

SCHOOL ABSENCE TRACKER

A termly analysis of official data relating to absence from schools.

140,706

The number of severely absent pupils has soared by 133.6 per cent since the pandemic. In Spring 2023, 140,706 pupils were absent more than they were present (severely absent), 1.96 per cent of the school population. This compares with 60,244 who were severely absent in Autumn 2019 (pre-pandemic), equating to an additional 80,462 pupils.

1,476,165

Persistent absence has decreased slightly since Autumn 2022, but increased by 60.0 per cent since before the pandemic. 1,476,165 pupils were persistently absent in Spring 2023, which equates to 20.58 per cent of all pupils. This compares to 922,566 pupils before the pandemic.

7.0%

The overall absence rate in Spring 2023 was 7.0 per cent. This is an increase of 2.1 percentage points since before the pandemic.

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Headline statistics

The number of severely absent pupils has soared by 133.6 per cent since the pandemic. In Spring 2023, 140,706 pupils were absent more often than they were present (severely absent), 1.96 per cent of the school population. This is a return to the record levels seen in Summer 2022. This compares with 60,244 who were severely absent in Autumn 2019, the last full term before the pandemic, equating to an additional 80,462 pupils.¹

It is vulnerable children who are affected most. In Autumn 2022, the latest term for which data is available, children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) had a severe absence rate which was triple the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. Children in receipt of special educational needs (SEN) support are also more likely to be severely absent than their peers.²

Persistent absence is still at a concerning high level compared to pre-pandemic. 1,476,165 pupils were persistently absent in Spring 2023, which equates to 20.6 per cent of all pupils. This is a decrease on the previous term, Autumn 2022, but is an increase of 60.0 per cent since before the pandemic.³

The overall absence rate in Spring 2023 was 7.0 per cent. This is an increase of 2.1 percentage points since before the pandemic.⁴

1 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

2 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2022" [Accessed via: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2022]

3 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

4 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) 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

More than two years since the CSJ first identified the post-COVID spike in school absence, Government is yet to grasp the nettle. While ministers have begun to get a grip of persistent absence, which appears to have turned a corner, the latest data shows that severe absence has returned to the record highs seen in Summer 2022, with 140,700 ‘ghost children’ missing at least 50 per cent of their school time.

Every day of school matters and the failure to return these children to the classroom is storing up untold problems for the future.

Children who routinely miss school typically do worse in their GCSEs and are overrepresented among those not in education, employment or training as young adults. CSJ analysis also shows that children with a history of persistent absence are around three times more likely than their peers to go on to commit a crime within two years of leaving school.

Disadvantaged children continue to be overrepresented among those missing school, with children in receipt of free school meals three times more likely to be severely absent than their classmates. Poorer pupils were already 18 months behind their more affluent peers pre-pandemic – an attainment gap compounded by the post-pandemic attendance crisis. New data shows that the attainment gap is now wider than at any point since 2011.

While, therefore, progress on persistent absence is very welcome, ministers must not lose sight of the social and economic repercussions of allowing current levels of severe absence to entrench. Abandoning these children will send a shockwave through society. The attendance mentor pilot is still reaching just 1 per cent of severely absent pupils at most, and attendance guidance remains advisory only. Accelerating the national roll out of attendance mentors and putting attendance guidance on a statutory footing would ensure families have the support they need.

In his conference speech, the Prime Minister described education as ‘the closest thing we have to a silver bullet’. That may be so, but only for children in the classroom.



Rt. Hon. Sir Iain Duncan Smith MP

Chairman of the Centre for Social Justice
and MP for Chingford and Woodford Green.

Executive summary

Since 2021, the Centre for Social Justice has been investigating the issue of school absence.

Our report, '[Kids Can't Catch Up if They Don't Show Up](#)', revealed that nearly 100,000 children were severely absent in Autumn 2020. Severely absent children are absent for 50 per cent or more of possible school sessions. They are absent more often than they are present.

This report was followed by '[Lost but Not Forgotten](#)', which examined the characteristics of pupils who were most likely to be absent from school. In March 2023 we published '[Lost and Not Found](#)', setting out the conclusions of our inquiry into the drivers behind school absence, which include anxiety and poor mental health, unmet special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), poverty/disadvantage, and changing parental attitudes towards education following the pandemic.

In May 2023, we launched the '[School Absence Tracker](#)', monitoring government figures on absence levels for Autumn 2022 and tracking steps taken by government to tackle school absence.

This updated 'School Absence Tracker' analyses absence figures for Spring 2023, revealing that severe absence has returned to record high levels.

Our analysis shows that, in Spring 2023, 140,706 children were severely absent, an increase of 133.6 per cent since before the pandemic (Autumn 2019).

Our analysis also shows record levels of persistent absence, with 1,476,165 children persistently absent in Spring 2023. This is a decrease on the previous record figure of 1,927,589 in Spring 2022, but an increase of 60.0 per cent on pre-pandemic levels .

The tracker then analyses the reasons behind absence and the characteristics of pupils who are disproportionately likely to be absent, before setting out the CSJ's seven-point plan to turn the tide on absence. We track government progress made on attendance against this plan.

The CSJ continues to call for urgent, nationwide action to tackle the scourge of school absence and to put an end to the postcode lottery of attendance support. We must act urgently to get the so called 'ghost children' back to school.

The CSJ will continue to track and analyse termly data on absence, as well as tracking any progress made by the government on implementing recommendations to turn the tide of school absence.

Absence data review

Since school shutdowns, attendance issues have become endemic across our school system. Persistent and severe absence have become entrenched across England and 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 Spring 2023.

Attendance issues had not been resolved as schools returned this academic year (2023/24). Indicative fortnightly data released from the Department for Education's attendance survey shows that in the opening weeks of the school year, absence rates remained much higher than before the pandemic. The most recent data shows that, as of the week commencing 25th September 2023, the overall absence rate for the year-to-date was 6.0 per cent.⁵ The authorised absence rate was 3.9 per cent and the unauthorised absence rate was 2.1 per cent.⁶

⁵ Department for Education, 2023. "Week 39 2023 Pupil attendance in schools"
[Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-attendance-in-schools]

⁶ Ibid.

Persistent absence

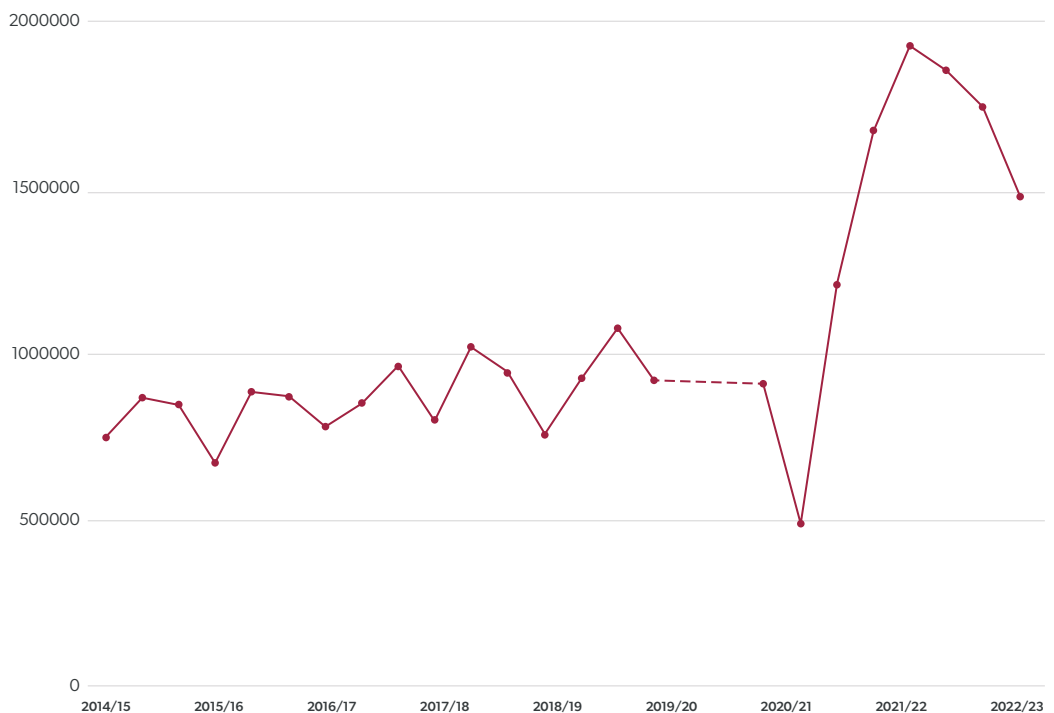
Children who are persistently absent miss 10 per cent or more of possible sessions in school. This is equivalent to missing at least one afternoon every week.

In Spring 2023, 1,476,165 children were persistently absent. This is equivalent to 20.58 per cent of all children (a fifth of children in state-funded mainstream or special schools).⁷

The number of persistently absent children has decreased by 15.3 per cent since the previous term, Autumn 2022, a decrease of 266,557 children.⁸

However, the number of persistently absent children remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels. In Autumn 2019, the last full term before schools closed for the pandemic, 922,566 pupils were persistently absent (13.1 per cent of all children in state-funded mainstream and special schools).⁹ Persistent absence therefore has grown by 60.0 per cent relative to pre-pandemic.¹⁰

Figure 1: persistent absence over time



7 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

8 Ibid.

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

10 Ibid.

Severe absence

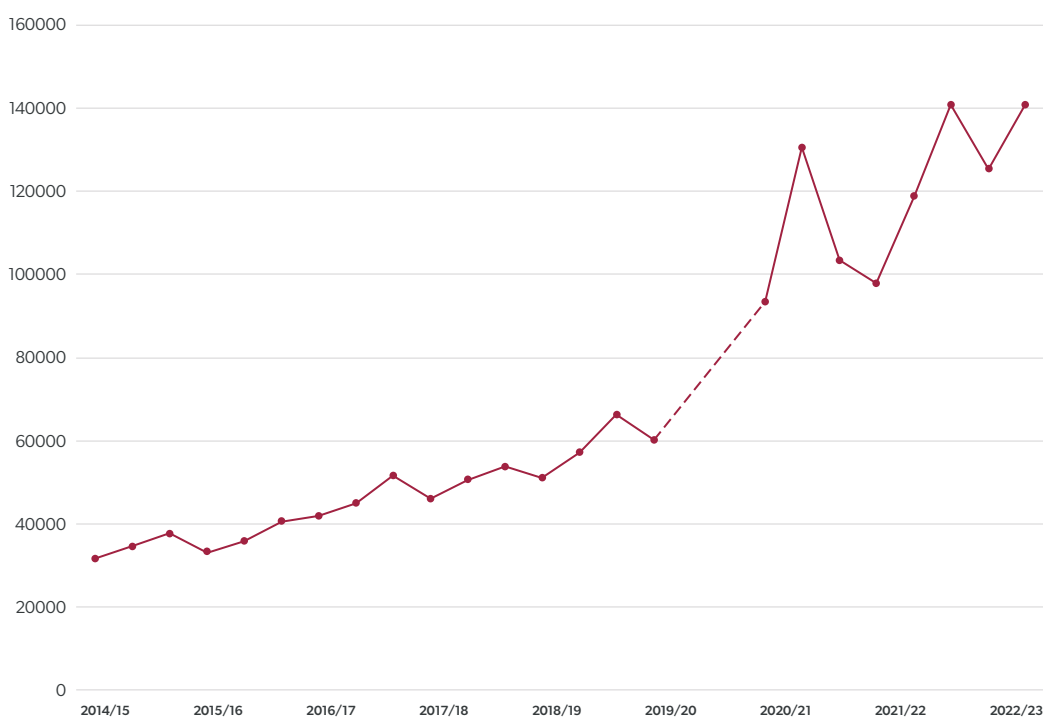
Children who are severely absent miss 50 per cent or more of possible sessions. This is equivalent to missing every morning of school or more. They are a subgroup of persistently absent children and are absent more often than they are present.

In Spring 2023, 140,706 children were severely absent. This equates to 1.96 per cent of children in state-funded mainstream or special schools.¹¹

The number of severely absent children remains higher than pre-pandemic levels. In Autumn 2019, 60,244 pupils were severely absent.¹² Compared to pre-pandemic, the number of children who were severely absent in Spring 2023 has increased by 133.6 per cent.¹³

The number of severely absent children has increased by 15,484 since Autumn term 2022, an increase of 12.4 per cent.¹⁴

Figure 2: severe absence over time



11 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

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

13 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

14 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2022" [Accessed via: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2022]

Reasons for absence

In total, in Spring 2023, 7.0 per cent of sessions were marked as absent.¹⁵ 4.7 per cent of sessions were marked as authorised absences and 2.3 per cent were marked as unauthorised absences.¹⁶

Illness absences make up the majority of overall absences and have done consistently throughout the period for which data has been collected. Illness rates for Spring 2023 are 0.8 percentage points higher than Autumn 2019 – the last full-term before school closures – and 1.4 percentage points lower than Spring 2022.¹⁷

Unauthorised other absence rates have grown considerably since the pandemic. These rates indicate where children are off school without permission and for an unknown reason. In Spring 2023, 1.7 per cent of all sessions were marked unauthorised other; in Autumn 2019 (pre-pandemic) it stood at 0.8.¹⁸ In total, unauthorised other absences have increased by 0.9 percentage points since pre-pandemic. Unauthorised other absence has also increased by 0.3 percentage points since Spring 2022 and 0.3 percentage points since Autumn 2022.¹⁹

In Spring 2023, 0.31 per cent of sessions were marked absent for unauthorised holidays. This compares to 0.36 per cent pre-pandemic and 0.24 per cent in Spring 2022.²⁰

The rate of authorised holidays in Spring 2023 was 0.04 per cent. This compares to 0.06 per cent pre-pandemic and 0.03 per cent in Spring 2022.²¹

15 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23"
[Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

16 Ibid.

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

18 Ibid.

19 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2022"
[Accessed via: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2022]

20 Department for Education, 2023 Pupil absence in schools in England: Academic year 2021/22
[Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2021-22]

21 Ibid.

Breakdown of absence data

Absence by school type

In Spring 2023, 24.1 per cent of all children in state-funded secondary school were persistently absent.²² 772,883 children in total were persistently absent in state-funded secondary schools.²³

17.1 per cent of children in state-funded primary schools were persistently absent in Spring 2023, equating to 656,650 children.²⁴

The rate of persistent absence is higher in special schools. In Spring 2023, 46,632 children educated in special schools were persistently absent.²⁵ This represents 36.3 per cent of all children educated in special schools.²⁶

The rate is much higher in Alternative Provision (AP) settings. Across Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023, 81.2 per cent of children educated in AP (28,221 in total) were persistently absent.²⁷ AP figures only reflect pupil enrolments in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), which are a type of state-maintained AP setting. It is worth noting that, due to the transience of the AP population, the absence figures are counted separately and not included in the total absence figures (which only includes state-funded primary, secondary and special schools). This is to prevent double counting, where a child may have been counted as absent in their mainstream setting, before then moving into AP and being counted as absent there.

In Spring 2023, 3.3 per cent of all secondary school children were severely absent, accounting for 75.6 per cent of all severely absent children.²⁸ This is equivalent to 1 in every 30 secondary school children. This would equate to having over 100 secondary schools where all the children are absent for at least half of all possible sessions.

Primary school pupils account for 18.5 per cent of all severely absent children. 0.7 per cent of children in primary schools were severely absent in Spring 2023.²⁹

22 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

As with persistent absence, the rate of severe absence is higher in special schools. In Spring 2023, 8,252 children educated in special schools were severely absent. This represents 6.4 per cent of all children educated in special schools.³⁰

The rate is also much higher in AP settings. Across Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023, 37.5 per cent of children in Pupil Referral Units (13,012 in total) were severely absent. As above, these figures are not counted as part of the total absence figures, to avoid double counting.

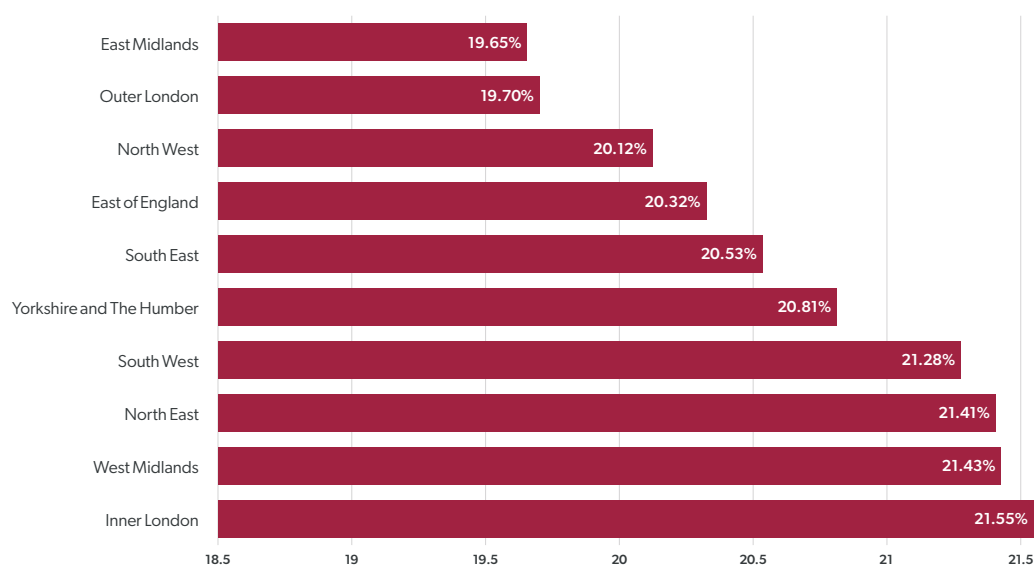
Absence by geography

Patterns of absence vary across England.

Inner London had the highest rate of persistent absence in Spring 2023 (21.55 per cent) followed by the West Midlands (21.43 per cent).³¹

East Midlands had the lowest rate of persistent absence in Spring 2023 (19.65 per cent), followed by Outer London (19.70 per cent).³²

Figure 3: Regions percentage persistent absence



The local authority with the highest rate of persistent absence in Spring 2023 is Knowsley (26.10 per cent). The local authority with the lowest rate of persistent absence is Trafford at (15.29 per cent).³³

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

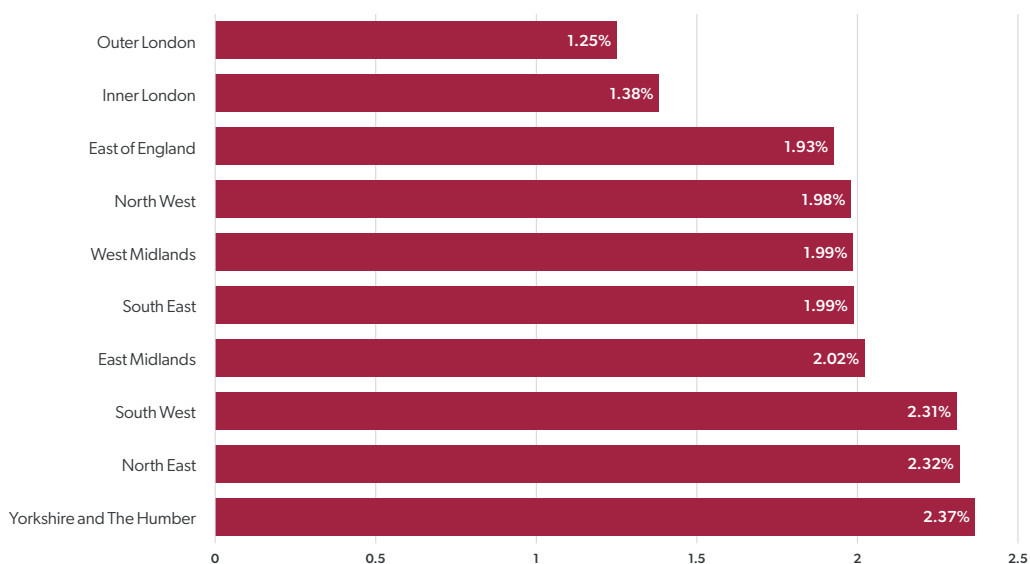
Table 1: Local Authorities with highest rates of persistent absence

Regional Identifier	Local Authority	Enrolments Persistant Absence	Percentage Persistent Absence
North West	Knowsley	4657	26.10
North West	Blackpool	4393	24.92
Yorkshire and The Humber	Bradford	20491	24.30
South East	East Sussex	14695	24.23
Inner London	Camden	4030	24.02
East of England	Luton	8623	23.96
North East	Middlesbrough	5086	23.87
South West	Cornwall	15646	23.85
South West	Isles of Scilly	55	23.71
North East	Newcastle upon Tyne	8231	23.49

Yorkshire and The Humber had the highest rate of severe absence in Spring 2023 (2.37 per cent) followed by the North East (2.32 per cent).³⁴

Outer London had the lowest rate of severe absence in Spring 2023 (1.25 per cent), followed by Inner London (1.38 per cent).³⁵

Figure 4: Regions percentage severe absence



34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

The local authority with the highest rate of severe absence in Spring 2023 is Middlesbrough (3.20 per cent). The local authority with the lowest rate of severe absence is City of London at (0.0 per cent), followed by Brent (0.83 per cent).³⁶

Table 2: Local Authorities with highest rates of severe absence

Regional Identifier	Local Authority	Enrolments Severe Absence	Percentage Severe Absence
North East	Middlesbrough	682	3.20
Yorkshire and The Humber	Bradford	2685	3.18
North East	Newcastle upon Tyne	1094	3.12
South East	East Sussex	1849	3.05
South West	Torbay	517	3.04
South East	Portsmouth	737	2.92
Yorkshire and The Humber	Sheffield	2009	2.83
South West	Bristol, City of	1489	2.78
South West	Somerset	1750	2.74
South West	Devon	2326	2.66

³⁶ Ibid.

Absence by pupil characteristics

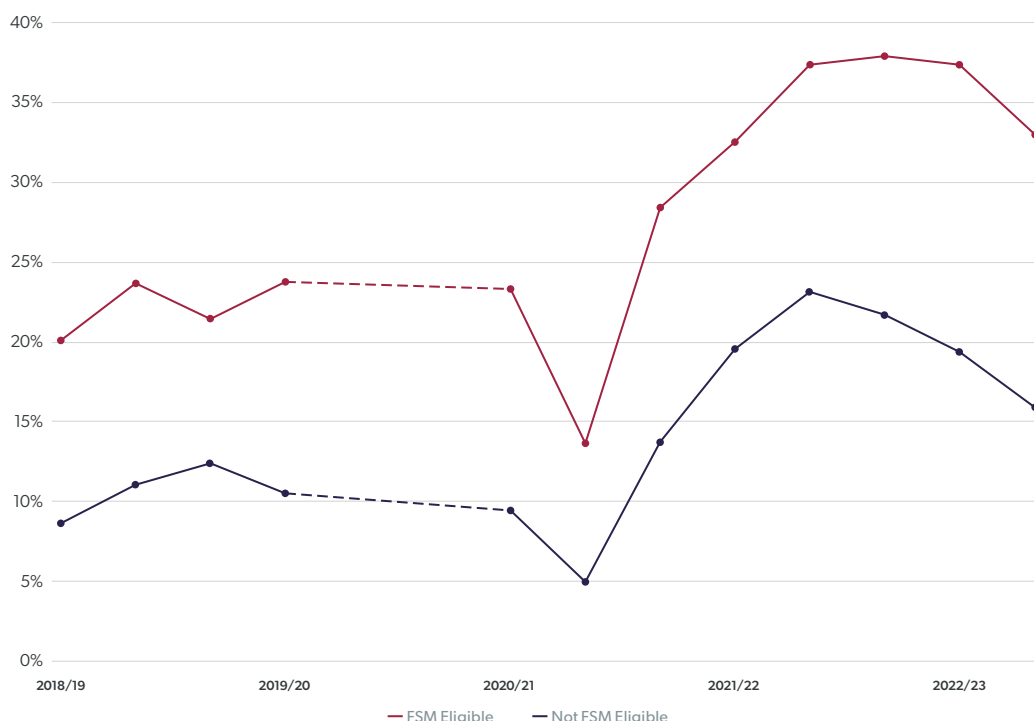
The most recent data for persistent absence breakdown by pupil characteristics is Spring 2023. The most recent data for severe absence breakdown by pupil characteristics is Autumn 2022. Therefore, the next section reflects these time periods unless otherwise stated.

Absence by free school meal eligibility

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

In Spring 2023, children eligible for FSM had a persistent absence rate which was more than twice the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. A total of 33.0 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were persistently absent, compared to 15.9 per cent of children not eligible.

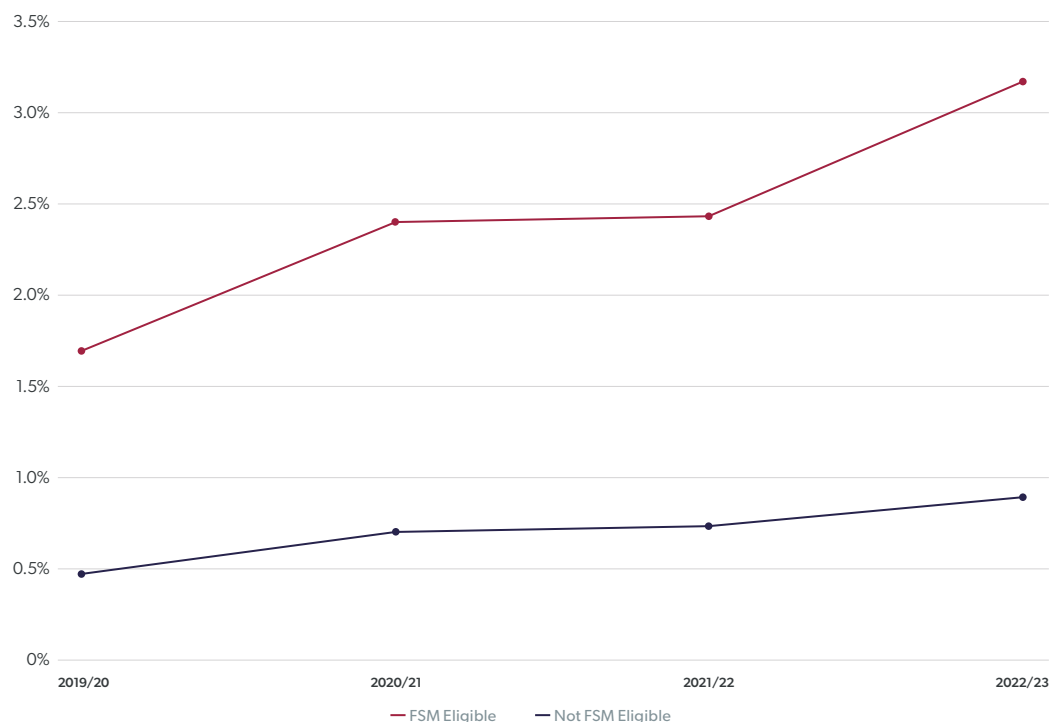
Figure 3: Termly persistent absence rates by free school meal eligibility (Spring 2023)



37 Ibid.

In the Autumn 2022, children eligible for FSM had a severe absence rate which was more than triple the rate of children who were not eligible for FSM. 3.2 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were severely absent, compared to 0.9 per cent of children not eligible.³⁸

Figure 4: Autumn term severe absence rates by free school meal eligibility (Autumn 2022)



Absence by special educational needs/disabilities

Children with special educational needs (SEN) support and Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCP) are more likely than their peers to be both persistently and severely absent.

In Spring 2023, 384,202 children had some form of identified SEN and were persistently absent.³⁹ Children with some form of SEN made up 26.0 per cent of all persistently absent children in the same term.

281,186 persistently absent children had SEN Support and a further 103,016 persistently absent children had a SEN provision statement or an EHCP.⁴⁰

The rate of persistent absence was 28.8 per cent for children with SEN Support, 33.2 per cent for children with a SEN provision statement or an EHCP, and 18.2 per cent for children with no identified SEN.⁴¹

38 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2022" [accessed via: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2022]

39 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

40 Ibid.

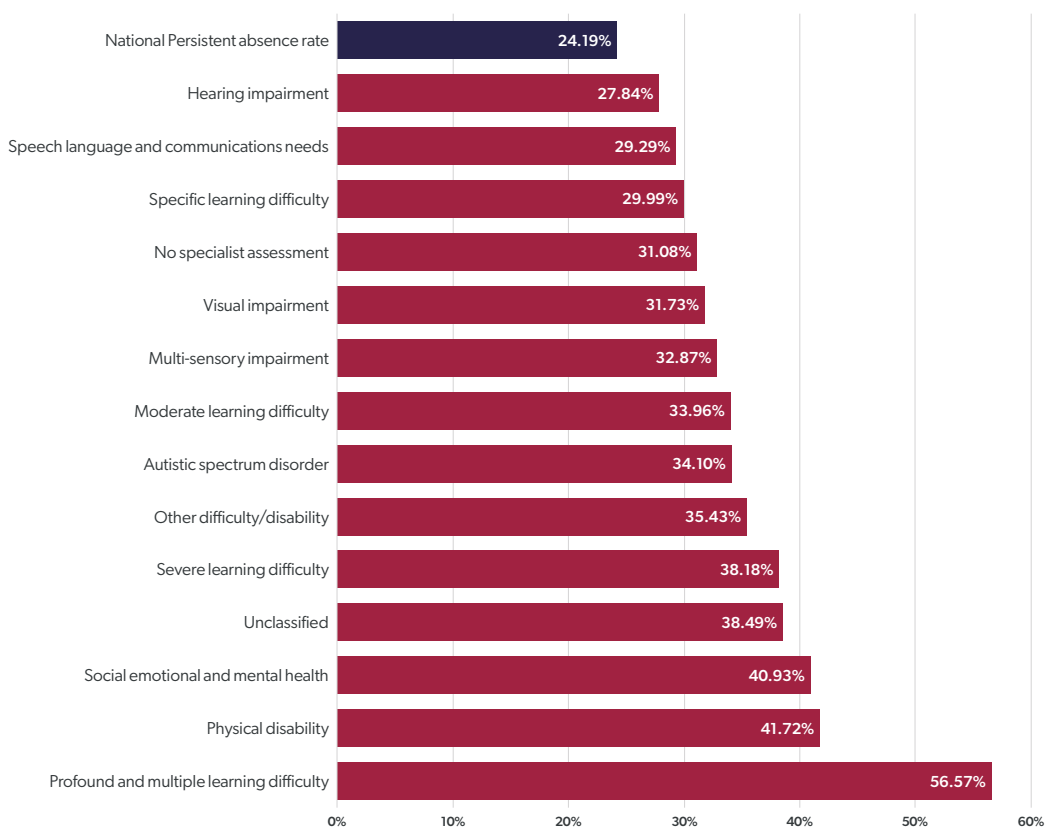
41 Ibid.

The Autumn 2022 data provides the latest breakdowns for different SEN primary need types. Overall, in Autumn 2022, children with profound and multiple learning difficulties, physical disabilities, and social, emotional and mental health SEN primary needs had the highest rates of absence.⁴²

Children with social, emotional, and mental health needs made up 5.6 per cent of all persistently absent children in Autumn 2022 (and 22.5 per cent of all children who were persistently absent with identified SEN).⁴³

In Autumn 2022, more than half (56.6 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 SEN, regardless of their primary need type.⁴⁴

Figure 5: Persistent absence by SEN primary need



In total, 47,576 children had some form of identified SEN and were severely absent in Autumn 2022.⁴⁵ Children with some form of SEN made up 38.0 per cent of all severely absent children in Autumn 2022.

42 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2022" [accessed via: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2022]

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

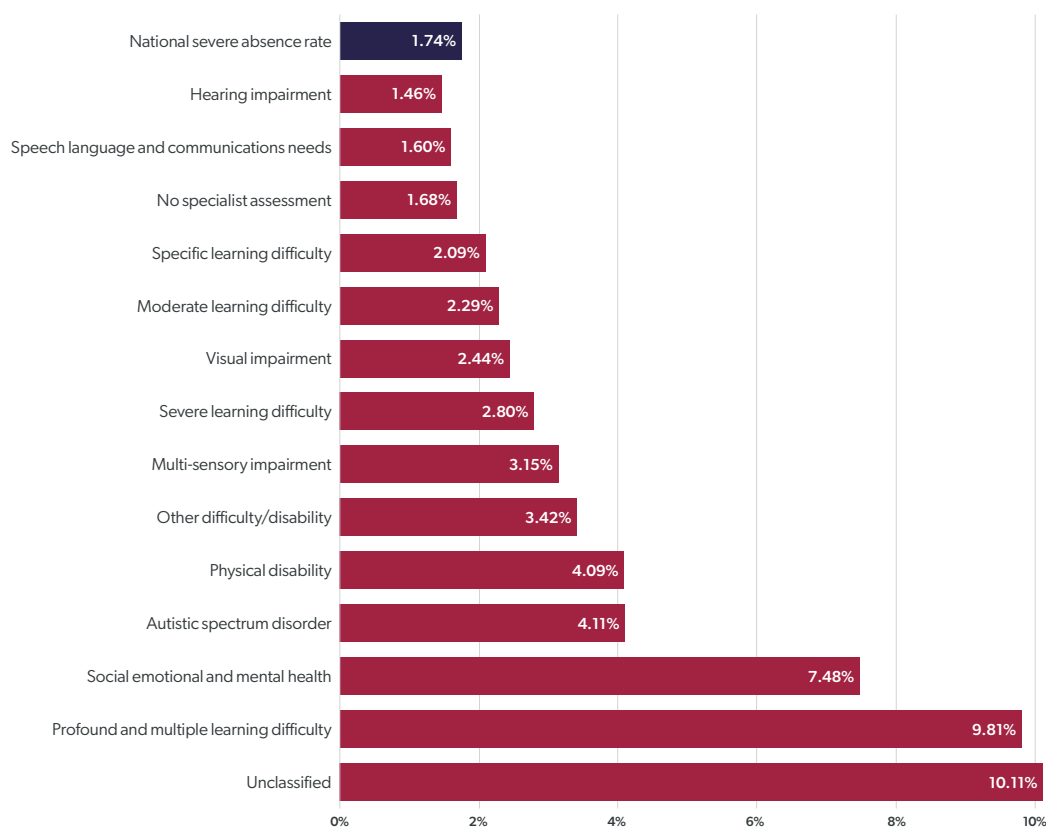
30,960 severely absent children had SEN Support and a further 16,616 severely absent children had a SEN statement or EHCP.⁴⁶

The rate of severe absence was 3.2 per cent for children with SEN Support, 5.4 per cent for children with a SEN statement or EHCP, and 0.98 per cent for children with no identified SEN.⁴⁷

Aside from pupils with an unclassified primary need, children with profound and multiple learning difficulties had the highest rates of severe absence, at 9.8 per cent.⁴⁸

14.3 per cent of all severely absent children had an identified social, emotional, or mental health need.⁴⁹ Children with social, emotional, or mental health needs again make up the biggest cohort of children with SEN who are severely absent: 37.7 per cent of all children who were severely absent with SEN.⁵⁰

Figure 6: Severe absence by SEN primary need



46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

Absence by gender

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

In Spring 2023, 20.4 per cent of females and 19.9 per cent of males were persistently absent.⁵¹

In Autumn 2022, 1.8 per cent of females and 1.7 per cent of males were severely absent.⁵²

Absence by ethnicity

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

In Spring 2023, 58.4 per cent of Traveller of Irish heritage and 51.3 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were persistently absent.⁵³ For comparison, 20.3 per cent of White British pupils were absent over this period.⁵⁴

13.3 per cent of Traveller of Irish heritage and 7.9 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were severely absent last year.⁵⁵ For comparison, the rate of severe absence for White British pupils was 1.9 per cent.⁵⁶

Absence by pupil residency

For this variable, the latest data available is from the 2021/22 academic year.

30.0 per cent of children living in the most disadvantaged areas were persistently absent over the course of 2021/22.⁵⁷

For comparison, 14.3 per cent of children living in the most affluent areas were persistently absent over the same period.⁵⁸

51 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

52 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2022" [Accessed via: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term-2022]

53 Department for Education, 2023. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2022/23" [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england]

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Department for Education, 2023 Pupil absence in schools in England: Academic year 2021/22 [Accessed via: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2021-22]

58 Ibid.

School absence action tracker

The number of severely absent children remains at crisis levels two and a half years after schools reopened their doors following COVID closures. The Government must accelerate its response to get this cohort of children back into the classroom.

The Government has taken several welcome steps:

- New attendance guidance has been issued, setting out a multi-agency approach to attendance.
- Additional regular data published by the Government on absence has allowed us to build a more detailed understanding of absence than ever before.
- The Attendance Alliance was established in December 2021 and has so far met 14 times, most recently in September 2023, to discuss other actions that can be taken to improve attendance.
- The introduction of local pilots for Attendance Mentors, offering some support to councils with higher rates of absence. This was initially introduced in Middlesbrough. In May 2023, the Government confirmed the pilot will be rolled-out to four other areas, having announced this earlier in the pilot. Attendance mentors deliver targeted one-to-one support, working closely with the pupil and their family to address any underlying causes of their absence.
- The Government is also in the process of further rolling out attendance hubs, after a successful pilot in Stockton-on-Tees. These attendance hubs bring together schools to share best practice on attendance and offer additional support to pupils. In May the government named 9 more schools and academy trusts and a further 4 more in September that will become new attendance hubs leads, supporting up to 600 primary, secondary and alternative provision schools in England.

However, the approach so far is nowhere near ambitious enough to meet the scale of the challenge.

The current pilots for attendance mentors and attendance hubs are only reaching an extremely limited number of children – with the attendance mentors pilot set to reach one per cent of the total number of severely absent pupils at most over the course of the pilot, with no clear timeline for a national rollout.

This does not represent a serious response to this unfolding crisis in our education system. A child who started year 7 in lockdown will be leaving school by the time the limited pilot is complete.

Meanwhile, the new attendance guidance is non-statutory, leading to inconsistencies in how it is being applied and a postcode lottery of absence support.

Additionally, as detailed in our March 2023 report 'Lost and Not Found', CSJ research uncovered that persistent and severe absence are often symptoms of a combination of complex barriers. The root causes behind attendance issues need to be addressed to overturn the tide of absence.

In our last school absence tracker, published May 2023, the CSJ outlined a seven-point plan for reform which would help to reengage absent children. This plan has been designed to tackle the underlying drivers of absence cost-effectively, focusing on support for the whole family.

The CSJ will continue to track progress made by the Government on implementing recommendations to turn the tide of school absence.

Our plan for reform

The number of severely absent children remains at crisis levels term after term. The Government must accelerate its response urgently to get this cohort of children back into the classroom.

The CSJ has a seven-point plan to turn the tide on school absence. The plan was developed taking evidence from multiple alternative provisions, local authorities and charities that work with children disengaged with school as part of our attendance inquiry. Throughout the inquiry, we heard about the need to tackle the underlying drivers behind absence, including the need to engage parents in the process, the case for extra-curricular enrichment activities, and the role of youth work.

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.

Progress update: limited action taken, limited further action planned.

The government is currently conducting a £2.3m pilot for attendance mentors. This was initially introduced in one local authority, Middlesbrough, in 2022. The pilot was expanded to four additional areas in September 2023. It is estimated that the support will reach 1,665 persistently and severely absent children over the course of the pilot. While an encouraging step, this means the pilot will reach 1 per cent of severely absent children at most, leaving tens of thousands of children still without the important and individualised support that an attendance mentor can offer.

The Department for Education is also considering how it can support individual children with their attendance through other existing programmes. For example, the Department is investing over £50 million in serious violence hotspots to fund specialist support in both mainstream and Alternative Provision (AP) schools through its AP Specialist Taskforces (APST) and SAFE programmes. The aim is to improve children's attendance as well as behaviour, wellbeing and attainment in school with over 4,500 children reached so far.

2. Ensure families can access the right support.

Recommendation

The current Department for Education guidance on attendance should be made statutory. This would provide clarity and consistency in absence support, ensuring all parents and children are able to access the appropriate support they need to both prevent and remediate absence.

Progress update: limited action taken, further action planned.

New guidance has been issued, setting out a thorough multi-agency approach to attendance. However, this guidance remains non-statutory, leading to inconsistencies in how it is applied. Legislation would be required to make this statutory. The Department for Education have stated they are committed to making this guidance statutory at the next available legislative opportunity. It is unclear if and when this legislative opportunity will arise.

The Department currently have a team of advisers working with every local authority in the country and a number of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) to support them to implement the guidance ahead of it becoming statutory.

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.

Progress update: limited action taken, no further action planned.

New guidance for schools on how to communicate with families about school attendance was published in September 2023. This contains guidance for schools on different ways to engage with parents regarding attendance.

The updated guidance on absence also advises schools to work with families to understand the barriers to attendance, but this guidance is non-statutory, meaning it is inconsistently followed.

Recommendation

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

Progress update: some action taken, further action planned.

The government is currently investing over £300m across 75 local authorities (LAs) to develop and open family hubs and start for life services. The family hubs policy framework sets out that LAs should review co-location of services.

The guidance on Family Hubs emphasises the importance of working with schools, including via outreach work, but does not explicitly advise for the Hubs to be collocated in schools.

The government is in the process of developing a guidance module for schools and LAs on how to best integrate schools into family hub networks. This is being developed by the national centre for family hubs (the Anna Freud Centre).

Recommendation

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

Progress update: some action taken, further action planned.

The Department for Education has made available a £1,200 grant for eligible schools to use to train a senior mental-health lead. This training is part of the government's commitment to offer this training to all eligible schools by 2025. This training is not compulsory.

14,000 schools and colleges have now claimed a grant to train a senior mental health lead, helping them to develop their approach to mental health and wellbeing. The government is encouraging schools and colleges to claim a grant now and book training this academic year. The eligibility has been recently expanded to include settings that have previously claimed a grant, but the trained senior mental health lead has now left, to allow them to train a replacement.

Following the 2017/18 green paper and consultation on young people's mental health, the government announced plans to establish Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) in schools. This is being rolled out jointly with the NHS, with each MHST expected to cover around 7,000-8,000 pupils or between 10 to 20 educational settings.

MHSTs support a setting to develop their approach to mental health and wellbeing, and to liaise with specialist services in the community where needed. As of April 2023, MHSTs covered 35 per cent of pupils in schools and learners in further education (FE) in England. The coverage of MHSTs is being extended to an estimated 44 per cent of pupils and FE learners by the end of this financial year and at least 50 per cent by the end of March 2025.

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.

Progress update: some action taken, no further action planned.

The Department for Education has started to publish fortnightly data on school absence, to help track and analyse patterns in school absence. Since January 2022, 86 per cent of schools have signed up to participate in a new voluntary automated daily feed. Indicative full-year absence data for the 2022/23 academic year was published in August.

In July, the Department for Education updated the data in the reports that schools, trusts and LAs see. These reports now include: the percentage of pupils who are persistently and severely absent, trend arrows showing whether attendance is improving or declining, weekly view of pupil attendance, an ability to track pupil attendance codes to the start of the year, and data visualisations.

In July, the public dashboard was also updated to include absence and persistent absence by pupil characteristics. However, the Department has not yet published the severe absence rates as part of this public release.

5. Recognise the value of relational work.

Recommendation

The Government should build on its 2019 manifesto commitment to invest £500 million in new youth clubs and services, with 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.

Progress update: some action taken, more action needed.

In 2022, DCMS announced a National Youth Guarantee: that by 2025, every young person in England will have access to regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home, and volunteering opportunities, supported by a three-year investment of over £500 million. Some progress has been made in delivering this, including progress made on the Youth Investment Fund – with over £160m so far granted to 87 organisations to build, renovate and expand youth provision.

The government is yet to commit to a match fund scheme partnering with businesses and charities to expand local youth provision.

The government has also opened the second phase of the Million Hours Fund, which exists to create more than a million hours of youth activities in antisocial behaviour hotspots. Government has also published clearer statutory guidance for LAs' youth provision.

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.

Progress update: plans for action, limited action taken.

In March 2023, the Government announced up to £57 million in funding to help keep primary school sport facilities open outside school hours. This is expected to benefit up to 1,350 schools.

In July 2023, the Government updated its 'school sport activity and action plan', which is designed to support schools to utilise PE and sports premium funding to deliver 2 hours of PE per week and improve the quality of school sport provision. The Government also announced new non-statutory PE guidance would be published by the end of 2023.

In August 2023 the Government launched its new sport and physical activity strategy, with a focus on increasing participation rates for people of all ages and backgrounds. The strategy acknowledges other areas in which sport and physical activity can play a positive role, for example in academic disengagement. However, there was an absence of clear policy commitments in the strategy. We now need a clear, strategic national plan delivering on those ambitions—especially for disadvantaged children and young people who are disengaged with their education, such as that outlined in the recent CSJ report '[Game Changer](#)'.

7. *Ensure fines are working.*

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.

Progress update: limited action taken.

The government ran a consultation in early 2022 on the consistency of attendance support, which included considering a new regulatory framework for fixed penalty notices for attendance. In August 2023, the government published its response to the consultation, which restated government's commitment to improving the consistency of local approaches to enforcement. Views collected in the consultation will be used to inform developments on this.

In the now dropped Schools Bill, there were plans to introduce national thresholds for fixed penalty notices. The government has said it will try and introduce aspects of the Schools Bill through other legislative frameworks, but it remains unknown if this will include action on fixed penalty notices.

Recommendation

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

Progress update: no action taken.

The Department for Education will be considering these measures in addition to the work on the above detailed regulatory framework to improve the consistency of enforcement on attendance.



The Centre for Social Justice
Kings Buildings
16 Smith Square
Westminster, SW1P 3HQ

www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk
[@csjthinktank](https://twitter.com/csjthinktank)