5] Education Scotland releases deep dive report into school attendance in Scotland, Education Scotland, 2023: <https://education.gov.scot/news/education-scotland-releases-deep-dive-report-into-school-attendance-in-scotland/>
- [6] Saxton J, Toth K, Ukoumunne OC, et al, One-to-one counselling and school attendance in the UK: a single group pre-post study, Archives of Disease in Childhood Published Online First: 29 July 2024. doi: 10.1136/archdischild-2023-326458
- [7] Survey of Scotland's Teachers lays bare H&WB Impact of Workload & Cost of Living Crisis, EIS, 2023
- [8] This covers 2,076 sessions (1,638 across 46 primary schools and 438 across 11 secondary schools).
- [9] Improvement Service, 2024: https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0029/47828/Benchmarking-Overview-Report-2024.pdf
- [10] Hundreds of new teachers quit profession within five years, figures show, STV News, 2024: <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/hundreds-of-new-teachers-quit-profession-within-five-years-figures-show>
- [11] Primary heads: 'Burnout seem to be inevitable', TES, 2023: <https://www.tes.com/magazine/analysis/primary/scottish-primary-headteachers-leadership-burnout-inevitable>

Place2Be Research and Policy Documents

Evaluation of our work to support student teachers at Moray House School of Education and Sport at the University of Edinburgh (2023): <https://www.place2be.org.uk/media/tw4bjwsh/place2be-initial-teacher-education-in-scotland-report.pdf>

Evaluation of the reflective practice for school staff, delivered in 2020-21 as part of the Scottish Government's response to the impact of COVID-19 on schools (2023): <https://www.place2be.org.uk/media/tw4bjwsh/place2be-initial-teacher-education-in-scotland-report.pdf>

Place2Be's Policy Recommendations for Scotland: <https://www.place2be.org.uk/about-us/impact-and-evidence/policy-and-public-affairs/our-policy-recommendations-for-scotland/>

Solutions for School Attendance (Outcome of Place2Be Roundtable in England): <https://www.place2be.org.uk/media/iwqljivw/persistent-absence-roundtable.pdf>



Get in touch

Fiona McFarlane, Director for Scotland

fiona.mcfarlane@place2be.org.uk

Liam Furby, Senior Influencing and Partnerships Manager

liam.furby@place2be.org.uk

W: www.place2be.org.uk/scotland

X: x.com/Place2BeScot