

SCHOOL ABSENCE TRACKER

A termly analysis of official data relating to absence from schools: Summer term 2025

180,369

The number of severely absent pupils has soared by **171.8** per cent since before the pandemic. In Summer 2025, **180,369** pupils were absent from school more than they were present (severely absent), which is **2.5** per cent of the school population. This compares with **66,364** pupils who were severely absent in Summer 2019 (pre-pandemic), equating to an additional **114,005** pupils.

1,538,468

Persistent absence has increased by **42.6** per cent since before the pandemic. **1,538,468** pupils were persistently absent in Summer 2025, which equates to **21.7** per cent of all pupils. This compares to **1,078,723** pupils before the pandemic.

7.2%

The overall absence rate in Summer 2025 was **7.2** per cent. This is an increase of **37.7** per cent since before the pandemic, but a decline of **5.8** per cent on Summer 2024.

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Headline statistics

The number of severely absent pupils has soared by 171.8 per cent since before the pandemic. In Summer 2025, 180,369 pupils were absent from school more often than they were present (severely absent), which is 2.5 per cent of the school population. This is an additional 114,005 pupils since before the pandemic, just 66,364 were severely absent in Summer 2019.

It is vulnerable children who are affected most. In the 2024/25 academic year, children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) had a severe absence rate 3.6 times the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. Children in receipt of an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) were 6.2 times more likely to be severely absent than their peers.

Persistent absence is still at a concerningly high level compared to pre-pandemic but has had an encouraging fall. 1,538,468 pupils were persistently absent in Summer 2025, which equates to 21.7 per cent of all pupils. This is 42.6 per cent more children than the pre-pandemic number but down 8.6 per cent on Summer 2024.

The overall absence rate in Summer 2025 was 7.2 per cent. This is an increase of 37.7 per cent since before the pandemic but down 5.8 per cent on Summer 2024.

We are grateful to all those who support our Youth Disadvantage Unit for making important work like this possible.

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. Other CSJ policy initiatives include *Universal Credit*, *Universal Support*, and the *Into Work Guarantee*; *Family Hubs*; *Housing First*; *Severe Absence from School*; and *Prisoner Work Placements*.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of frontline charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations. These are curated by our CSJ Foundation and have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown in some of the UK's most challenging communities, far beyond Westminster.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2026 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

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. This report was followed by 'Lost but Not Forgotten', which found that vulnerable pupils are the most likely to have disengaged from school.

In March 2023 we published 'Lost and Not Found', setting out the conclusions of our inquiry with those on the frontline of the crisis into the drivers of school absence. This found key drivers to include disruptive home environments, challenges around mental and emotional wellbeing, deprivation, and changing parental attitudes towards education following the pandemic. This was followed by 'The Missing Link' in January 2024, which detailed the results of polling commissioned by the CSJ on parental attitudes towards attendance and parental perceptions of school engagement. The polling uncovered that 28 per cent of parents agreed that the pandemic has shown it is not essential for children to attend school every day.

In May 2023, we launched our School Absence Tracker and we have published updated trackers to coincide with every new termly data release, ensuring we remain focused on the drive to get them back in school, achieving and thriving. This latest 'School Absence Tracker' analyses absence figures for Summer 2025, as well as the annual figures for the 2024/25 academic year.

Our analysis also shows that good, if slow, progress is being made in reducing persistent absence. Correspondingly, overall absence is also beginning to come down. However, the crisis of severe absence – the most vulnerable children – is continuing to get worse.

CSJ analysis suggests that, without urgent action, almost 180,000 pupils will leave school to become NEETs (not in education, employment or training) due to persistent absence over the course of this Parliament, adding to the almost one million existing NEETs. In August 2025, the CSJ released a fully costed plan to tackle the NEETs crisis in Wasted Youth, including a Future Workforce Credit that we estimate will help 115,561 NEETs back into work. We are pleased to see that the Government has made steps to introduce such a policy, following our research.

In September 2025, the CSJ published Absent Ambition, a major enquiry examining the root causes of the school absence crisis. Absent Ambition identified three overarching root causes: a mutual breakdown of trust between home and school, deteriorating educational ambition, and a challenging parenting landscape. It proposed recommendations looking to address these at their roots, building on the CSJ's previous research in this area to provide a more ambitious vision for recovery. We were pleased to see that, in its White Paper, the Government has taken some steps to introduce some of these recommendations, but there remains much to be done to address these challenges at their roots.

Spring 2026 marks a pivotal moment for the education sector. We can now take stock of the entirety of the last academic year, informed by the strategy set out in the recent White Paper and SEND reforms, curriculum review, and the new Ofsted framework.

Ministers must now build on the progress they have made and work with local charities and families by attacking the root causes of school absence, including softening parental attitudes to attendance and an education system that fails to engage thousands of young people.

Absence data review

Since school shutdowns, attendance issues have become endemic across our school system. Persistent absence has thankfully started coming down after continued efforts from schools and government, but severe absence continues to spiral.

This chapter explores the most recent pupil level data collected by the Department for Education on attendance in the Summer term of the 2024/25 academic year.

Absence rates continue to come down but remain far higher than before the pandemic.

Persistent absence

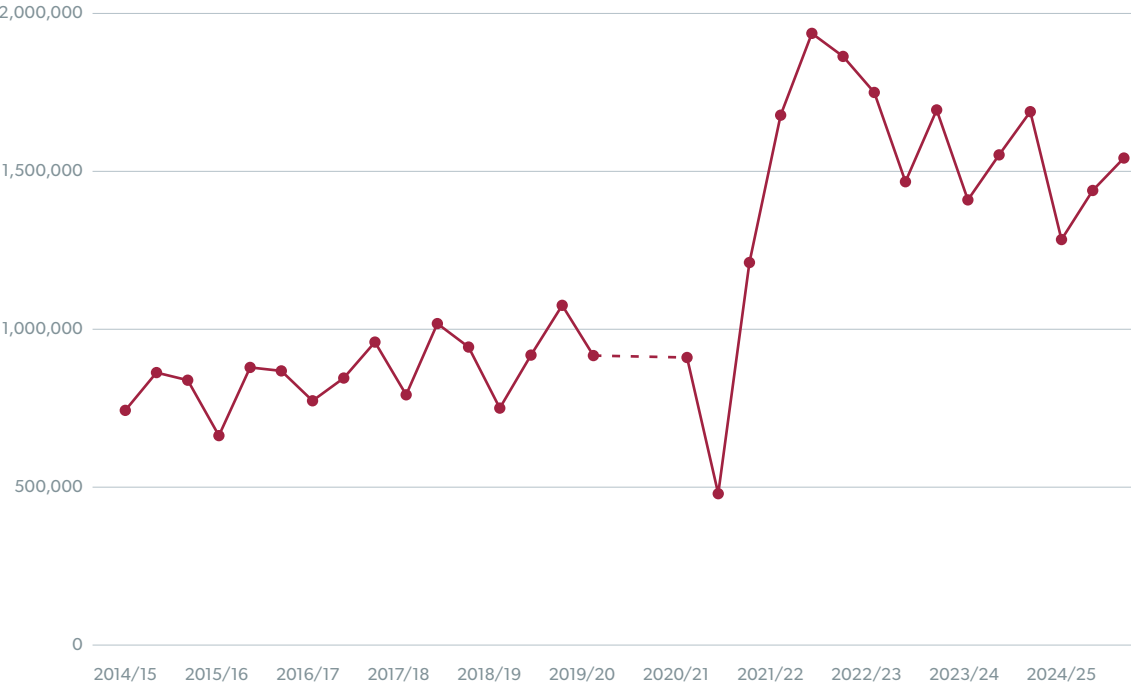
A child is persistently absent if they miss at least 10 per cent of their possible sessions.¹ This is equivalent to missing one day every two weeks.

In Summer 2025, 1,538,468 children were persistently absent. This is equivalent to 21.7 per cent of all children educated in state-funded mainstream or special schools.²

The number of persistently absent children has increased by 7.0 per cent since the previous term, Spring 2025, an increase of 101,231 children.³ Compared with last Summer term, the number of persistently absent children has decreased by 8.6 per cent, or 144,720 children.⁴

The number of persistently absent children remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels. In Summer 2019, the last summer term before schools closed for the pandemic, 1,078,723 pupils were persistently absent (15.9 per cent of all children in state-funded mainstream and special schools).⁵ This then spiked to a peak of 1.93 million in Spring 2022 and remains above 1.5 million.⁶

Figure 1: Persistent Absence Over Time



1 One session is equivalent to half a day of school
2 Department for Education, Autumn and spring term 2024/25: Pupil absence in schools in England 2025. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2024-25-autumn-and-spring-term>
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.

Severe absence

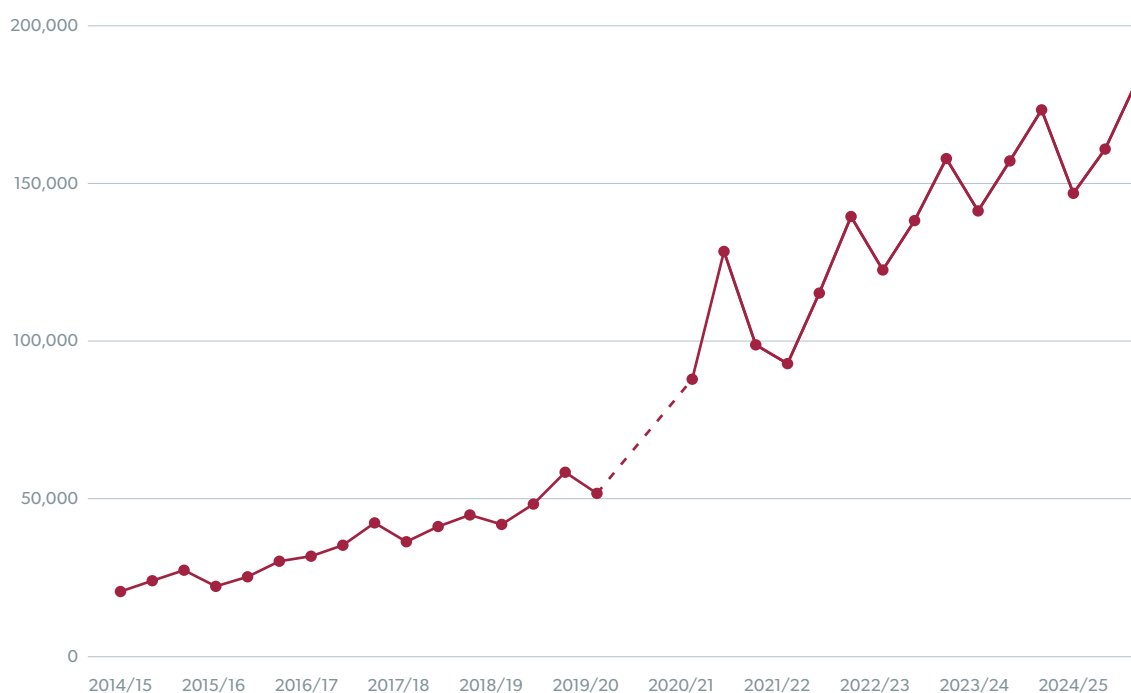
Children who are severely absent miss 50 per cent or more of possible sessions. They are a subgroup of persistently absent children and are absent more often than they are present.

In Summer 2025, 180,369 children were severely absent, a termly record high. This equates to 2.5 per cent of children in state-funded schools.⁷

The number of severely absent children remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels. In Summer 2019, 66,364 pupils were severely absent.⁸ Compared to pre-pandemic, the number of children who were severely absent in Summer 2025 has increased by 172 per cent.⁹

The number of severely absent children has increased by 19,874 since Spring 2025, an increase of 12.4 per cent.¹⁰ When compared to the previous year's Summer term, Summer 2024, the number of severely absent children has increased by 4.9 per cent, an increase of 8,446 children.¹¹

Figure 2: Severe Absence Over Time



7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

Reasons for absence

In total, in Summer 2025, 7.2 per cent of sessions were marked as absent.¹² 4.4 per cent of sessions were marked as authorised absences and 2.8 per cent were marked as unauthorised absences.¹³

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 Summer 2025 are 0.6 percentage points higher than Summer 2019, but 0.3 percentage points lower than Summer 2024.¹⁴

'Unauthorised other' absence has risen since before the pandemic. This refers to children who are off school without permission and for an unknown reason. In Summer 2025, 1.79 per cent of all sessions were marked 'Unauthorised Other'; in Autumn 2019 (pre-pandemic) it stood at 0.83 per cent.¹⁵

In Summer 2025, 0.7 per cent of sessions were marked absent for unauthorised holidays, slightly lower than at 0.8 per cent in Summer 2024. This compares to 0.7 per cent pre-pandemic.¹⁶

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

Breakdown of absence data

Absence by school type

In Summer 2025, 27.7 per cent of all children in state-funded secondary schools were persistently absent, which accounts for 892,304 children.¹⁷ This is far higher than the rate of persistent absence in primary schools, where just 16.0 per cent of children – or 596,154 children – were persistently absent in Summer 2025.¹⁸

The rate of persistent absence is also higher in special schools. In Summer 2025, 50,010 children educated in special schools were persistently absent.¹⁹ This represents 34.8 per cent of all children educated in special schools.²⁰

The rate is much higher in Alternative Provision (AP) settings. In the 2024/25 academic year, 83.6 per cent of children educated in AP (34,152 children) were persistently absent.²¹ 40.4 per cent were severely absent.²²

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 include 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 Summer 2025, 4.3 per cent of all secondary school children were severely absent, accounting for 76.9 per cent of all severely absent children.²³ This is equivalent to nearly 1 in every 23 children. This would equate to having over 130 secondary schools where all the children are absent for at least half of all possible sessions.²⁴

Primary school pupils account for 17.3 per cent of all severely absent children. 0.8 per cent of children in primary schools were severely absent in Summer 2025.²⁵

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Department for Education, 2025. "Schools, pupils and their characteristics" [Accessed via: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25>]

25 Ibid.

As with persistent absence, the rate of severe absence is higher in special schools. In Summer 2025, 10,567 children educated in special schools were severely absent. This represents 7.3 per cent of all children educated in special schools.²⁶

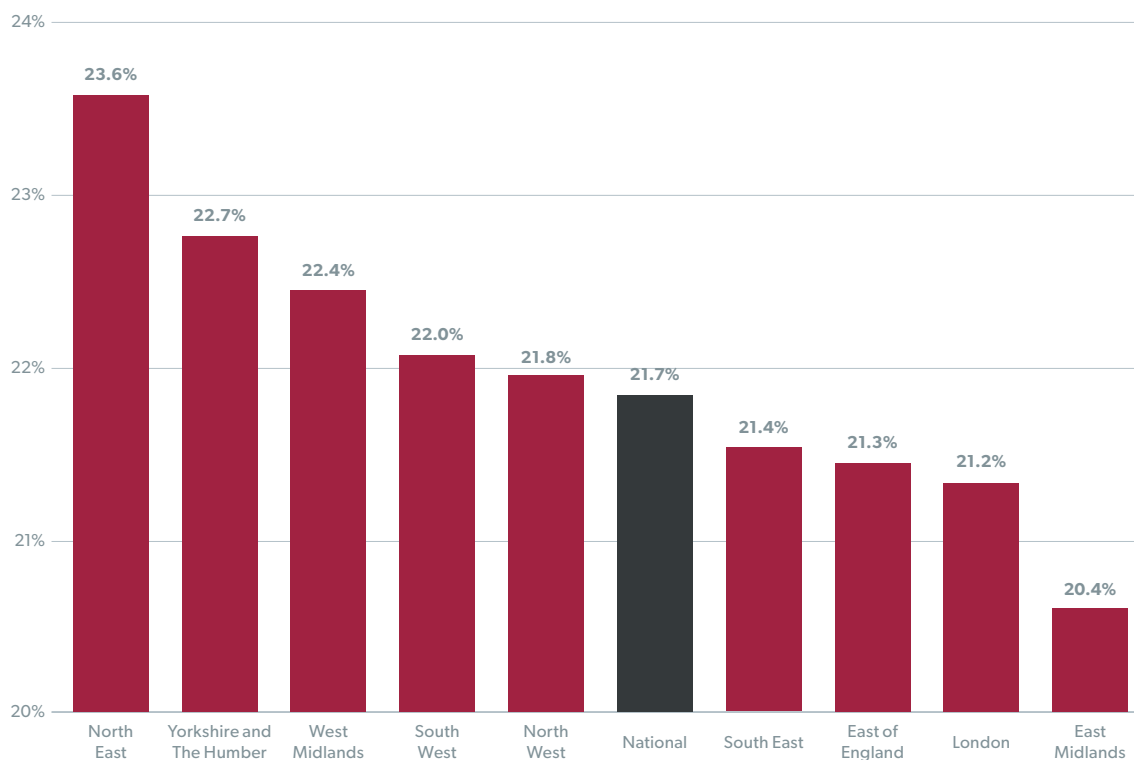
Absence by geography

Patterns of absence vary a little across the regions of England.

The North East had the highest rate of persistent absence in Summer 2025 (23.6 per cent) followed by Yorkshire and the Humber (22.7 per cent).²⁷

The East Midlands had the lowest rate of persistent absence in Summer 2025 (20.4 per cent), followed by London (21.2 per cent).²⁸

Figure 3: Persistent Absence Rates by Region



At a local authority level, we see a few pockets of markedly higher persistent absence rates, but broadly the same story of limited geographic variation. The local authority with the highest rate of persistent absence in Summer 2025 was Knowsley (27.6 per cent). City of London had the lowest rate (10.0 per cent).²⁹

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Department for Education, Autumn and spring term 2024/25: Pupil absence in schools in England 2025. "<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2024-25-autumn-and-spring-term>]

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

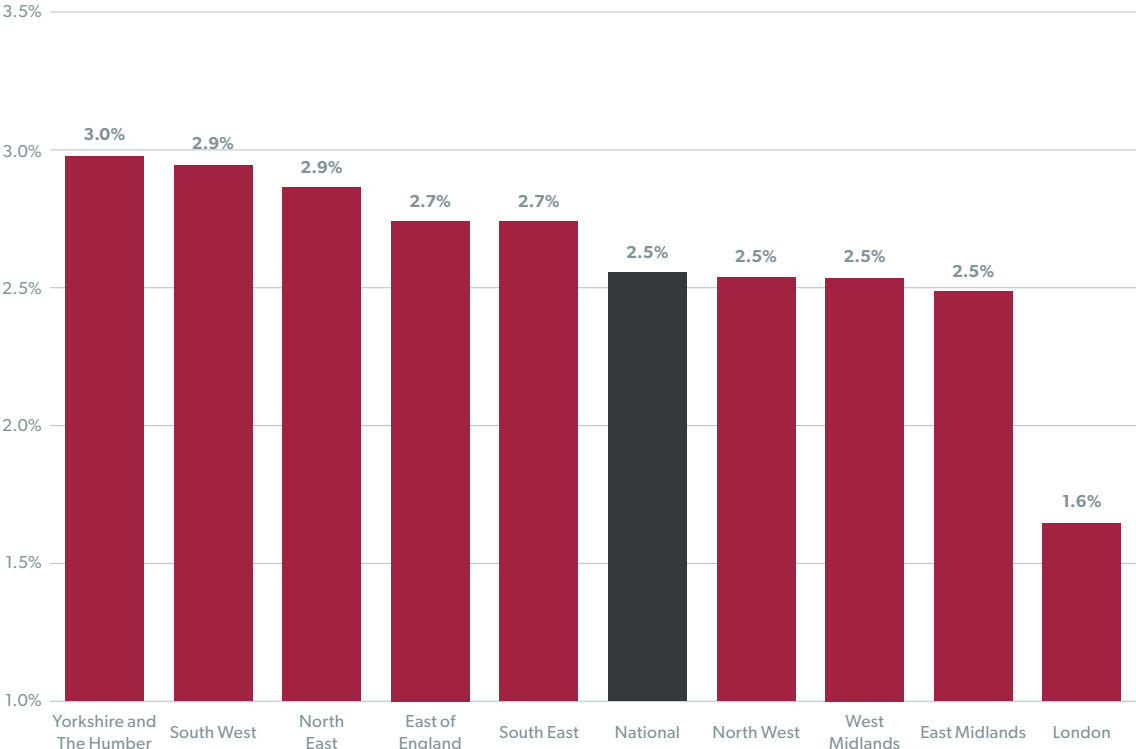
Table 1: Local Authorities with highest rates of persistent absence

Local Authority	Persistent absence rate
Knowsley	27.6
Camden	27.3
Bristol, City of	26.2
Halton	26.2
Wirral	25.6
Westminster	25.5
Sunderland	25.4
Middlesbrough	25.4
Islington	25.3
Liverpool	25.3

The Yorkshire and the Humber had the highest rate of severe absence in Summer 2025 (3.0 per cent) followed by the South West (2.9 per cent).³⁰

London had the lowest rate of severe absence in Summer 2025 with 1.6 per cent followed by the East Midlands (2.5 per cent).³¹

Figure 4: Severe Absence Rate by Region



30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Severe absence by local authority tells a slightly different story to persistent absence.

Southampton had the highest rate of severe absence in Summer 2025 (3.8 per cent) followed by Portsmouth (3.8 per cent).³²

City of London had the lowest rate of severe absence in Summer 2025 with none at all, followed by Tower Hamlets (1.1 per cent).³³

Table 2: Local Authorities with highest rates of severe absence

Local Authority	Severe Absence Rate
Southampton	3.8
Portsmouth	3.8
Sheffield	3.7
Brighton and Hove	3.7
York	3.5
Bradford	3.5
Newcastle upon Tyne	3.4
Devon	3.4
Warwickshire	3.4
Isle of Wight	3.4

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

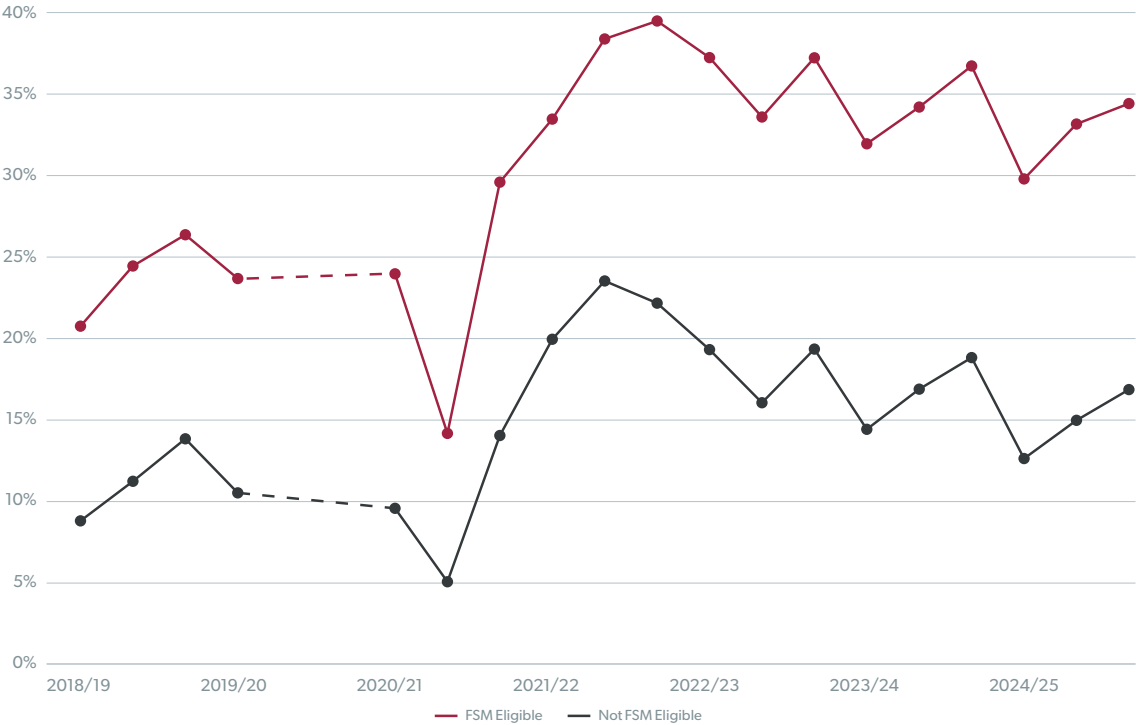
Absence by pupil characteristics

Absence by Free School Meal eligibility

Children who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) have consistently higher rates of absence than their peers.

In Summer 2025, children eligible for FSM had a persistent absence rate which was 2.0 times the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. A total of 34.6 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were persistently absent, compared to 16.9 per cent of children not eligible.³⁴

Figure 5: Persistent Absence Rates by Free School Meal Eligibility



In the 2024/25 academic year, children eligible for FSM had a severe absence rate which was 3.6 times the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. 4.2 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were severely absent, compared to 1.2 per cent of children not eligible.³⁵

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid

Absence by special educational needs/disabilities

Children receiving 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.

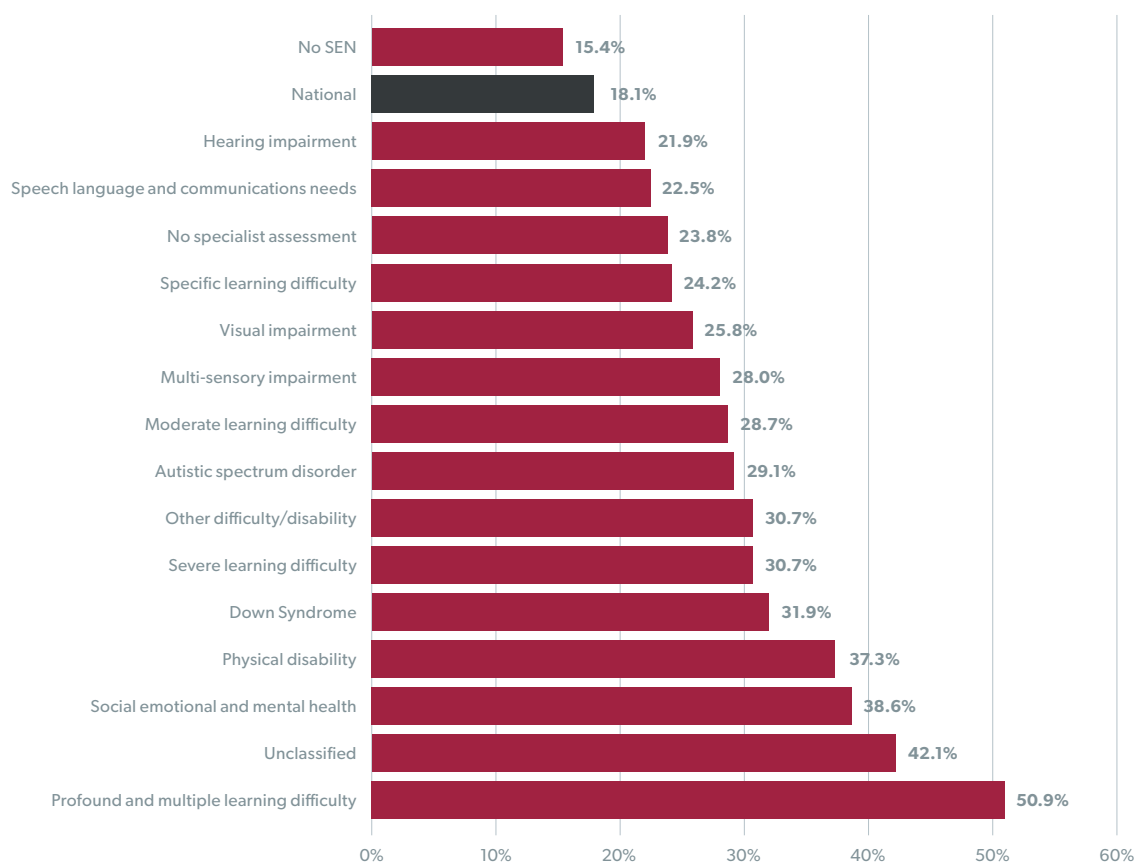
In Summer 2025, 126,673 children with an EHCP were persistently absent and 306,455 children with SEN support were persistently absent.³⁶

The rate of persistent absence was 30.1 per cent for children with SEN support, 34.1 per cent for children with an EHCP and 19.4 per cent for children with no identified SEN.³⁷

The data also provides breakdowns for different SEN primary need types. Overall, in the 2024/25 academic year, children with 'Profound and multiple learning difficulty' had the highest rates of persistent absence.³⁸

In the 2024/25 academic year, 38.6 per cent of all children with 'Social emotional and mental health needs' were persistently absent and 29.1 per cent of children with 'Autism spectrum disorder' were persistently absent.

Figure 6: Persistent Absence by SEN Primary Need



³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

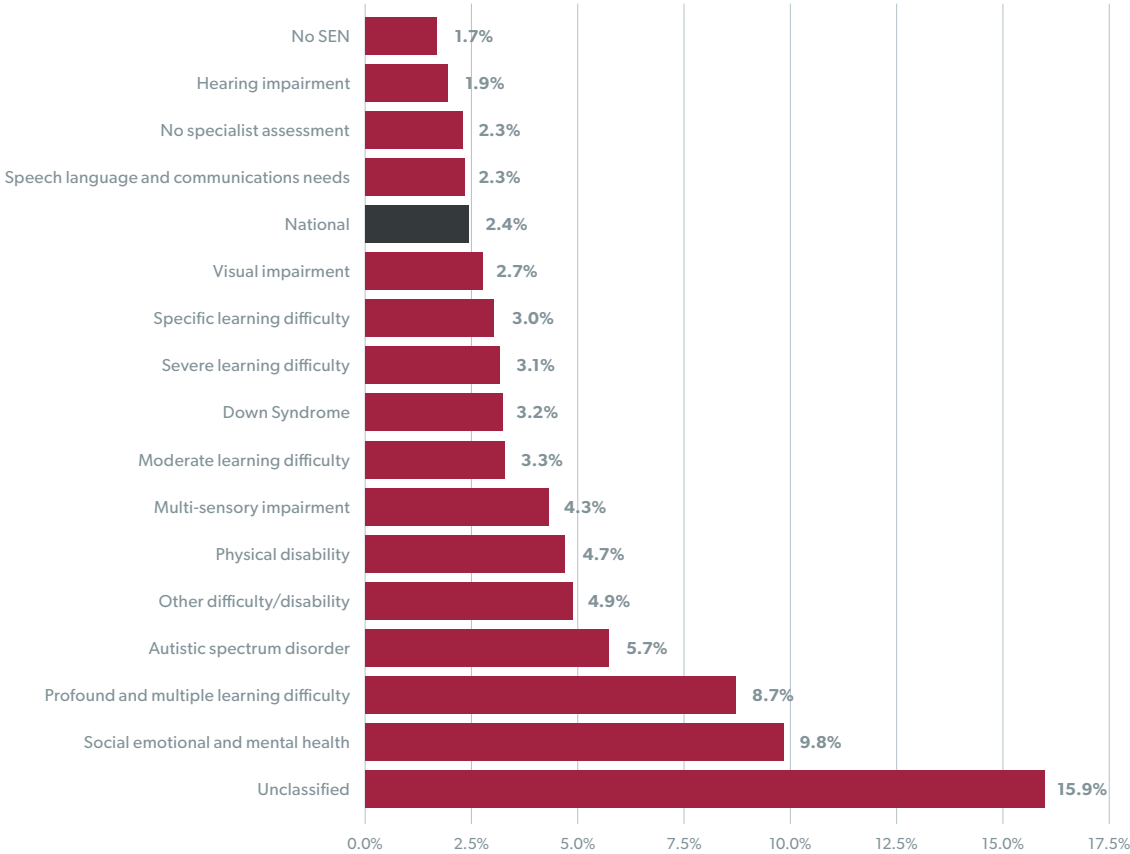
³⁸ Ibid.

In the 2024/25 academic year, 47,640 children in receipt of SEN support were severely absent and 29,154 children with an EHCP were severely absent.³⁹

The rate of severe absence was 4.5 per cent for children with SEN Support, 7.5 per cent for children with an EHCP, and 1.2 per cent for children with no identified SEN.⁴⁰

Children with 'Unclassified' SEN primary need had the highest rates of severe absence, at 15.9 per cent, followed by 'Social emotional and mental health' SEN (9.8 per cent) and 'Profound and multiple learning difficulty' SEN (8.7 per cent).⁴¹

Figure 7: Severe Absence by SEN Primary Need



39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

Absence by sex

The rates of persistent and severe absence vary minimally across sexes, although tend to be higher for girls.

In Summer 2025, 22.2 per cent of female pupils and 21.3 per cent of male pupils were persistently absent.⁴²

In the 2024/25 academic year, 2.4 per cent of female pupils and 2.3 per cent of male pupils were severely absent.⁴³

Absence by ethnicity

Children who are Gypsy/Roma or Traveller of Irish heritage have the highest persistent absence rates. Interestingly, persistent absence rates are markedly lower for Chinese (4.3 per cent over the whole 2024/25 academic year) pupils – and to a lesser extent African (9.0 per cent) and Indian (11.8 per cent) pupils.

In the 2024/25 academic year, 69.2 per cent of Traveller of Irish heritage and 61.3 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were persistently absent.⁴⁴ For comparison, 18.6 per cent of English/Welsh/Northern Irish/British pupils were absent over this period.⁴⁵

14.1 per cent of Travellers of Irish heritage and 10.0 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were severely absent in academic year 2024/25.⁴⁶ For comparison, the rate of severe absence for English/Welsh/Northern Irish/British pupils was 2.7 per cent.⁴⁷

Absence by year group

Absence rates climb substantially as children grow older. Part of this is likely demonstrating how children who are not likely to succeed in their GCSEs lose educational ambition and are not given opportunities that make school continue to feel worthwhile. Of course, there is also a slightly higher rate for children in Year 1 and below and, to a lesser extent, Year 2, as would be expected as they adjust to full-time school.

In academic year 2024/25, pupils in Year 11 experienced the highest rates of severe absence, at 4.9 per cent. Pupils in Year 3 experienced the lowest rates, at 0.57 per cent.⁴⁸

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

Table 3: Severe absence 2024/25 by Year Group

Year group	Severe absence rate
Year 1 and below	0.75
Year 2	0.60
Year 3	0.57
Year 4	0.61
Year 5	0.69
Year 6	0.76
Year 7	1.69
Year 8	2.99
Year 9	4.01
Year 10	4.63
Year 11	4.94
Year 12 and above	3.21

In Summer 2025, pupils in Year 12 and above experienced the highest rates of persistent absence, at 38.5 per cent, followed by Years 11 and 10 at 36.2 and 28.5 per cent, respectively. Pupils in Year 3 experienced the lowest rates, at 15.7 per cent.

Table 4: Persistent absence Summer 2025 by Year Group

Year group	Persistent absence rate
Year 1 and below	17.2
Year 2	16.0
Year 3	15.7
Year 4	15.8
Year 5	16.6
Year 6	16.2
Year 7	21.8
Year 8	26.0
Year 9	29.0
Year 10	28.5
Year 11	36.2
Year 12 and above	38.5

School absence tracker

The number of severely absent children continues its relentless upward march more than five years on from the pandemic. The Government must not ignore the need to get this cohort of children back into the classroom by solely focusing on the overall absence figure.

In the recent School White Paper, the Government made a new substantial commitment to reducing school absence, aiming for the attendance rate nationally to reach 94 per cent by 2028/29. This has come alongside a number of policy initiatives, roughly separated into three groups:

Lower-level persistent absence

- › Launched 93 RISE Attendance & Behaviour Hubs which have reached up to 3000 schools across the country.
- › Introduced a new Ofsted framework bringing together attendance and behaviour as a headline domain, with higher prominence, using more timely data.
- › Delivered major upgrades to school and LA-level data, including through substantial use of AI to generate reports for schools that compare their attendance against 20 similar schools. Alongside this, they have introduced Attendance Baseline Improvement Expectations, a personalised minimum annual improvement target for every mainstream school.
- › Confirming attendance is one of the first national priorities for the new Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams.

Severe and nearly severe absence

- › Re-confirming the expansion of the attendance mentors' pilot, the delivery and evaluation partners – which commenced in Spring 2025. Alongside proper evaluative quality control
- › It has joined up the guidance on social workers and attendance, ensuring their responsibilities on attendance and good practice are in one place.
- › It is undertaking research looking into reducing the number of school days lost for children in temporary accommodation so that targeted support can be provided more effectively. This includes introducing a new duty on councils to notify schools, health visitors and GPs that a child is in temporary accommodation.

Attendance-related policies on the wider educational environment

- › It has started rolling out free breakfast clubs in every primary school.
- › It is establishing new frameworks and standards around home-to-school relationships and pupil engagement.
- › It has announced an enrichment entitlement in the Schools White Paper in February 2026.
- › It is introducing a register of Children Not in School in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.
- › Publishing major expansions to the SEND system in their recent SEND reform consultation paper, alongside promised reforms down the line.

Indeed, it is difficult to argue that the issue in the attendance crisis is government inaction. The DfE has demonstrated its ability to act dynamically and effectively in tackling this crisis and have the large decline in persistent absence to show for it.

The problem is instead that “doing things” has been misunderstood as synonymous with understanding the structural problems in the education system causing this crisis and addressing them at their root.

In order to fully address the absence crisis, the underlying causes of absence must be addressed. The CSJ’s severe absence inquiry has uncovered that children miss school for a variety of reasons outside of their individual needs. They are often upstream of the day-to-day operations of schools. They include poor parenting, relational breakdown between home and school, and a lack of inspiring educational pathways outside of the academic GCSE → A-level → university route.⁴⁹

It is true that any plan to tackle absence must consider how to reemphasise the importance of school attendance across the country, with CSJ polling showing that over a quarter of parents (28 per cent) agree that the pandemic has shown it is not essential for children to attend school every day⁵⁰ and almost half think that nine out of ten days is reasonable attendance.⁵¹ Broadly, this is being done effectively.

The CSJ has a 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 reduce crisis levels of school absence.

Our plan for reform

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

The CSJ has a plan to turn the tide on school absence. Absent Ambition, published in September 2025, outlined a plan to address this crisis. This included both crisis response measures and longer-term solutions to address the root causes of school absence.

Crisis response

Every day this crisis goes on, more learning is lost, and more futures are damaged. We need urgent measures to arrest the continued climb in severe absence and to accelerate the recovery in persistent absence rates.

49 Centre for Social Justice, Lost and not found, 2022 [Accessed via: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CSJ-Lost_and_Not_Found.pdf]

50 Centre for Social Justice, The Missing Link, 2024 [Accessed via: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CSJ-Persistent_and_Severe_Absence-1.pdf]

51 Centre for Social Justice, Absent Ambition, 2025 [Accessed via: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/absent-ambition>]

1) Roll out attendance mentors to help struggling parents

RECOMMENDATION

Attendance mentors are a proven crisis intervention support mechanism for families facing severe and persistent absence. The Government's expansion of attendance mentors so that they will reach 5,300 children a year is welcome but still only covers just three per cent of severely absent pupils. Attendance mentors should be scaled up nationally, following the most effective models and with careful evaluation to ensure effective implementation.

Progress update: good action taken, alongside important quality control

The Department for Education (DfE) invested £2.3m to develop a 3-year pilot of attendance mentors delivered by Barnardo's. The pilot started in Middlesbrough in September 2022 and was extended to four additional local authorities (Salford, Doncaster, Knowsley and Stoke-on-Trent) in September 2023. This initial 3-year pilot – which was projected to support 1,700 pupils over the course of the pilot – has now concluded.

It was announced in January 2024 that the pilot would be rolled out to ten additional areas. This addition to the trial is expected to support 3,600 pupils per year.

In March 2024 the DfE released an initial evaluation of the rollout, conducted by York Consulting LLP, which found some promising results, but also that a shift in approach might be needed. 50 per cent of the pupils supported by the initial pilot achieved improved attendance, substantially below the impact level achieved by School-Home Support, and for over a third of cases (36 per cent) attendance declined during the intervention.⁵²

In October 2024, the Government confirmed the expansion intended from January, but with a new delivery partner – Etio. They named the ten additional local authority areas as Nottingham, Walsall, West Somerset, Ipswich, Hastings, Blackpool, Norwich, Hartlepool, Portsmouth and Rochdale.

The Government also announced that the Youth Endowment Fund will evaluate the continued expansion of this programme.

This work on school attendance is also underpinned by a range of additional activity. There are sixteen priority educational investment areas that have identified attendance as a priority and will be using the Local Needs Fund to fund attendance projects by March 2025.

The DfE also supports individual children in order to engage them in education through the AP Specialist Taskforces (APST) and SAFE programmes. This is an investment of over £50 million in serious violence hotspots to fund specialist support in both mainstream and Alternative Provision (AP) schools. 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.

52 York Consulting LLP (2024) Evaluation of the attendance mentors pilot: Year 1 findings. Department for Education. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fb20d3703c423c5158ef03/Evaluation_of_the_attendance_mentors_pilot_-_Year_1_findings.pdf (Accessed: 6 May 2025).

2) Introduce an attendance awareness course

RECOMMENDATION

Almost half of parents polled for the CSJ said they thought it was “reasonable” for a child to miss one in every ten days of school (that is, the definition of persistent absence), despite this level of absence conferring a £10,000 loss in income by age 28. Three in ten parents said it is no longer essential to attend school every day.

The Government should tackle low awareness of the harms of absence and draw from evidence of similar interventions to introduce a new mandatory Attendance Awareness Course at the beginning of the legal intervention process for unauthorised absence. After voluntary routes have been exhausted, parents would be referred to a mandatory awareness course before being issued a fine, or having an Attendance Case Management (ACM) case opened. Non-attendance or refusal should result in receipt of an increased fine of £200, or £100 if paid within 21 days.

Progress update: disappointing lack of action

Although it did emphasise the importance of parental attitudes to attendance, and of home-to-school relationships, the White Paper disappointingly did not announce the introduction of an attendance awareness course.

Longer-term reform

Alongside crisis response, we need to advance long-term solutions to address the root causes of school absence. We need to make school more purposeful for the next generation of young people through sport, enrichment, and work experience. We need to build a renewed relationship between home and school, with more support to parents through equipping schools with the tools they need to engage. And we need to help families start out on the right path, by improving school readiness.

3) Making school purposeful – Introduce a Right to Sport and enrichment activities

RECOMMENDATION

Sport has been shown to increase attendance, grades and engagement,⁵³ yet stubborn disparities in access to sport exist between poorer and more affluent pupils and the state and independent sectors.⁵⁴ The Government should address this by introducing an enrichment guarantee for young people, providing up to five hours a week of extracurricular activities.⁵⁵ Within this should be a 'Right to Sport', which would see all pupils participate in a minimum of two hours of extracurricular sport per week, on top of PE time already scheduled in the curriculum.

Progress update: encouraging action taken

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

In August 2023, the previous 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: A Plan to Transform Young Lives Through Sport*.⁵⁶

In July 2024, the Government announced the launch of a Curriculum and Assessment Review. Following this, a public consultation was launched in September 2024 and an interim report was subsequently published in March 2025.

In March 2025, the Government announced it is developing a new enrichment framework, in partnership with a panel of experts. This framework will highlight best practice on enrichment and provide advice for schools on how to deliver a high-quality enrichment offer. The same month the Government also announced £100m to upgrade sport facilities in local areas across the UK, with a focus on targeting deprived areas.

53 <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/physical-activity> (Accessed: 13 August 2025).

54 Centre for Social Justice (2020) A level playing field: why we need a new school enrichment guarantee and how to deliver it. Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/a-level-playing-field> (Accessed: 10 June 2025)

55 Centre for Social Justice (2024) A new deal for young people in the West Midlands. Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/CSJ-A-New-Deal-for-the-West-Midlands.pdf> (Accessed: 1 May 2025)

56 Centre for Social Justice, *Game Changer*, 2023 [Accessed via: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSJ-Game_Changer.pdf]

In August 2025, the Government announced £88 million to support youth clubs and schools to offer more after-school activities. This includes £22.5m over three years to create a tailored enrichment offer in 400 schools – which is a welcome announcement but only a small step considering that there are over 21,000 state-funded primary, secondary and special schools in England. The funding also included £8m to support local authorities to deliver a high-quality out of school offer.

Most encouragingly, in the 2026 White Paper, the Government announced a major overhaul of enrichment provision in schools, committing to an “enrichment entitlement” alongside a new “Every Child Can” programme. More detail is expected in the near future on this.

3b) Making school purposeful – Rewiring Education

RECOMMENDATION

The other, fundamental, structural, reform which will be necessary to address young people drifting out of school without exciting educational opportunities that make education purposeful and give them a clear line of sight into the workplace will be a comprehensive rewiring of our technical and vocational education system. The CSJ’s research programme *Rewiring Education* is exploring this issue over the coming year.

4) Overhaul parental engagement with schools

RECOMMENDATION

Many parents told the CSJ that when dealing with an absent pupil they often feel “on their own”. Alongside the expansion of support, long-term relationship building between schools and parents should be enhanced. The Department for Education should support teachers by expanding the ‘Communication with families’ toolkit into an ‘Engaging with parents’ toolkit, including:

- Guidance on communicating with parents, emphasising positive communication and the importance of in-person events such as parents’ evenings.
- Resources for introducing parental engagement into school Continuing Professional Development.
- Guidance on how to support the home learning environment.
- Guidance for schools on constructively managing transitions from primary and secondary school.
- Guidance on including fathers.
- Guidance on primary schools engaging with families in the early years as best practice where appropriate.
- Parent-friendly materials for schools on the importance of attendance.

This toolkit should be based on Parentkind’s ‘Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools’

Progress update: Good action taken, but root cause challenges still remain

The Government has made large steps in this direction over the course of the last year, including in their recent White Paper. Most strikingly is the introduction of minimum standards for home-to-school partnerships.

These are in the early stages of being introduced, so we cannot say whether this will move the dial or whether a further upstream solution will be necessary, but the Government has made an encouraging start to addressing this.

5) Improving the early years – school readiness

RECOMMENDATION

Our landmark Absent Ambition enquiry found that the seeds of school absence are often laid in the early years. The Department for Education should introduce ‘Starting Reception’ as the single, agreed definition of ‘school ready’ and use the age 2 to 2½ health visitor check-up as guidance for parents as they progress on school readiness, including the offer of a ‘Starting Reception’ supportive class to all parents. Alongside this, they should move birth registrations to family hubs and introduce a relationship support fund to allow a targeted discussion between midwives, health visitors, and couples at higher risk of separation to engage in relationship support services. This should be delivered through Family Hubs and antenatal classes.

Progress update: limited action taken

The Government has repeatedly emphasised the importance of the early years and set a target of 75 per cent of children being school ready by the end of this Parliament. Correspondingly, there has been an encouragingly large expansion of Family Hubs, with a £500 million investment announced in July 2025 and a further £200 million for specialist SEND provision announced in the 2026 Schools White Paper. However, the Government has not yet grasped the nettle of the importance of familial relationships in this issue.

For the full list of policy recommendations, see [Absent Ambition](#)



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

www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk
@csjthinktank