

# LOST AND NOT FOUND

How severe absence became endemic in England's schools

March 2023





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# About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report Breakthrough Britain. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report It Happens Here shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grass-roots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2023 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

# Foreword

On the 8th of March 2021 schools in England reopened for the first time, after successive lockdowns. The expectation was that every child would come back to school, excited to return to in-person learning, to be reunited with their friends. And yet, despite schools reopening their doors, the reality has been that thousands of children have not returned. In fact, as each term passes, a growing number of children have started to disengage with education entirely.

This report uncovers that 140,000 children were severely absent in Summer 2022. This is the highest number on record. These are children who are absent more often than they are present. They may still be on their school rolls, but they are hardly ever in class. These children have become known as the “ghost children” of the pandemic.

Getting these children back into school is an issue of social justice. Children who are supported to attend school are happier, healthier, and have access to the very best opportunities in life. Studies from the Department for Education show that every single day of school lost can hamper a child’s GCSE results. Children who were regularly absent from school are also much more likely to become unemployed as adults.

For some children, school absence can be an indicator of serious harm. School can be a safe haven for our most vulnerable young people. The Education Select Committee recently heard that children missing school was one of the biggest risk factors in cases of child exploitation. We must do everything we can to keep these children safe.

Despite strong consensus that school attendance is vital, we have not yet done enough to get these children back into school. Each term, the number of children who have become severely absent has grown.

This report exposes how school absence has become a defining feature of our education system. The Centre for Social Justice has revealed that in Summer 2022, 3.5 per cent of all children in secondary school were severely absent, that’s equivalent to one child in every secondary school class. That’s one child in every class who is missing half of their time in school. One child in every class who is being denied access to a brilliant education. One child in every class who we cannot account for.

Our most vulnerable children are those most likely to be missing. The severe absence rate for children who are eligible for free school meals is triple the rate of those who are not eligible. Children with special educational needs/disabilities are also more likely to be severely absent: one in twenty children with an EHCP missed half of their education last term.



140,000 children have slipped through the cracks. We must act urgently to get these children back into school. If we do not act now, we will have failed this generation.

**Flick Drummond MP**

Member of the Education Select Committee

# Executive Summary

Since 2021, the Centre for Social Justice has been investigating the issue of school absence. Our report, *Kids Can't Catch Up*, first revealed that nearly 100,000 children had become severely absent in Autumn 2020. Severe absence is defined as when a child is spending more time absent from, than present in, school.

Since then, the number of severely absent children has continued to climb. New Centre for Social Justice analysis reveals that in the latest term we have data for, Summer 2022, 140,000 children were severely absent.

This represents a rise of 134 per cent since before the pandemic – or the equivalent of 137 entire schools where the children are mostly missing education.

The Government has recognised the importance of attendance and taken several very welcome steps to tackle school absences. New guidance has been issued, setting out a thorough multi-agency approach to attendance. Regular data and the work of the Attendance Alliance has allowed us to build a more detailed understanding of absence than ever before. And the introduction of Attendance Advisors and local pilots for Attendance Mentors has offered some support to councils most in need.

Yet these actions do not yet go far enough. This report finds that the support for school attendance issues is still a postcode lottery. Persistent and severe absence are often symptoms of complex issues which need to be addressed. Far too often, schools and local authorities are unable to provide the support that children need to access education.

In this paper, we uncover the damaging scale of severe absence. Despite recent efforts, the number of children missing half or more of their time at school has continued to grow term on term. At an alarming pace, children are disengaging with education entirely. This paper sets out a plan to support them back to school.

This report provides further analysis on the latest school attendance data. In the first chapter, we examine the rate and number of children who are persistently and severely absent from school. The report examines the reasons for school absence and identifies the children most likely to be missing from school.

The second part of the report draws upon insights from our recent attendance inquiry. In this inquiry, the Centre for Social Justice spoke to 50 charities, local authorities, and alternative providers to further understand the drivers behind school absence.

The final section lays out an ambitious strategy for reform to reengage England's severely absent children. We recommend that the government should:

## 1. Roll out attendance mentors – a proven intervention to boost attendance

- **Recommendation:** The Department for Education should roll out a national programme of 2,000 attendance mentors. These mentors would work with families to understand and remove the underlying barriers to school attendance.

A national programme would cost an estimated £80 million per year. We suggest that this could be funded through the existing Supporting Families programme.

## 2. Ensure families can access the right support

- **Recommendation:** The current Department for Education guidance on attendance should be made statutory.

This would help ensure all parents and children are able to access the appropriate support they need to both prevent and remediate absence.

## 3. Put more support in place in schools

- **Recommendation:** As part of a broader Parental Participation Strategy, the government should release guidance on the best practice for engaging parents of children who are severely absent.
- **Recommendation:** Family Hubs should be integrated with existing school services and collocated within schools.
- **Recommendation:** The government should fast track their commitment to roll out designated mental health leads for all schools. School should be supported to develop a whole-school approach to mental health.

## 4. Improve school attendance data

- **Recommendation:** The Department for Education should develop new metrics to track school attendance. This data should examine attendance patterns at an individual and school level and should be incorporated into the attendance dashboard.

## 5. Recognise the value of relational work

- **Recommendation:** The Government should follow through on its 2019 manifesto commitment to invest £500 million in new youth clubs and services, where there remains considerable underspend.

This should be scaled up through a new match fund scheme designed to inspire major businesses, charities and third sector organisations to support a national mission of returning our young people to school.

## 6. Introduce an 'enrichment guarantee' in our schools

- **Recommendation:** The Government should introduce a new 'enrichment guarantee' in schools. When activities take place in the morning, breakfast clubs should be incorporated as part of the enrichment guarantee.

## 7. Ensure fines are working

- **Recommendation:** The fines for School Attendance Orders and attendance prosecution should be made the same value to avoid creating perverse incentives which push children out of the education system.

Taken together, these recommendations provide a blueprint for how we can support the most vulnerable severely absent children to return to school.

## chapter one

# Absence: a review of the data

Since school shutdowns, absence and attendance issues have become endemic across our school system. Persistent and severe absence have become entrenched across England and thousands of schools are struggling to reengage this lost generation.

This chapter explores the most recent pupil level data collected by the Department for Education on attendance in Summer 2022.<sup>1</sup>

According to the most recent data, persistent absence has remained at a rate which is 100 per cent higher than before the pandemic and severe absence has peaked at its highest ever level.

The Department for Education has stated that attendance at education settings is lower than usual rates and that the attendance gap cannot be explained by the pandemic. There is an attendance gap between vulnerable young people and their peers which has continued to grow.<sup>2</sup>

All indications suggest that attendance issues have not been resolved as schools have returned this academic year (2022/23). Fortnightly data released from the Department for Education's attendance survey<sup>3</sup> shows that to the year to date, absence rates remain much higher than before the pandemic.

The overall absence rate this year to date was 7.6 per cent as of February 2023. The authorised absence rate was 5.3 per cent and unauthorised absence rate was 2.3 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

In Autumn 2019, the last term before the pandemic, the overall absence rate was 4.9 per cent. The authorised absence rate was 3.6 per cent and the unauthorised absence rate was 1.3 per cent. Therefore, since Autumn 2019, authorised absence has increased by 1.7 percentage points and unauthorised absence has increased by 1 percentage point.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>].

2 Department for Education, 2022. "Annual Report" [Accessed via: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1125417/DfE\\_consolidated\\_annual\\_report\\_and\\_accounts\\_2021\\_to\\_2022\\_accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1125417/DfE_consolidated_annual_report_and_accounts_2021_to_2022_accessible.pdf)]

3 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil attendance in schools" [Accessed via: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-attendance-in-schools>]

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

## Overall figures

### Persistent absence

Children who are persistently absent miss 10 per cent or more of possible sessions in school. This is equivalent to missing one afternoon every week.

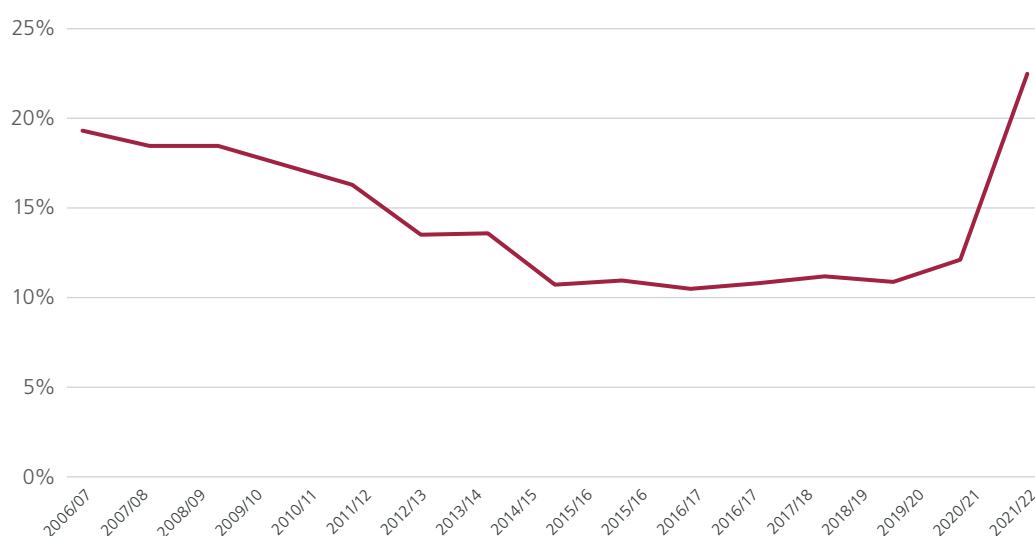
In Summer 2022, 1,855,628 children were persistently absent. This is equivalent to 26.4 per cent of all children (more than a quarter of children in mainstream or special schools).<sup>6</sup>

This figure is slightly lower than the number of children persistently absent in Spring 2022. In this term, persistent absence peaked at its highest ever level at 1,927,589 children (27.2 per cent of children in mainstream or special schools).<sup>7</sup>

Persistent absence has reached new heights since schools returned from the second shutdown in Summer 2021. When schools originally returned, in Autumn 2020, persistent absence stood at 13.0 per cent,<sup>8</sup> similar to before the pandemic (persistent absence was 13.1 per cent in Autumn 2019).<sup>9</sup>

From Summer 2021, persistent absence has increased steadily, this term marks a levelling of persistent absence at record high levels.<sup>10</sup>

*Figure 1: Percentage of persistent absentees over time (Annual Rates)*



6 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

7 Department for Education, 2022. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn 2021 and spring 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-2021-and-spring-2022>]

8 Department for Education, 2021. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2020" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2020>]

9 Department for Education, 2020. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2019" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2019>]

10 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

Before the pandemic, persistent absence rates had been hovering around 11 per cent. The proportion of persistently absent children had fallen from 19.3 per cent in 2006/07, when records were first recorded. However, following school shutdowns, the rate of persistent absence has shot up to the highest level on record. In the academic year 2021/22, 22.5 per cent of children were persistently absent.

## Severe absence

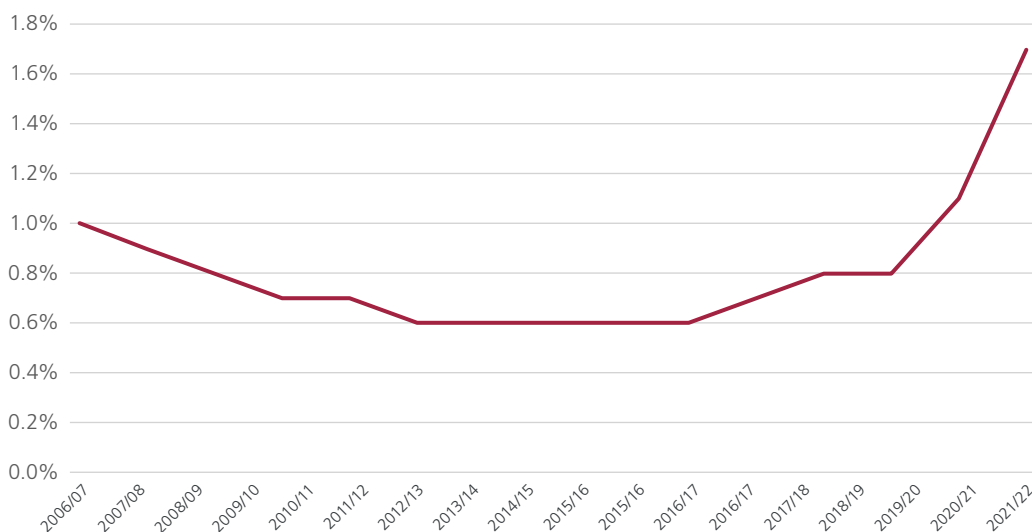
Children who are severely absent miss 50 per cent or more of possible sessions. They are a subgroup of persistently absent children who are absent more often than they are present.

In Summer 2022, 140,843 children were severely absent. This equates to 2.0 per cent (1 in 50) of children in mainstream or special schools.<sup>11</sup>

Severe absence has been increasing term on term since schools reopened. The number of children severely absent in Summer 2022 is up by 22,295 pupils<sup>12</sup> when compared to the previous term, Spring 2022, where 118,548 children were severely absent.<sup>13</sup>

Severe absence has grown exponentially when compared with before the pandemic. In Autumn 2019, before school shutdowns, 60,202 children were severely absent.<sup>14</sup> Between then and now, the number of severely absent children has grown by 130 per cent. Similarly, the rate of absence has more than doubled from 0.9 per cent before the pandemic (less than 1 in 100) to 2.0 per cent in Summer 2022.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 2: Percentage of severe absentees over time (Annual Rates)



11 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

12 Ibid.

13 Department for Education, 2022. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn 2021 and spring 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-2021-and-spring-2022>]

14 Department for Education, 2020. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2019" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2019>]

15 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

While there is a strong link between school shutdowns and the growth in severe absence, this issue was growing unnoticed over time even before schools closed. In 2015/16 the rate of severe absence was 0.6 per cent. This increased the following year to 0.7 per cent and in 2018/19, the last full year before the pandemic, the severe absence rate stood at 0.8 per cent.

Since shutdowns, the severe absence rate has grown exponentially. In 2021/22, 1.7 per cent of all children were severely absent for the entire academic year.

## Reasons for absence

In total, in Summer 2022, 8.0 per cent of sessions were marked as absent. 5.1 per cent of sessions were marked as authorised absences and 2.9 per cent were marked as unauthorised absences.<sup>16</sup> Before the pandemic, in Autumn 2019, the overall absence rate was 4.7 per cent. In Autumn 2019, 3.3 per cent of sessions were authorised absence and 1.4 per cent were unauthorised absences.<sup>17</sup>

Illness absences make up the majority of overall absences and have done consistently throughout the period for which data has been collected on attendance. Illness rates have been 1.1 percentage point higher than pre-pandemic. However, in Summer 2022, illness absence was lower than in previous terms this academic year<sup>18</sup> (3.6 per cent compared to 5.0 per cent in Spring 2022).<sup>19</sup>

The Children's Commissioner estimates that 621,000 children were persistently absent in Summer 2022 due to illness alone and over 1 million pupils – 1,023,000 – were persistently absent for reasons other than just illness.<sup>20</sup>

Unauthorised other absence rates have grown considerably since the pandemic. In Summer 2022, 0.76 per cent of all sessions were marked unauthorised other,<sup>21</sup> in Spring 2022, this rate stood at 0.24<sup>22</sup> and in Autumn 2019 it stood at 0.12.<sup>23</sup> In total, unauthorised other absences have increased by 0.6 percentage points.

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16 Ibid.

17 Department for Education, 2020. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2019" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2019>]

18 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

19 Department for Education, 2022. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn 2021 and spring 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-2021-and-spring-2022>]

20 Children's Commissioner, 2023. "New attendance figures for academic year 2021/22" [Accessed via: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/new-attendance-figures-for-academic-year-2021-22/>]

21 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

22 Department for Education, 2022. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn 2021 and spring 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-2021-and-spring-2022>]

23 Department for Education, 2020. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2019" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2019>]

There is also a greater proportion of absences for holidays. The unauthorised holiday absence rate was much higher this term. 0.76 per cent of sessions were marked absent for unauthorised holidays<sup>24</sup> compared to 0.24 per cent in Spring 2022<sup>25</sup> and 0.12 per cent in Autumn 2019 (pre-pandemic).<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, authorised holidays have increased in the latest data. In Summer 2022, the rate of authorised holidays increased to 0.10 per cent<sup>27</sup> (from 0.03 per cent in Spring 2022)<sup>28</sup>. This is much higher than the rate of authorised holidays pre-pandemic, in Autumn 2019, only 0.01 per cent of sessions were marked absent for an authorised holiday.<sup>29</sup>

## Absence by school type

### Persistent absence

Secondary schools have higher rates of persistent absence. In Summer 2022, 3 in 10 (31.5 per cent) of all children in secondary school were persistently absent. 978,243 children in total were persistently absent in state-secondary schools.<sup>30</sup>

21.8 per cent of children in state-funded primary schools were persistently absent in Summer 2022. This equates to a further 830,084 children.<sup>31</sup>

Persistent absent rates are higher in special schools and much higher in alternative provision. In Summer 2022, 38.8 per cent of children in special schools were persistently absent. In the academic year 2021/22, 80.9 per cent of all children in AP were persistently absent.<sup>32 33</sup>

### Severe absence

The issue of severe absence is particularly acute in secondary schools. In Summer 2022, 3.5 per cent of all secondary children were severely absent. This is equivalent to 1 in every 28 children, or one in every class.<sup>34</sup>

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24 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

25 Department for Education, 2022. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn 2021 and spring 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-2021-and-spring-2022>]

26 Department for Education, 2020. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2019" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2019>]

27 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

28 Department for Education, 2022. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn 2021 and spring 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-2021-and-spring-2022>]

29 Department for Education, 2020. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2019" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2019>]

30 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Children in alternative provision are not counted in the overall attendance figures because in some instances the children educated in AP are also educated in mainstream schools for part of the year. Since there is a lot of transience between these groups, children in AP are often accounted for separately in the data.

34 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

110,164 severely absent children (78.2 per cent of all severely absent children) are in state-funded secondary schools. This is equivalent to having 107 average sized secondary schools where all the children are absent for at least half of all possible sessions.<sup>35</sup>

Children in older year groups are more likely to be severely absent. Over the 2021/22 academic year, 3.7 per cent of all Year 11 pupils were severely absent. The year group with the lowest severe absence rate for this year was Year 2 where 0.4 per cent of children were severely absent.<sup>36</sup>

22,953 children in state-funded primary schools were severely absent. Primary school pupils account for 16.3 per cent of all severely absent children. 0.6 per cent of children in primary schools were severely absent in Summer 2022.<sup>37</sup>

As with persistent absence, the rate of severe absence is much higher in special schools and alternative provision (AP).

In Summer 2022, 7,726 children educated in special schools were severely absent. This represents more than 1 in 20 (6.3 per cent) of all children educated in special schools. In the academic year 2021/22, 34.5 per cent of children in AP (12,202 in total) were severely absent.<sup>38</sup>

## Regional variation

Patterns of absence vary across England. In the worst performing areas, 1 in 3 children were persistently absent and 1 in 30 were severely absent in Summer 2022.

Consistently, areas in Inner and Outer London tend to have lower absence rates whereas areas like Yorkshire and the Humber, the South West and the North East have some of the highest.<sup>39</sup>

## Persistent absence

Yorkshire and the Humber had the highest rate of persistent absence in Summer 2022 (28.7 per cent – 204,045 children) followed by the North East (28.6 per cent – 93,302 children).<sup>40</sup>

Inner London had the lowest rate of persistent absence in Summer 2022 (24.8 per cent – 86,048 children), followed by Outer London (25.1 per cent – 176,214 children).<sup>41</sup>

The 10 local authorities with the worst rates of persistent absence were:

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35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

Table 1: Local authorities with highest rates of persistent absence (Summer 2022)

	<b>Geographic Identifier</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Enrolments Persistently Absent</b>	<b>Percentage Persistently Absent</b>
<b>1</b>	Middlesbrough	North East	6,965	33.8%
<b>2</b>	Bradford	Yorkshire and The Humber	27,292	33.6%
<b>3</b>	Knowsley	North West	5,781	33.0%
<b>4</b>	Rotherham	Yorkshire and The Humber	12,109	32.1%
<b>5</b>	Barnsley	Yorkshire and The Humber	9,606	31.7%
<b>6</b>	Bristol, City of	South West	16,516	31.6%
<b>7</b>	Doncaster	Yorkshire and The Humber	12,585	31.5%
<b>8</b>	Birmingham	West Midlands	53,430	31.2%
<b>9</b>	Sunderland	North East	10,572	31.1%

## Severe absence

Yorkshire and the Humber had the highest rate of severe absence in Summer 2022 (2.4 per cent – 16,999 children) followed by the South West (2.3 per cent – 15,178 children) and the North East (2.3 per cent – 7,402 children).<sup>42</sup>

Inner London and Outer London had the lowest rates of severe absence in Summer 2022 (1.3 per cent each). In Inner London 4,387 children were severely absent, in Outer London 8,813 children were severely absent.<sup>43</sup>

The 10 local authorities with the worst rates of severe absence were:

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Table 2: Local authorities with highest rates of severe absence (Summer 2022)

	<b>Geographic Identifier</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Enrolments Severely Absent</b>	<b>Percentage Severely Absent</b>
<b>1</b>	Newcastle upon Tyne	North East	1,144	3.4%
<b>2</b>	Torbay	South West	543	3.3%
<b>3</b>	Bradford	Yorkshire and The Humber	2,628	3.2%
<b>4</b>	Buckinghamshire	South East	2,302	3.2%
<b>5</b>	Middlesbrough	North East	655	3.2%
<b>6</b>	Portsmouth	South East	715	2.9%
<b>7</b>	Liverpool	North West	1,744	2.9%
<b>8</b>	St. Helens	North West	653	2.8%
<b>9</b>	Bristol, City of	South West	1,459	2.8%
<b>10</b>	Warwickshire	West Midlands	2,014	2.8%

## Pupil characteristics

### Free school meals eligibility

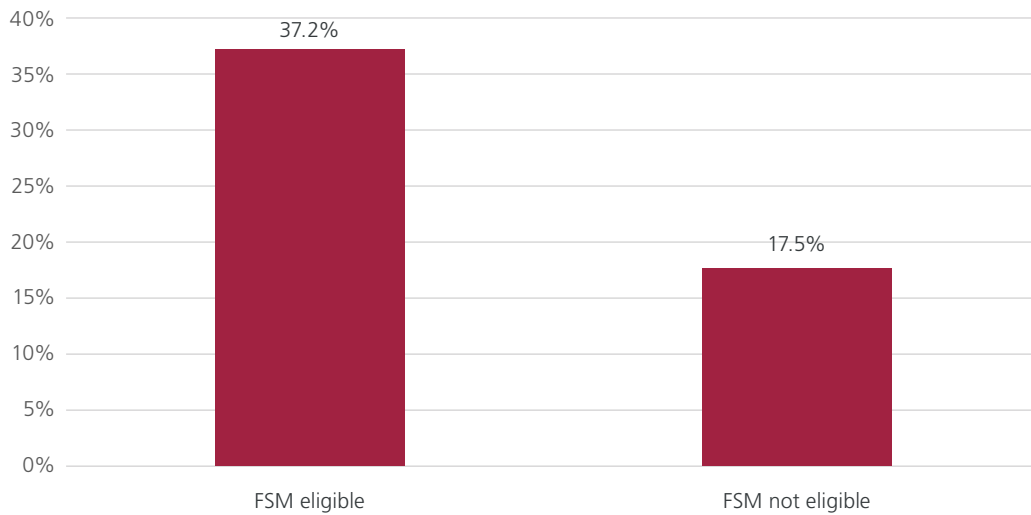
Children who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) or had been eligible in the past six years have consistently had higher rates of absence than their peers.

### Persistent absence

In 2021/22, children eligible for FSM had a persistent absence rate which was more than double the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. 37.2 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were severely absent, compared to 17.5 per cent of children not eligible.<sup>44</sup>

*Figure 3: Persistent absence rates by free school meal eligibility*

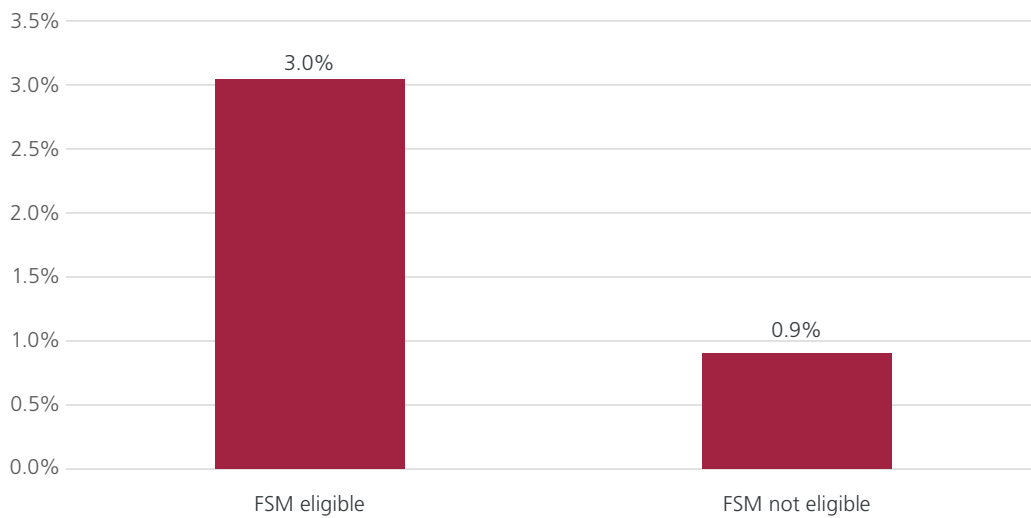
44 Ibid.



### Severe absence

In 2021/22, children eligible for FSM had a severe absence rate which was more than triple the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. 3.0 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were severely absent, compared to 0.9 per cent of children not eligible.<sup>45</sup>

Figure 4: Severe absence rates by free school meal eligibility



45 Ibid.

## Pupil Residency

### Persistent absence

30.0 per cent of children living in the most disadvantaged areas<sup>46</sup> were persistently absent over the course of 2021/22. For comparison, 14.3 per cent of children living in the most affluent areas<sup>47</sup> were persistently absent over the same period.<sup>48</sup>

### Severe absence

Analysis of the pupil residency of severely absent pupils was not published in the latest data release.

## SEND

Children with SEN support and Education, Health, and Care Plans are more likely than their peers to be both persistently and severely absent.

Overall, children with profound and multiple learning difficulties, physical disabilities, and social, emotional and mental health SEN primary needs have the highest rates of absence.

### Persistent absence

In total, 408,961 children had some form of identified SEND and were persistently absent in the last academic year. Children with some form of SEND made up 24.9 per cent of all persistently absent children in 2021/22.<sup>49</sup>

303,164 persistently absent children had SEN Support and a further 105,797 persistently absent children had an EHCP.<sup>50</sup>

The rate of persistent absence was 32.0 per cent for children with SEN Support, 37.0 per cent for children with an EHCP, and 20.0 per cent for children with no identified SEN.<sup>51</sup>

Children with social, emotional, and mental health needs made up 5.7 per cent of all persistently absent children in 2021/22 (and 23.0 per cent of all children who were persistently absent with identified SEND).<sup>52</sup>

Over this academic year, more than half (54.4 per cent) of all children with profound and multiple learning difficulties were persistently absent. Persistent absence rates were always higher than 1 in 4 for all children with SEND, regardless of their primary need type.<sup>53</sup>

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46 Ranked in the 0-10% (most deprived) areas by IDACI scores.

47 Ranked in the 90-100% (least deprived) areas by IDACI scores.

48 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021 to 2022" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2021-to-2022>]

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

Table 3: Persistent absence by SEN primary need

SEN primary need	Enrolments Persistently Absent	Percentage Persistently Absent
Profound and multiple learning difficulty	4,659	56.4%
Physical disability	13,059	41.8%
Social emotional and mental health	93,942	41.5%
Unclassified	17,632	37.1%
Severe learning difficulty	9,963	36.8%
Other difficulty/disability	16,062	35.2%
Moderate learning difficulty	70,505	33.4%
Multi-sensory impairment	1,147	33.0%
Autistic spectrum disorder	51,268	32.0%
Visual impairment	3,593	30.9%
No specialist assessment	11,640	29.7%
Specific learning difficulty	42,850	29.6%
Hearing impairment	5,270	26.8%
Speech language and communications needs	67,371	26.0%

## Severe absence

In total, 43,151 children had some form of identified SEND and were severely absent in the last academic year. Children with some form of SEND made up 35.8 per cent of all severely absent children in 2021/22.<sup>54</sup>

28,356 severely absent children had SEN Support and a further 14,806 persistently absent children had an EHCP.<sup>55</sup>

The rate of severe absence was 3.0 per cent for children with SEN Support, 5.2 per cent for children with an EHCP, and 1.0 per cent for children with no identified SEN.<sup>56</sup>

As with persistent absence, children with profound and multiple learning difficulties had the highest rates of severe absence, at 9.4 per cent.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

13.4 per cent of all severely absent children had an identified social, emotional, or mental health need. Children with social, emotional, or mental health needs again make up the biggest cohort of children with SEND who are severely absent: 37.5 per cent of all children who were severely absent with SEND. <sup>58</sup>

*Table 4: Severe absence by SEN primary need*

<b>SEN primary need</b>	<b>Enrolments Severely Absent</b>	<b>Percentage Severely Absent</b>
Profound and multiple learning difficulty	777	9.4%
Unclassified	4,074	8.6%
Social emotional and mental health	16,193	7.2%
Autistic spectrum disorder	6,218	3.9%
Multi-sensory impairment	124	3.6%
Physical disability	1,092	3.5%
Other difficulty/disability	1,545	3.4%
Severe learning difficulty	733	2.7%
Moderate learning difficulty	4,712	2.2%
Specific learning difficulty	3,195	2.2%
Visual impairment	238	2.0%
No specialist assessment	639	1.6%
Hearing impairment	258	1.3%
Speech language and communications needs	3,353	1.3%

## Gender

The rates of persistent and severe absence are similar across genders.

## Persistent absence

In 2021/22, 22.8 per cent of females and 22.2 per cent of males were severely absent. <sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

## Severe absence

In 2021/22, 1.7 per cent of females and 1.6 per cent of males were severely absent.<sup>60</sup>

## Ethnicity

Children who are Gypsy/Roma or Traveller of Irish heritage have some of the highest absence rates.

## Persistent absence

In 2021/22, 71.7 per cent of Traveller of Irish heritage and 64.9 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were persistently absent. For comparison, 23.3 per cent of White British pupils were absent over this period.<sup>61</sup>

## Severe absence

13.6 per cent of Traveller of Irish heritage and 8.3 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were severely absent last year. For comparison, the rate of severe absence for White British pupils was 1.8 per cent.<sup>62</sup>

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60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

## chapter two

# Absence: insights from our Inquiry

Alongside our analysis of the most recent figures, this report unpacks insights gained from focus groups with 10 local authorities (LAs), 10 Alternative Providers (APs), and 25 charities working with children who are absent or disengaged from school.

This section reflects the intelligence gathered from those conversations.

## Factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils

### Anxiety and mental health

Many participants in our focus groups argued that anxiety is the biggest driver behind recent increases in absence. We heard of a growing cohort of children and families who struggle to leave the house.

Local authorities said that primary school children were more likely to be showing anxiety around leaving their parents for extended periods of time. This cohort of children grew up under school shutdowns and consequently find leaving home more difficult.

For older children, anxiety issues tended to centre around general anxiety. All participants reflected on the fact that there was a growing group of children who had previously attended school regularly before the pandemic but had since become extremely anxious.

We also heard about families where both parents and children were anxious about leaving the home. In some cases, parental mental health was seen as a barrier to attendance. Sometimes children stay off school to support and alleviate mental health difficulties their parents face. In other cases, poor parental mental health can make children's mental health worse and lead to non-attendance.

More broadly, mental health difficulties have become more widespread and are contributing to school attendance difficulties. Children are struggling to access the mental health support that they need to engage in education. We heard of instances where children have to wait months, if not years, to access CAMHS support, despite being in a critical condition.

Young people's mental health has been steadily worsening over time. In 2022, 18 per cent (over 1 in 6) of children aged 7-16 years had a probable mental health disorder. This has increased from 12.1 per cent (1 in 9) in 2017.<sup>63</sup>

Children aged 11-16 with a probable mental health disorder are less likely to feel safe at school, and less likely to report enjoyment of learning or having a friend they can turn to for support. They are more likely to report being bullied online than their peers.<sup>64</sup>

The NHS survey also shows that 1 in 5 (19.9 per cent) of 7-16 year olds lived in a house that experienced a reduction in household income this year. This rose to more than 1 in 4 (28.6 per cent) among children with a probable mental health disorder.<sup>65</sup>

Data collected from NHS Surveys shows how the likelihood of school attendance issues varies based upon whether children have a mental health condition.<sup>66</sup> According to their survey, 1 in 18 (5.6 per cent) of children aged 7-16 years missed more than 15 days of school in Autumn 2021. School absence rates were higher for children with a probable mental health disorder: 12.6 per cent of children with probable mental health disorder missed 15 days or more of school, compared to 3.9 per cent of children who were unlikely to have a mental health disorder.

The most recent data on school attendance shows that children with a diagnosed social, emotional, or mental health condition are more likely than their peers to be both persistently and severely absent. 93,942 children with a SEMH diagnosis were persistently absent in Summer 2022. Of these, 16,193 were severely absent.

We heard frustrations about how severely absent children were often not prioritised for support. Participants told us about how the health system tends to work on thresholds for eligibility and children who do not qualify for support at the point of referral are often not referred on to other services that may help to improve their mental health and wellbeing. We heard of some areas who had tried to tackle this issue by providing a front-door and triaging services for children's mental health support.

## Special educational needs/disabilities

Many participants stressed the issue of undiagnosed and unmet special educational needs/disabilities (SEND) needs as a driver for absence.

We heard about children who were waiting for special educational needs diagnoses. Children awaiting a diagnosis do not have access to formal SEND Support and may struggle to attend school as a result. Local authorities told us that when children do not attend school, it becomes harder to get the evidence for a diagnosis

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63 NHS Digital, 2022. "Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022 – wave 3 follow up to 2017 survey" [Accessed via: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2022-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey/>]

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

We also heard of instances where children had some form of SEN support or had qualified for an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) but where parents were not convinced that the setting was providing sufficient to support the child's SEND.

Attendance data from Summer 2022 shows that children on SEN Support or with an EHCP are more likely to be absent from school than their peers. The rate of persistent absence was 32.0 per cent for children with SEN Support, 37.0 per cent for children with an EHCP, and 20.0 per cent for children with no identified SEN.

When there are tensions between the local authority, school, and parents about the sufficiency of SEN provision, often relationships can break down. We heard from parents who allowed their children to stay at home, rather than force them into school, when SEND needs were not perceived to be met. We heard from parents who felt blamed for not forcing attendance who believed that pressurising their child would make things worse.

## Disengagement with the curriculum

Disengagement with the curriculum was a common theme throughout our focus group discussions. Local authorities, charities and APs told us that children who are disengaged from school often have lower grades and feel pressured by the expectations at school. Some children get bullied because they are getting low grades in traditional subjects.

Charities told us that these children are not given the same sense of reward in other non-academic areas where they have talents. This has been made worse by the pandemic as there has been increased pressure to catch up on lost learning.

A recent report from the Edge Foundation showed how pervasive disengagement with school has become.<sup>67</sup> Their survey of over 10,000 children showed that nearly 1 in 2 young people aged 15-16 see secondary school as not an enjoyable or meaningful experience. Young people said that school was something they felt they need to "get through" because of its bearing on their futures.

We also heard of disengagement with school which was intergenerational. Parents and grandparents may have struggled at school but are thriving in their careers despite this. In some cases, we heard of families who expected their children to follow them into the family industry, where GCSE grades were not seen to be important. This can cause parents to doubt their child's need for a good education and hamper their willingness to engage with the school.

## Children in Alternative Provision

Children in alternative provision (AP) have much lower attendance rates than their peers in mainstream schools. 80.9 per cent of children in AP were persistently absent in 2021/22. 34.5 per cent of children in AP were severely absent.

AP participants told us that recently there has been an increase in the number of children with an EHCP or seeking a SEND diagnosis being placed in AP. We also heard about children in AP who were on the brink of, or already involved in, criminality.

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67 Edge Foundation, 2023. "Schools for all?" [Accessed via: [www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/research-reports/schools-for-all/](http://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/research-reports/schools-for-all/)]

While attendance rates are lower in AP, we heard from many participants about the importance of contextualising attendance and understanding the distance travelled on improving school attendance. Many children referred to AP have missed big chunks of their education, especially if they are referred from home education. Some children enter AP having not attended mainstream school for several weeks. APs told us that they focus on improving attendance and developing the building blocks of learning.

In the best APs, children improve their attendance rates over time. Research from the Edge Foundation found that children who leave mainstream school for AP or vocational education often describe having more meaningful and supportive relationships with teachers. In some cases, children in these settings are thriving due to the different educational support they are offered.<sup>68</sup>

## Low income and social disadvantage

Low household income was seen as a key driver behind absence, made worse by the cost-of-living crisis.

The attendance data consistently shows that children who are eligible for free school meals or who live in more disadvantaged areas are more likely to be persistently and severely absent. In 2021/22, children eligible for FSM had a persistent absence rate which was more than double and a severe absence rate which was the triple the rates for children who were not eligible for FSM.

Families are increasingly unable to afford necessities such as travel, food, and toiletries. When children live in temporary accommodation or are placed in a school far away from home, transport links underpin school attendance. Transport is a particular issue in rural areas. We also heard of instances of children not attending school where their commute would have involved passing through gang territory or breaking the terms of their bail.

Hygiene issues were seen as a hidden driver of school absence. Children feel too embarrassed to go into school when they do not have access to hot showers, deodorant, or sanitary products.

Food insecurity was raised as an acute issue for families of absent children. We heard of breakfast clubs unearthing children who were regularly missing meals.

## Disrupted home environments

We also heard of many other issues underlying absence which originate at home. Issues like insecure housing, domestic abuse, young people acting as carers, relationship breakdown, and family addictions can act as a catalyst for attendance problems. Often, families recognise they need support but do not tell statutory services out of fear of repercussions.

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68 Ibid.

We heard about the value of having non-statutory support services which could triage support to the whole family and tackle the root causes of absence issues. The availability of support for issues at home was seen to be patchy, at best. Participants told us that the support available for families was a postcode lottery. In many cases, teachers are not equipped to identify and understand the issues at home and, even if issues are flagged, schools may not have the capacity to support families to address these issues. Too often, attendance issues escalate without support being put in place.

Participants told us that key moments to intervene were often missed. It was normal for issues to escalate beyond the stage where early intervention is possible. This was a particular problem during school shutdowns when issues at home became more difficult to observe.

Since the pandemic, families have been more reluctant to invite attendance officers into their home, making it harder to spot home-based risks.

## A culture shift following the pandemic

There has also been a culture shift in parents' attitudes towards children being at home during the school day. Parents who home-schooled during the pandemic are more happy to let their children stay at home. LAs told us the pandemic taught families that sometimes education is important and sometimes it is not.

In some areas, families are asking for leaves of absence that they would not have considered before the pandemic.

We also heard how families are now more likely to withdraw their children from school due to other illnesses or viruses (for example Strep A) to avoid contamination.

The pandemic led to a breakdown in routines which have not yet been re-established. More children are staying up late and not coming into school the next day. Parents are struggling to enforce boundaries with their children, especially as they get older.

## Where are children when they are absent from school?

Participants agreed that when children are absent from school, they are mostly at home.

Parents may keep children at home because they need extra support with their mental health or caring responsibilities.

In the cases where parents do not want to force attendance, as mentioned above, they may even have to make arrangements to stay at home to look after their children.

When at home, the children are typically spending the majority of time in their bedroom. We heard gaming addictions have become rampant and more children are spending time online. Participants spoke of children being groomed and talking to strangers online, while at home.

Truancy has become less common, although it does still happen. Some LAs have seen patterns of friendship groups crowding in one person's house during school hours. We also heard reports of children who were involved in county lines or selling sex on the street during the school day.

## chapter three

# A plan to reduce severe absence

With every term that passes, more and more children are becoming severely absent. It is vital that we grasp this issue and urgently get this cohort of children the support they need to return to school.

While the government has put in place some welcome initiatives, the approach so far does not meet the scale of need. This section outlines a plan for reform which would help to reengage persistently and severely absent children.

## 1. Roll out attendance mentors – a proven interventions to boost attendance

A constant theme in our inquiry was that school staff do not have the capacity to do welfare and attendance checks. Staff in schools are burnt out and do not necessarily have the skill sets needed to engage in whole-family support.

Currently, schools must choose between funding additional teaching staff and attendance support. Often, it is schools in the most disadvantaged areas, with lower school budgets who are facing twin pressures around results and attendance.

One key theme from our inquiry was the disparities between what whole-family support is available from one locality to the next. Previously, all LAs had Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) who would conduct attendance home visits but since the money has been devolved to schools this resource has diminished. Schools now must pay for EWOs, where they exist, as a traded good.

In our inquiry we heard from a range of non-statutory whole-family support offers including charitable interventions, AP outreach work, community hubs, and youth intervention programmes funded by Violence Reduction Units. While the delivery models differed, all agreed that non-statutory support could be useful. Often parents do not want to engage with social workers out of fear that they may end up losing their child. Non-statutory agencies were typically better equipped to establish a trusting relationship with families and to develop a more thorough understanding of issues at home.

A lot of the whole-family support mechanisms that we looked at in this inquiry were funded through philanthropy or short-term grants. Participants explained that this was not a sustainable approach to funding whole-family support.

The new funding for tackling severe and persistent absence in Education Priority Investment Areas and in the attendance mentor pilot were broadly welcomed. However, there was strong consensus the funding available would not reach the scale of need. Part of the issue is that whole-family support is piecemeal and provided on a postcode lottery basis. Whole-family support needs to be universal and available nationally.

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**Recommendation:**

The Department for Education should roll out a national programme of 2,000 attendance mentors. These mentors would work with families to understand and remove the underlying barriers to school attendance.

A national programme would cost an estimated £80 million per year. We suggest that this could be funded through the existing Supporting Families programme.

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## 2. Ensure families can access the right support

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that attendance issues emerge when children cannot access the support they need in a timely fashion. This includes, but is not limited to, treatment for physical and mental health conditions, SEND support, educational interventions, and also support for issues at home such as housing, carers' support, and access to welfare.

The renewed focus on multi-agency working in the new guidance<sup>69</sup> was welcomed by the majority of local authorities and APs in our focus groups. However, many participants reported that the guidance is not being picked up by all the relevant agencies because it is not statutory.

Many areas reported a bottleneck in demand for mental health services. We heard of children who were not in school for two years because they were waiting for CAMHs support. LAs stated that health colleagues often do not see their role as focusing on social and emotional development as well as mental health. When children do not meet thresholds for mental health support, they are often not triaged to the wider support that they could benefit from. Participants agreed some current thresholds are creating barriers to accessing support which would otherwise improve school attendance.

Similarly, LAs told us that Early Help teams did not prioritise attendance issues and often closed cases even when a child is still severely absent. School absence was often not seen through the lens of neglect, so families who could have benefitted from additional early help support often missed out.

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69 Department for Education, 2022. "Working together to improve school attendance" [Accessed via: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1099677/Working\\_together\\_to\\_improve\\_school\\_attendance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1099677/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance.pdf)]

Some areas had strong local strategies built on partnership working, which were seen as key for providing the right support at the right time. These areas tended to be smaller and better resourced, but also had Director and council buy-in which enabled a joined-up approach.

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**Recommendation:**

The current Department for Education guidance on attendance should be made statutory.

This would help ensure all parents and children are able to access the appropriate support they need to both prevent and remediate absence.

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### 3. Put more support in place in schools

Participants in our focus groups fully agreed that whole-family support was necessary to tackle the root causes behind absence. Whole-family support looks beyond the individual pupil and instead looks at the whole family to understand the barriers to attendance. It is an approach rooted in relational work with both the pupil who is not attending and also the broader family. Participants told us that whole-family support had to be offered early and done in partnership with parents.

To engage with families and offer whole-family support, public services including school need to better understand how they want to engage given the fast pace of change to our communication environment. We found that most families do not respond to formal communication, such as letters. Nor do all families engage with school newsletters as touchpoints to accessing support.

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**Recommendation:**

As part of a broader Parental Participation Strategy, the government should release guidance on the best practice for engaging parents of children who are severely absent.

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Participants agreed that family support was not always easily accessible, calling for the government to do more to promote what good family support looks like and offer parenting courses for all ages.

Family Hubs play a key role in convening support services for families for all children aged 0-19 and for children with SEND aged up to 25. The Family Hub model, introduced by the CSJ in its landmark 2007 report, Breakthrough Britain,<sup>70</sup> has been established to provide a one-stop shop for family services. In 2021, the government committed £300 million to roll out 75 Family Hubs across the country.

Family Hubs can work alongside schools to improve access to services and timely interventions. An evaluation of the Family Hub rollout in 2021 found that collaboration between service professionals and the hub team was proving difficult. One solution is for hubs to locate their services on school sites.<sup>71</sup>

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**Recommendation:**

Family Hubs should be integrated with existing school services and collocated within schools.

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Embedding family support and outreach into school culture, before then working on the transition back into school, is fundamental to improving attendance. Schools are the one constant feature in young people's lives, meaning they are often better equipped to provide pastoral support on an ongoing basis.

However, accountability measures are typically more focused on academic results than wellbeing. Schools must make a judgement over what is more important. APs told us that a greater focus on welfare crowds out time spent on teaching the curriculum.

We heard from participants that there needs to be a greater focus on mental health and wellbeing at school level. Many participants cited the value of a whole-school approach to mental health which would, in turn, improve attendance for children whose primary barrier is mental health or social and emotional difficulties. The child and their voice should be at the centre of this, helping them to move to a place where they want to be in school to achieve their future ambitions.

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**Recommendation:**

The government should fast track their commitment to roll out designated mental health leads for all schools. School should be supported to develop a whole-school approach to mental health.

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70 Centre for Social Justice, 2007. "Breakthrough Britain: Family Breakdown" [Accessed via: [https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BB\\_family-breakdown.pdf](https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BB_family-breakdown.pdf)]

71 Department for Education, 2021. "Evaluation of family hubs" [Accessed via: [gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-family-hubs](http://gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-family-hubs)]

## 4. Improve school attendance data

Some participants in our focus groups stated that the focus on absolute rates of attendance was creating perverse incentives.

Focusing on attendance alone can lead to schools losing sight of whether the actions they are taking are in the interests of the individual or the school. Heads reported schools over-relying on sanctions to force bums on seats and inflate their attendance figures, rather than tackling the underlying barriers to attendance.

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**Recommendation:**

The Department for Education should develop new metrics to track school attendance. This data should examine attendance patterns at an individual and school level and should be incorporated into the attendance dashboard.

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## 5. Recognise the value of relational work

Often, schools do not know the reason for school absence. Sometimes children will be recorded as ill when families and young people do not want to disclose the true barriers to attendance.

Having a child-centred approach, where the child's voice is heard, can help improve attendance. Young people need an adult to confide in who they can trust. As quoted in our sessions, "The quick fix is the trusting relationship and then you can build out from that."

We heard about the benefits of this relationship lying with a third party who was separate from school and home – for example a youth worker or a sports coach. This can help bridge the gap between school and home.

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**Recommendation:**

The Government should follow through on its 2019 manifesto commitment to invest £500 million in new youth clubs and services, where there remains considerable underspend.

This should be scaled up through a new match fund scheme designed to inspire major businesses, charities and third sector organisations to support a national mission of returning our young people to school.

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## 6. Introduce an 'enrichment guarantee' in our schools

In our sessions, we heard about how enrichment activities, such as sport, can be used to develop soft skills outside the curriculum, including leadership, determination and understanding another person's point of view. A fully academic curriculum only develops one part of a child and discounts those whose skills and talents are more practical.

Where a child has disengaged with the curriculum, due to their skills lying outside of academia, they should be encouraged and praised in what they are good at. This will increase self-esteem and help them view school in a more positive way.

Participants recognised the value of breakfast clubs and free school meals, when they were wrapped into a broader strategy for engagement and attendance. Sports coaches also talked about how they had integrated food provision into existing clubs.

Breakfast clubs are particularly helpful as a means of engaging children whose families are struggling to provide food at home. Similarly, food banks on school sites can engage parents, but must be done tactfully where families can access the support without others knowing and potentially singling out those who use it.

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### **Recommendation:**

The Government should introduce a new 'enrichment guarantee' in schools. When activities take place in the morning, breakfast clubs should be incorporated as part of the enrichment guarantee.

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## 7. Ensure fines are working

When children do not attend school and all other routes have failed, LAs can take the route of formal support, fines, or attendance prosecution. Formal support includes parenting contracts and Education Supervision Orders (ESOs). Fines can take the form of fixed-penalty notices, prosecution for School Attendance Orders (SAOs), and attendance prosecutions under Section 444 of the Education Act 1996.

LAs told us that the new guidance has helped to reset the mindset with respect to fines. They stated there used to be a focus on prosecution first, but now local areas are looking for evidence of where schools have engaged with parents and offered support to the family, before enacting a fixed-penalty notice.

We were told part of the reason fines are used is because there is no other support available, so some areas overly rely on fines to improve attendance. Participants were concerned the new reforms, which would allow LAs to draw down funds from fixed-penalty notices to fund support, may create perverse incentives.

Many of our participants expressed the view that fines rarely work to get children back into school.

Participants told us that fixed-penalty notices were used more for holidays rather than for irregular attendance. Many areas only used fixed-penalty notices in the instances where absence is being driven by holidays. However, we heard reports of some families being indifferent to these fines and sometimes writing cheques to cover the fine to the LA ahead of taking the leave.

Participants shared the view that fixed-penalty notices and attendance prosecution often made irregular attendance worse. When schools rely on fines to get back into school children whose absence is motivated by other underlying causes, this can exacerbate issues at home and worsen relationships between schools, LAs, and families.

In some areas, ESOs and SAOs were not used because schools and LAs saw them as time consuming and ineffective.

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**Recommendation:**

The Department for Education should conduct a review into the effectiveness of fines and attendance prosecution, to examine the conditions under which these formal mechanisms can improve attendance.

In our inquiry, we heard how inconsistencies in the level of fines can lead to perverse incentives for parents facing pressure on attendance issues to pull their children out of school. If a child is not regularly attending, their parents can be fined up to a maximum of £2,500 and can face up to three months imprisonment. However, if a child is removed into home education and the family are subsequently found to be providing an unsuitable education and do not comply with an SAO, the maximum fine they face is £1,000.

APs told us that this inconsistency can make it difficult to push on attendance issues. They stated that if they push too hard, parents feel forced to remove their children from the school roll.

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**Recommendation:**

The fines for SAOs and attendance prosecution should be made the same value to avoid creating perverse incentives which push children out of the education system.





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