

SCHOOL ABSENCE TRACKER

A termly analysis of official data relating to absence from schools: Spring term 2026

164,225

The number of severely absent pupils has risen by **187.7** per cent since before the pandemic. In Spring 2026, **164,225** pupils missed at least half of their possible school sessions, equivalent to **2.3** per cent of the school population. This compares with **57,081** severely absent pupils in Spring 2019, an increase of **107,144** pupils.

1,319,620

The number of persistently absent pupils has increased by **42.9** per cent since before the pandemic. In Spring 2026, **1,319,620** pupils were persistently absent, equivalent to **18.7** per cent of all pupils. This compares with **923,378** pupils in Spring 2019.

6.8%

The overall absence rate in Spring 2026 was **6.8** per cent. This represents an increase of **40.1** per cent compared with Spring 2019, but a decline of **2.3** per cent compared with Spring 2025.

Contents

About the Centre for Social Justice	1
<i>About the CSJ Youth Disadvantage Unit.....</i>	<i>1</i>
Executive summary	3
Absence data review	5
<i>Persistent absence.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Severe absence.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>The changing face of school absence</i>	<i>7</i>
Breakdown of absence data	8
<i>Absence by school type.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Absence by geography.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Absence by pupil characteristics	12
<i>Absence by FSM eligibility and ethnicity.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Absence by special educational needs and disabilities.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Absence by sex</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Absence by year group</i>	<i>18</i>
Tackling school absence	19
<i>The Government's plan to get children back in school</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Our plan for reform.....</i>	<i>21</i>

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.

About the CSJ Youth Disadvantage Unit

Since 2021, the Centre for Social Justice has been investigating school absence, its consequences for disadvantaged children, and the changes needed to get pupils back into school.

Our report, *Kids Can't Catch Up if They Don't Show Up*, revealed that 100,000 children were severely absent in Autumn 2020. It was followed by *Lost but Not Forgotten*, which highlighted the concentration of absence among vulnerable pupils.

In March 2023, *Lost and Not Found* brought together evidence from schools, families and frontline organisations to investigate the drivers of absence. These included disruptive home environments, mental and emotional health difficulties, deprivation, and changing parental attitudes towards education following the pandemic.

The Missing Link, published in January 2024, examined the relationship between parents and schools. Our polling found that 28 per cent of parents believed the pandemic had shown that daily school attendance was no longer essential, demonstrating the importance of rebuilding shared expectations about education.

Alongside these inquiries, we launched the *School Absence Tracker* in May 2023. Published alongside the Department for Education's termly releases, the tracker monitors the scale and distribution of absence, examines the Government's response, and identifies priorities for action.

In September 2025, *Absent Ambition* brought this work together in a major inquiry into the roots of the attendance crisis. It identified a mutual breakdown of trust between home and school, deteriorating educational ambition, and an increasingly challenging parenting landscape. Its recommendations combined an immediate response to entrenched absence with longer-term reforms to parental engagement, the purpose of school and support for families.

Our wider work examines how educational disengagement develops and shapes young people's subsequent lives. Our *Change the Prescription* series examines the rapid rise in diagnoses of mental ill-health and special educational needs; its latest instalment set out how the system can seek to support children's needs at their root rather than through diagnoses. *Rewiring Education* examines how stronger technical pathways and closer connections between education and employment can give young people a clearer purpose at school. The *Inactive Nation* series set out how few children meet physical activity guidelines and how the loss of sport, play and places to go is leaving children and teenagers isolated and disconnected, and proposed a Right to Sport alongside a 'From Alone to Active' package to re-engage young people in community life.

Together, these programmes inform our approach to restoring attendance and improving the opportunities available to disadvantaged young people.

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

Executive summary

Attention may have moved on, but the school absence crisis is not going away.

The latest school absence figures from the Department for Education show an increasingly concentrated school absence crisis. Persistent absence (missing at least a tenth of school) continues to decline slowly from its peak of 27 per cent in Spring 2022, and is now back under 19 per cent. Four years on, this remains well above the persistent absence rate of 11 per cent in the final year before the pandemic, but there is cause for hope.

Severe absence (missing at least half of school) tells a different story. Spring 2026's severe absence rate of 2.3 per cent marks the highest Spring severe absence rate ever, with 164,225 severely absent schoolchildren. There were 34,762 in Spring 2015.

With this, the face of school absence has changed. Before the pandemic, children missing at least 30 per cent of school accounted for 19 per cent of all absence. They now account for 34 per cent. School absence is no longer mainly a large number of children missing a little school. It is an increasingly concentrated cohort of young people missing much of their education.

This disengaged group is growing unevenly. It is concentrated among older pupils: by Year 11, severe absence is seven times its Year 3 rate. It is concentrated among poorer White British children, who make up one in six pupils but more than a third of those who are severely absent. And it is concentrated among children with special educational needs, who accounted for over half of severely absent pupils in Spring 2026.

The consequences extend beyond school

Repeated absence means lost teaching, weaker relationships with school and fewer opportunities to develop the knowledge, habits and confidence needed for adult life. Its consequences extend into employment, earnings and contact with the criminal justice system.

Department for Education research associates an additional day of secondary-school absence with an estimated £750 reduction in lifetime earnings. Persistently absent pupils are £10,000 worse off by the age of 28. They are three times as likely to become a young offender within two years of leaving school, and over six times as likely to become persistently not in education, employment or training (NEET).¹

On our estimates, up to 100,000 persistently absent Year 11 pupils could join the NEET population by 2029.² School attendance is fundamental to many of the issues facing Britain today, not least the crisis of youth economic inactivity.

1 Centre for Social Justice (2025). Absent Ambition: Addressing the root causes of school absence. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/CSJ-Absent_Ambition.pdf (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

2 Centre for Social Justice (2026). Ministers urged to stop NEET “conveyor belt” as school absence crisis worsens – new data. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/newsroom/school-absence-neets-data-aug26 (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

Our plan for reform

The Government's plan is extensive, and in some ways it is working – the overall absence rate is coming down. But, if we are to inspire the record numbers who are becoming completely disengaged from education, we need a long term plan alongside a continued crisis response. We need to build a system for the future that is protected against educational disengagement.

First, we must get the most absent children back through the school gates.

- › Attendance mentors should be scaled up responsibly since the current expansion reaches only around three per cent of severely absent pupils.
- › Family Support Workers should give every family a trusted adult in school before problems become entrenched.
- › Alongside support must come expectations that parents will join in efforts to get their children to school, with a mandatory Attendance Awareness Course before fines are handed out.

Second, maintaining a high standard of education is paramount to engaging and protecting the most vulnerable.

- › Broader enrichment and a Right to Sport would give every secondary pupil more reason to be in school.
- › A renewed partnership between home and school would rebuild the trust that attendance depends on.
- › A clear standard of school readiness would tackle absence where its roots are often laid.

Third, we need a rewired education system where every child has a route to meaningful destinations. Absence escalates through the teenage years, and 42 per cent of secondary school parents doubt that what their child is taught will help them later in life.

- › Careers guidance from Year 7 and a Technical Baccalaureate from age 14 would give young people a clear line of sight into good work.

Alongside these reforms, we must change our national attitude to school. A nation where almost half of parents consider persistent absence “reasonable” is cutting its children's futures off at the knees. Getting children back into school will take a cultural change, and that change begins in the home.

Absence data review

This chapter examines the latest Department for Education absence data for Spring 2026. It considers how far attendance has recovered, how the pattern differs across levels of absence, and which groups of pupils face the greatest challenges.

A pupil is **persistently absent** if they miss at least 10 per cent of their possible school sessions during the reporting period, equivalent to approximately one day every fortnight. A pupil is **severely absent** if they miss at least 50 per cent of possible sessions. Severely absent pupils are included within the persistent absence total.

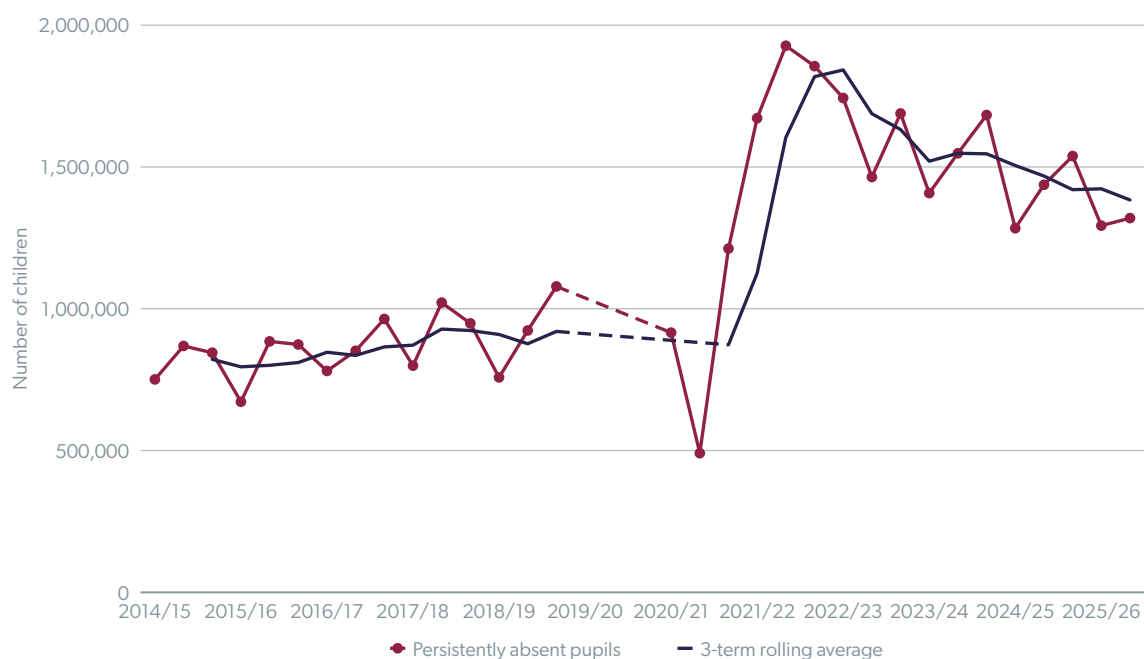
Persistent absence

Persistent absence was largely steady before the pandemic, doubled following the pandemic, and has been slowly recovering since. The Spring-term rate remains approximately 39.4 per cent higher than in Spring 2019.

In Spring 2026, there were 1,319,620 (18.7 per cent) persistently absent children. This is 26,547 more than in the previous term, Autumn 2025. However, as Figure 1 shows, persistent absence tends to rise over the school year. Relative to Spring 2025, persistent absence has fallen by 117,617 (8.2 per cent).

The three-term rolling average is useful to understand the broader trend. This has moved from 20.0 per cent in Autumn 2025 to 19.5 per cent in Spring 2026. Persistent absence therefore continued to fall on this measure. The continued fall in persistent absence is welcome, if slow, recovering around 60 per cent of the post-pandemic surge in four years.

Figure 1 – Persistent absence over time, termly



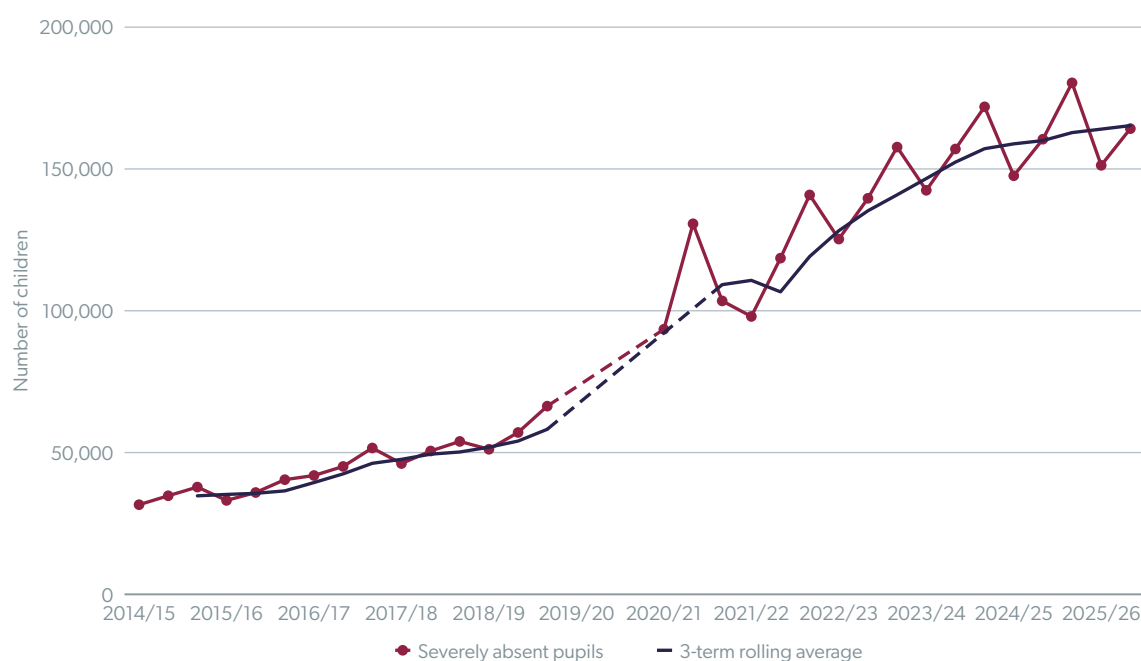
Severe absence

Severe absence has been rising for over a decade, but this growth accelerated following the pandemic. The growth rate has since slowed, but severe absence continues to rise and has now hit termly records in 12 consecutive terms.

In Spring 2026, there were 164,225 (2.3 per cent) severely absent children. This is 12,946 more than in the previous term, Autumn 2025. Relative to Spring 2025, severe absence has risen by 3,730 (2.3 per cent).

The wider recovery in school attendance after the post-pandemic crisis has not filtered through into severe absence rates, which are now nearly five times what they were in 2014/15. This is an urgent crisis, and is becoming more so every term it goes on.

Figure 2 – Severe absence over time, termly



The changing face of school absence

Since before the pandemic, school absence has changed shape across England.

The first shift has been towards more severe absence.

In 2018/19, those who missed at least 30 per cent of school (severely and nearly severely absent children) accounted for 19 per cent of all absence. In the most recent data, they now account for 34 per cent of all absence. Pupils with at least 90 per cent attendance accounted for 59 per cent of all absence before the pandemic and now account for just 42 per cent.

Absence is ceasing to be primarily a large number of children missing a little school and is instead becoming a disengaged cohort missing much of their education.

The second shift is towards older children.

In 2018/19, Years 9–11 accounted for 32 per cent of all absence. They now account for 38 per cent of all absence. Although a smaller shift, little of this is accounted for by population shares – absence is meaningfully less even by age than before the pandemic.

The third shift is towards children with SEND. Children with SEND have seen an enormous rise from 23 per cent of all absence in 2018/19 to 34 per cent of all absence in Autumn and Spring 2025/26. Much of this is due to the growing number of children with SEND – absence rates have only grown a little faster among those with SEND than others.

Breakdown of absence data

Absence by school type

In Spring 2026, 22.5 per cent of all children in state-funded secondary schools were persistently absent, accounting for 727,042 children. This is far higher than the rate of persistent absence in primary schools, where just 14.7 per cent of children – or 540,702 children – were persistently absent in Spring 2026.

The rate is much higher in alternative provision (AP) settings. Across Autumn and Spring 2025/26 combined, 82.1 per cent of children educated in AP (30,654 children) were persistently absent. 39.7 per cent were severely absent.

It is worth noting that, due to the transience of the AP population, the absence figures are counted separately and are 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 moving into AP and being counted as absent there.

In Spring 2026, 3.7 per cent of all secondary school children were severely absent, accounting for 72.2 per cent of all severely absent children. This is equivalent to approximately 1 in every 27 secondary-school children. At an illustrative 1,000 pupils per school, this would equate to having over 118 secondary schools where all the children are absent for at least half of all possible sessions. Primary school pupils account for 21.1 per cent of all severely absent children. 0.9 per cent of children in primary schools were severely absent in Spring 2026.

As with persistent absence, the rate of severe absence is higher in special schools. In Spring 2026, 11,068 children educated in special schools were severely absent. This represents 7.3 per cent of all children educated in special schools.

Absence by geography

Absence rates vary somewhat across England, although this is difficult to identify at a regional level. Persistent absence is highest in the North East, at 19.7 per cent, followed by Yorkshire and the Humber at 19.2 per cent. The East Midlands has the lowest rate, at 18.0 per cent, giving a gap of 1.7 percentage points between the highest- and lowest-ranked regions.

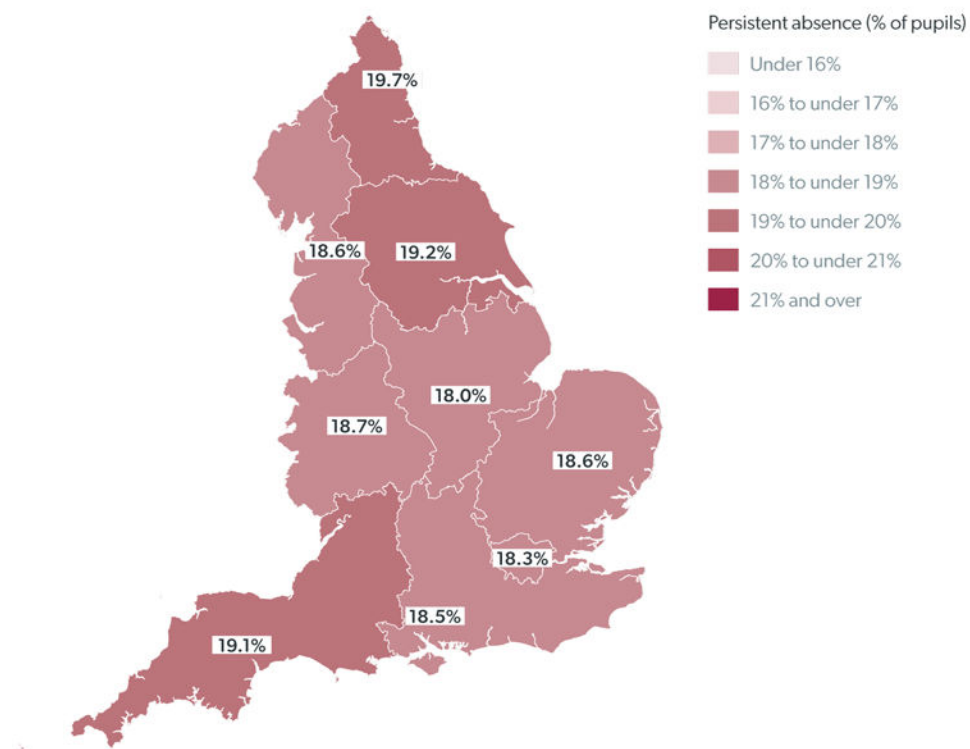
The geographical pattern is slightly different – and more varied – for severe absence. Yorkshire and the Humber has the highest rate, at 2.8 per cent, followed by the South West and the North East, while London has the lowest rate, at 1.4 per cent. The local authority figures reveal further variation within regions, with pockets of high absence across both northern and southern England.

At local authority level, persistent absence is materially higher in a few pockets of the country. The highest persistent absence rates are in Knowsley (24.8 per cent), the Isle of Wight (23.9 per cent), Camden (23.7 per cent) and Bradford (22.4 per cent). There is also considerable variation within London, with Camden standing out against the capital's generally lower rates.

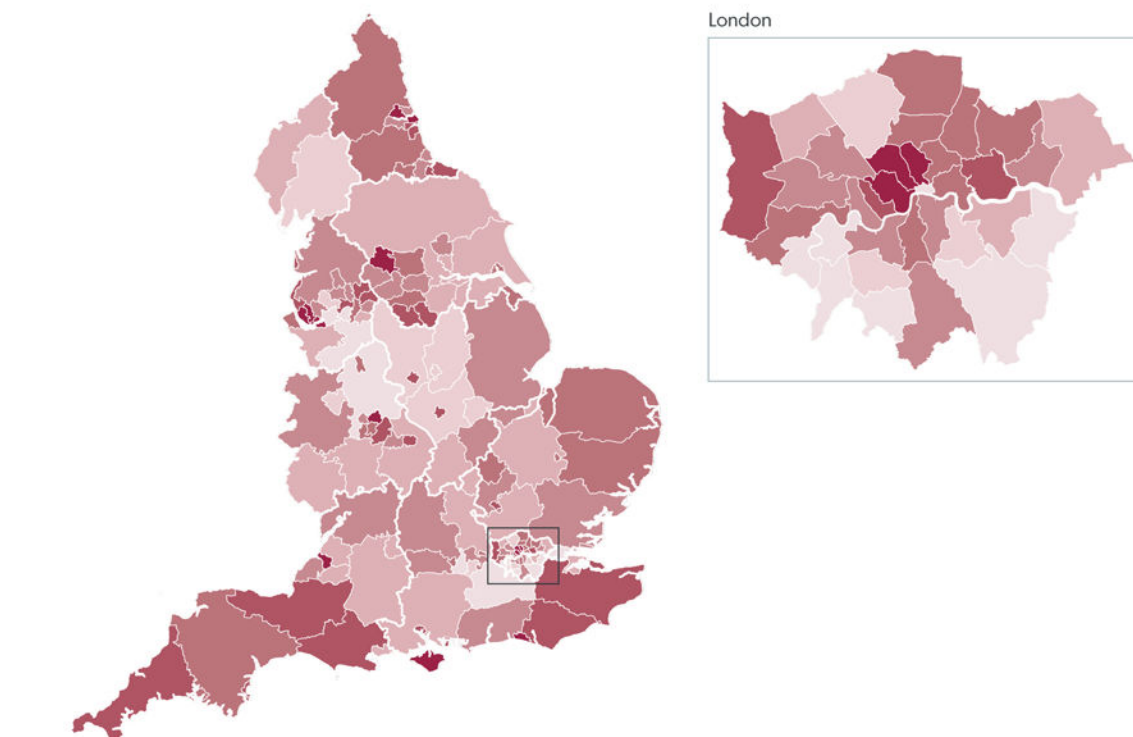
The pattern for severe absence is more geographically dispersed, with the highest rates in York (3.5 per cent), Sheffield (3.5 per cent), Portsmouth (3.4 per cent) and the Isle of Wight (3.4 per cent). Across England, 16 local authorities have severe absence rates above 3 per cent, while 5 have rates below 1 per cent. These local differences show how regional averages can conceal substantial variation in children's attendance.

Figure 3 – Persistent and severe absence across England, Spring 2026
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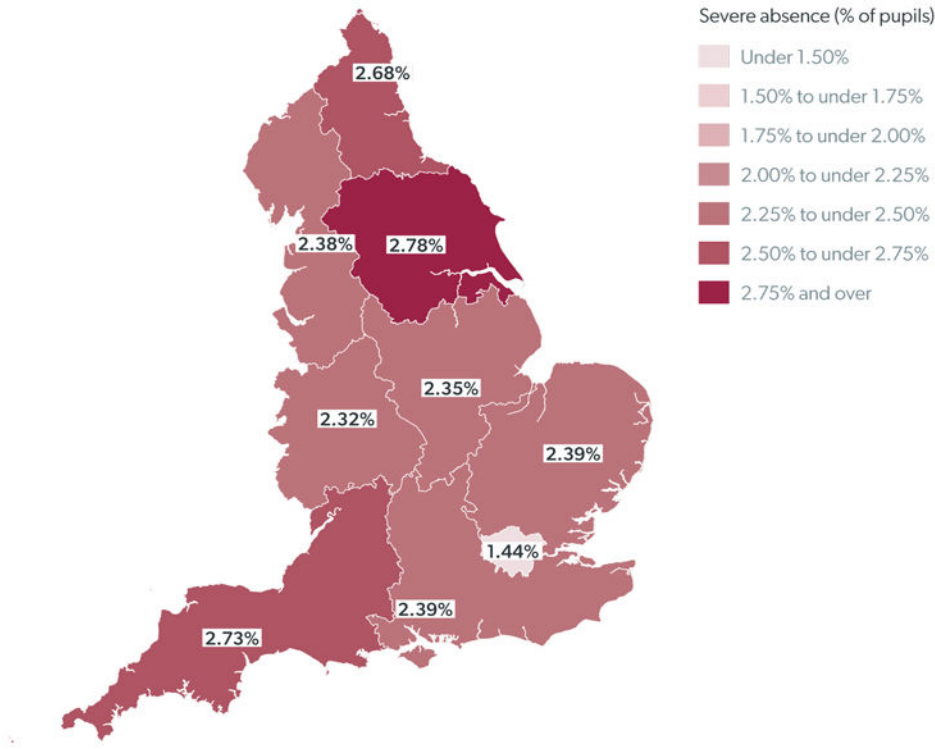
Persistent absence by region



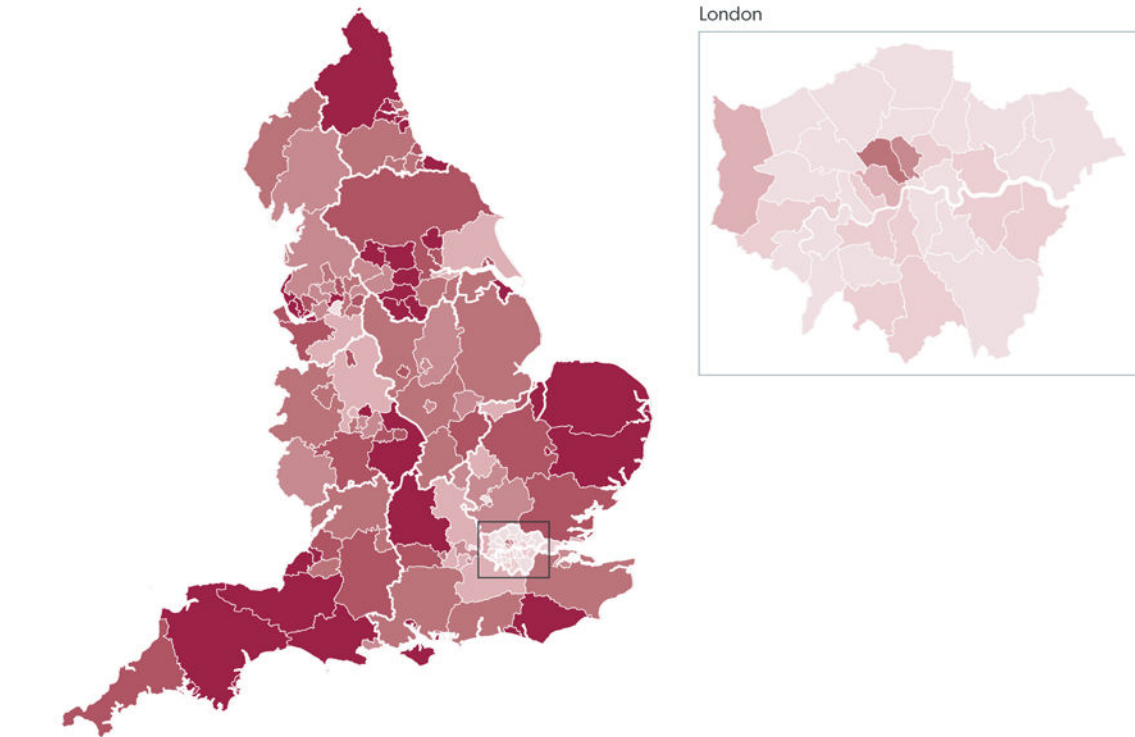
Persistent absence by local authority



Severe absence by region



Severe absence by local authority



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Absence by pupil characteristics

Absence by FSM eligibility and ethnicity

Children eligible for free school meals (FSM) continue to have substantially higher absence rates than their peers. FSM-eligible pupils are 2.3 times as likely to be persistently absent and 3.6 times as likely to be severely absent as pupils who are not eligible. Although they represent 28.2 per cent of pupil enrolments, they account for 47.5 per cent of persistently absent pupils and 57.5 per cent of severely absent pupils.

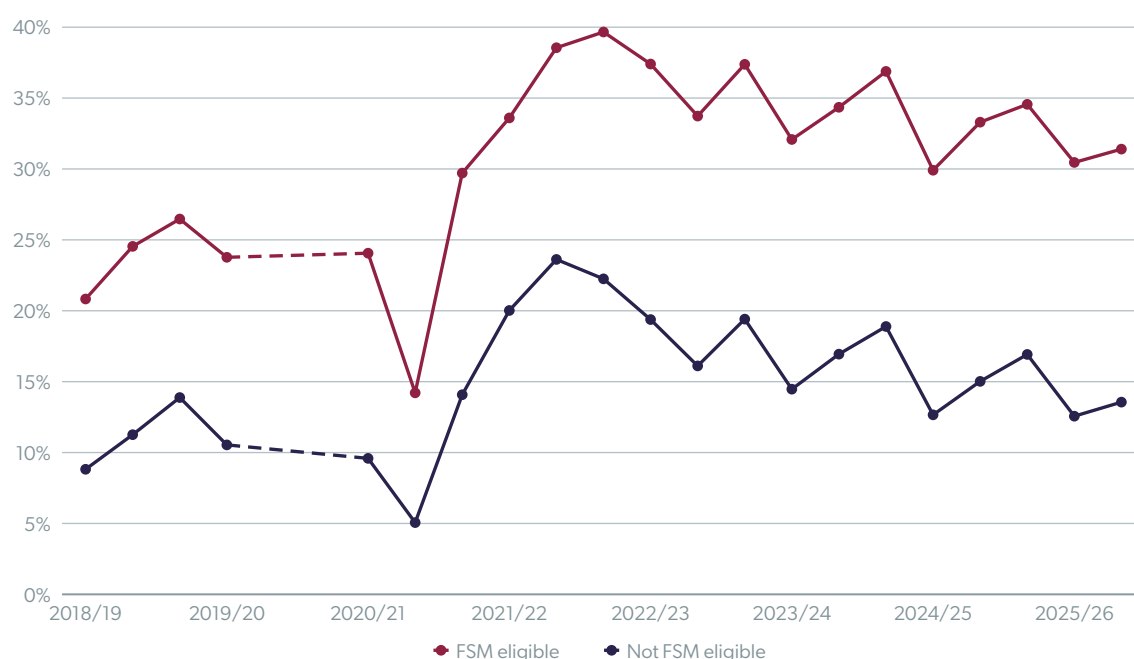
Among FSM-eligible pupils, 626,988 children were persistently absent in Spring 2026, equivalent to 31.4 per cent of the cohort. This compares with 30.5 per cent in the previous term and 33.3 per cent in Spring 2025.

94,458 FSM-eligible children were severely absent, representing 4.7 per cent of the cohort, compared with 3.6 per cent in the previous term and 4.6 per cent a year earlier. Overall, FSM-eligible pupils missed 10.7 per cent of possible school sessions.

Among pupils who are not eligible for FSM, 686,540 children were persistently absent in Spring 2026, equivalent to 13.6 per cent of the cohort. This compares with 12.6 per cent in the previous term and 15.0 per cent in Spring 2025.

Severe absence affected 67,165 children, or 1.3 per cent of the cohort, compared with 1.0 per cent in the previous term and 1.3 per cent a year earlier. These pupils missed 5.2 per cent of possible school sessions overall. Comparisons with the same term a year earlier provide a clearer indication of progress, given seasonal differences in absence.

Figure 4 – Persistent absence by Free School Meals eligibility, termly



The relationship between FSM eligibility and absence also varies substantially by ethnicity. The following joint FSM-and-ethnicity figures cover Autumn and Spring 2025/26 combined, as shown in Figures 5 and 6. Among White British pupils eligible for FSM, 35.0 per cent were persistently absent, compared with 6.1 per cent of Chinese pupils and 11.6 per cent of Black African pupils eligible for FSM. The corresponding severe absence rates were 5.2, 0.3 and 0.9 per cent respectively. White British pupils eligible for FSM were therefore 15.4 times as likely to be severely absent as Chinese pupils eligible for FSM, and 6.0 times as likely as their Black African counterparts.

Within the White British cohort, FSM-eligible pupils were 4.1 times as likely to be severely absent as those who were not eligible. These differences show that the attendance gap associated with FSM eligibility varies markedly between ethnic groups.

The latest year-on-year pattern suggests that absence is becoming increasingly concentrated among FSM-eligible pupils, with the number of persistently absent pupils falling by 3.4 per cent among FSM-eligible pupils and by 12.2 per cent among their non-eligible peers. FSM-eligible pupils now account for 47.5 per cent of all persistently absent pupils, compared with 45.2 per cent in the same term last year, and 57.5 per cent of severely absent pupils, up from 55.9 per cent. In the separate Autumn and Spring 2025/26 combined figures, White British pupils eligible for FSM account for a particularly large share of severe absence: they represent 16.2 per cent of all pupil enrolments but 36.6 per cent of severely absent pupils.

Figure 5 – Persistent absence by Free School Meals eligibility and ethnicity

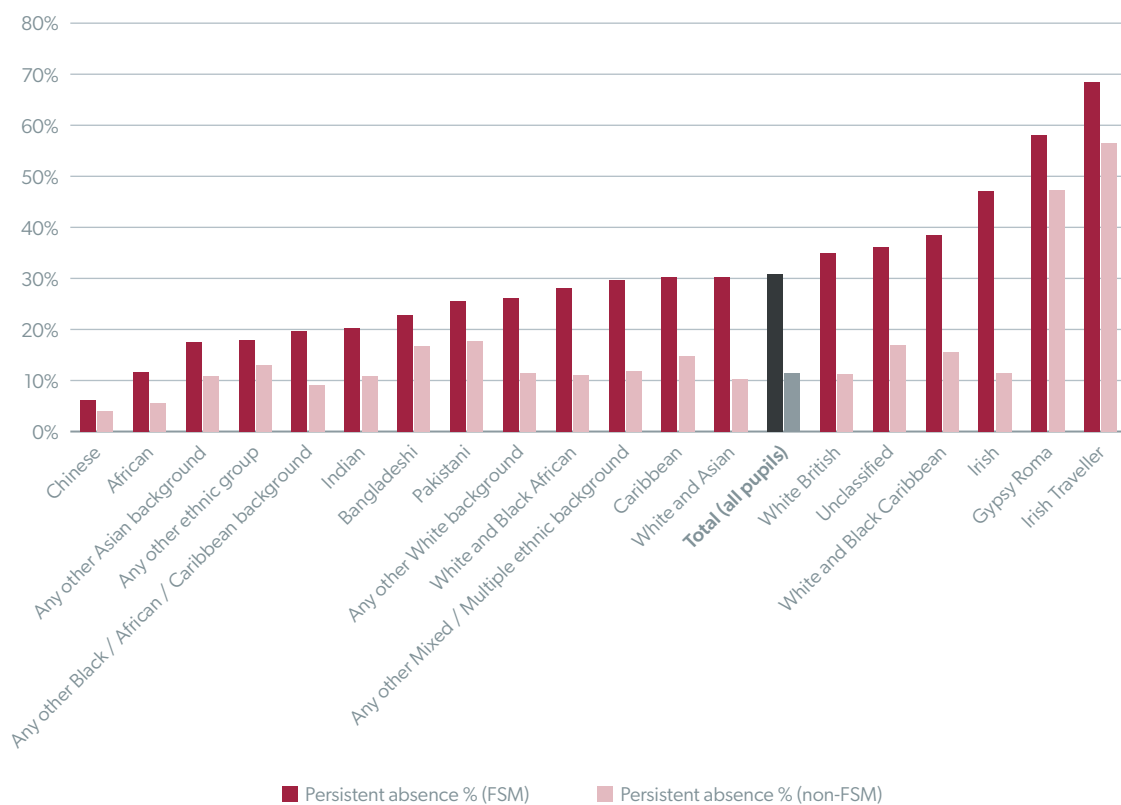
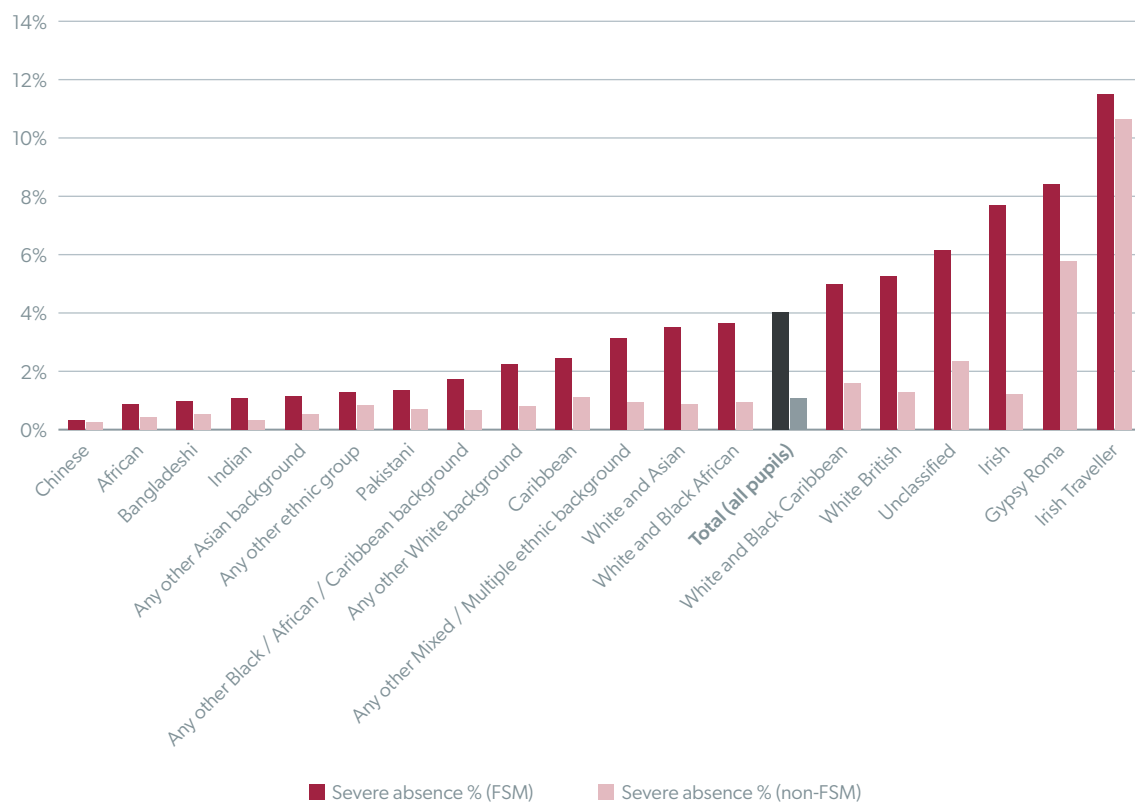


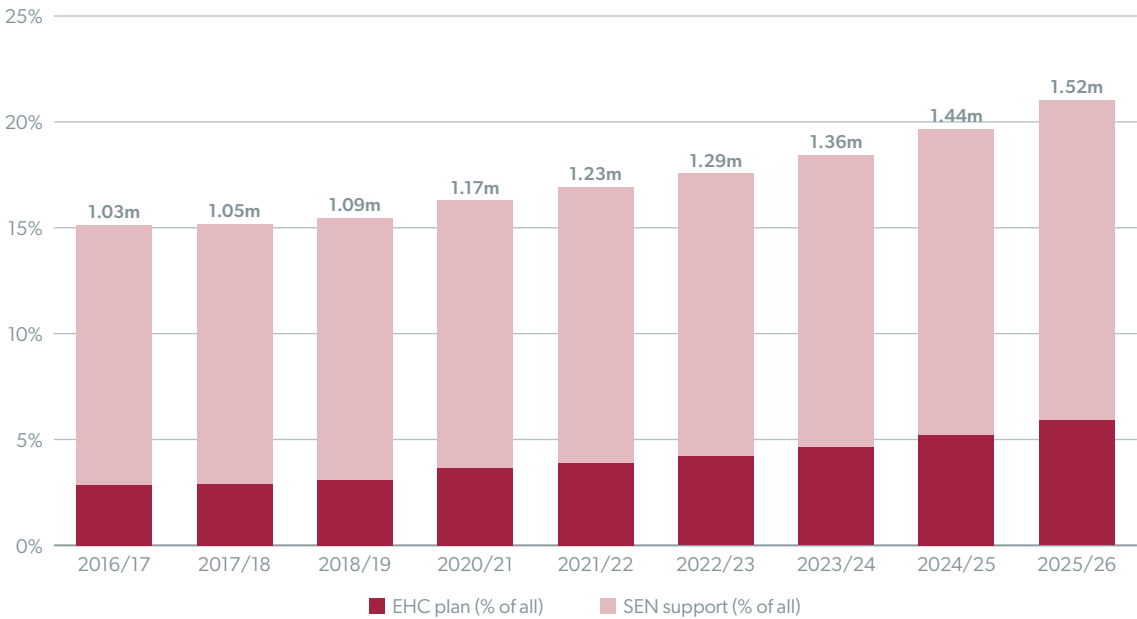
Figure 6 – Severe absence by Free School Meals eligibility and ethnicity



Absence by special educational needs and disabilities

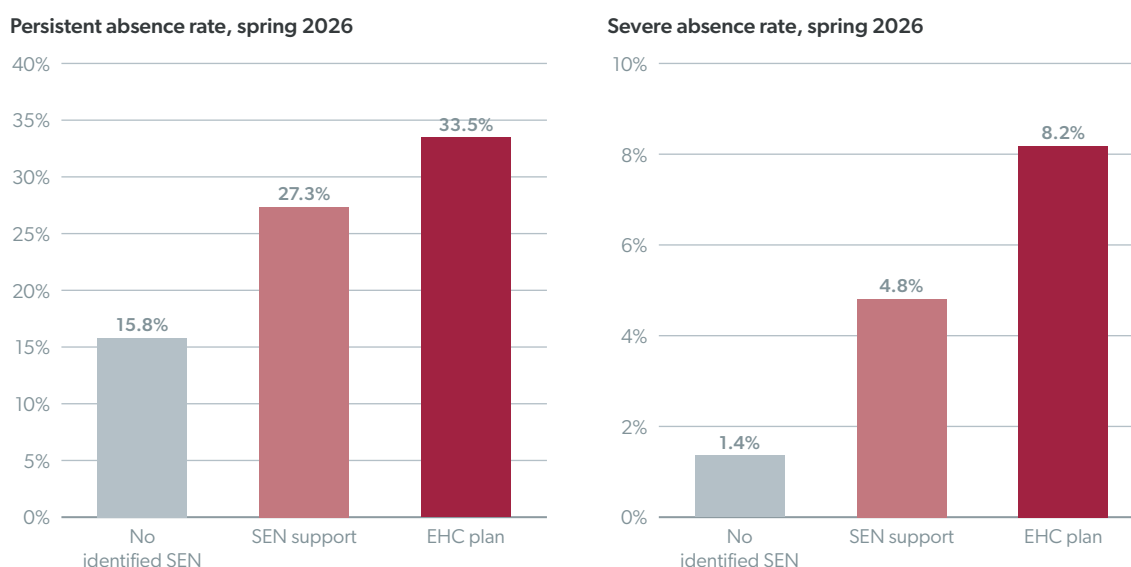
The number of pupils with identified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) has grown rapidly. Across Autumn and Spring 2025/26, 1,523,106 pupils received SEN support or had an education, health and care (EHC) plan, representing 21.0 per cent of pupil enrolments. This compares with 1,034,546 pupils, or 15.1 per cent, in the same period in 2016/17 — an increase of 47.2 per cent. Over this period, the number receiving SEN support increased by 30.2 per cent, while the number with EHC plans or their predecessor statements increased by 120.3 per cent.

Figure 7 – Pupils with SEND account for a growing share of the school population



Pupils with SEND also experience substantially higher absence rates. In Spring 2026, 27.3 per cent of pupils receiving SEN support and 33.5 per cent of pupils with EHC plans were persistently absent, compared with 15.8 per cent of pupils with no identified SEN. The disparity is particularly pronounced for severe absence. The corresponding rates were 4.8, 8.2 and 1.4 per cent, meaning pupils with EHC plans were 6.0 times as likely to be severely absent as pupils with no identified SEN.

Figure 8 – Persistent and severe absence rates are higher among pupils with SEND

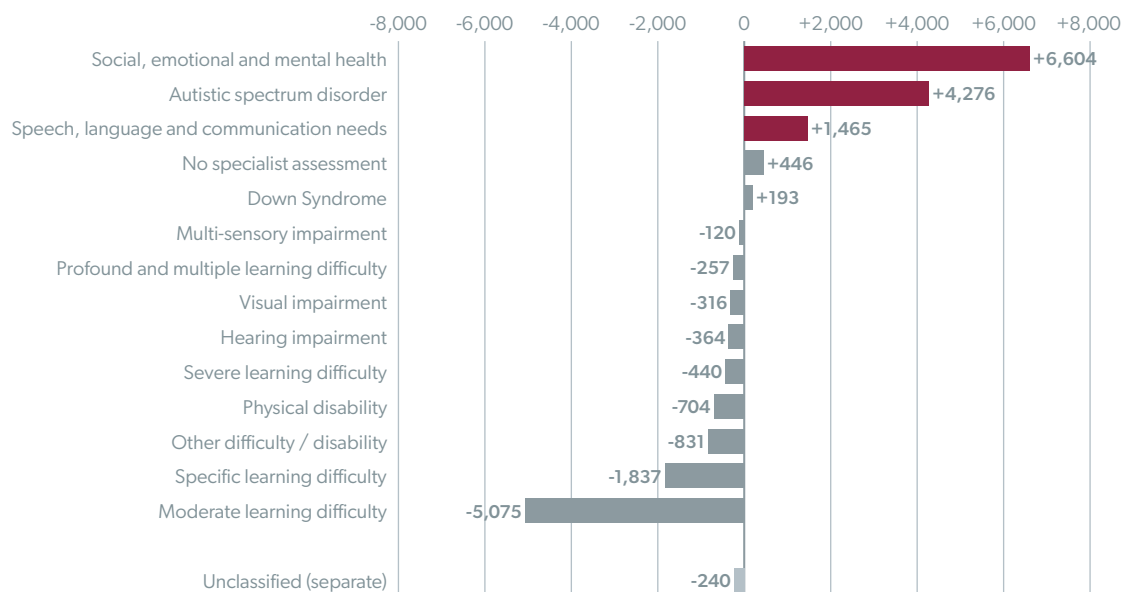


Pupils with SEND account for an increasing share of absent pupils. Across Autumn and Spring 2025/26, they represented 34.3 per cent of persistently absent pupils, compared with 32.0 per cent in 2024/25 and 26.3 per cent in 2016/17. Their share of severely absent pupils rose from 43.7 to 46.7 per cent over the past year. It is likely that soon over half of severely absent children receive SEN support or have an EHCP.

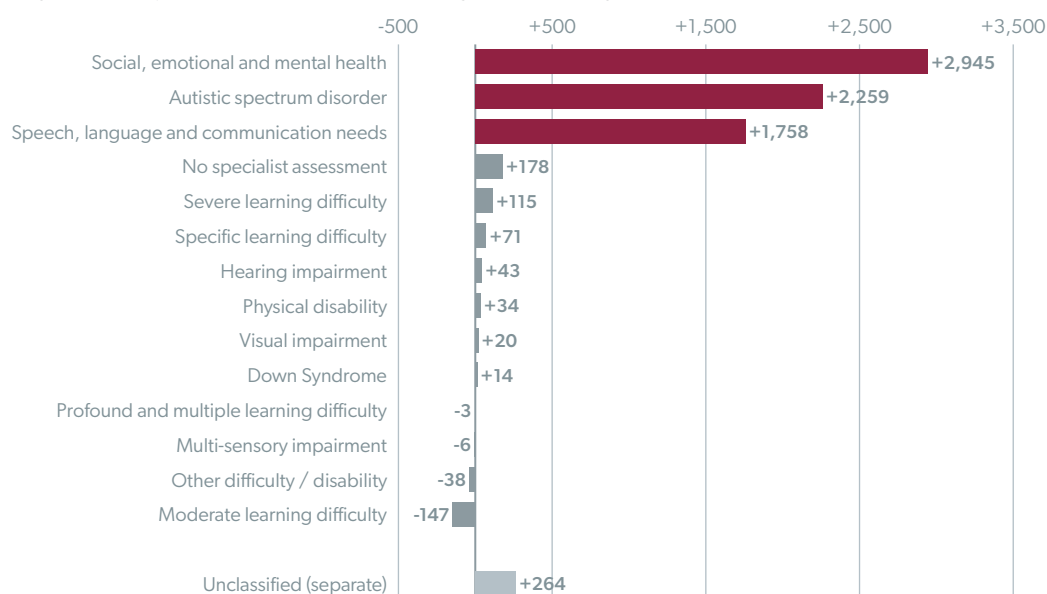
Within SEND, much of the increase in absence is concentrated in pupils whose recorded primary needs are autistic spectrum disorder, social, emotional and mental health needs and speech, language and communication needs. Between Spring 2025 and Spring 2026, these three groups accounted for an additional 12,345 persistently absent pupils. This increase was partly offset by a fall of 9,545 among pupils with other identified SEN, leaving an overall increase of 2,800 persistently absent pupils with SEND.

Figures 9 and 10 – Change in persistently and severely absent pupils with SEND, spring 2025 to spring 2026

Change in persistently absent pupils with SEND, spring 2025 to spring 2026



Change in severely absent pupils with SEND, spring 2025 to spring 2026



Absence by sex

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

In Spring 2026, 18.9 per cent of female pupils and 18.5 per cent of male pupils were persistently absent. For severe absence, the rates were 2.4 per cent for female pupils and 2.3 per cent for male pupils, respectively.

Absence by year group

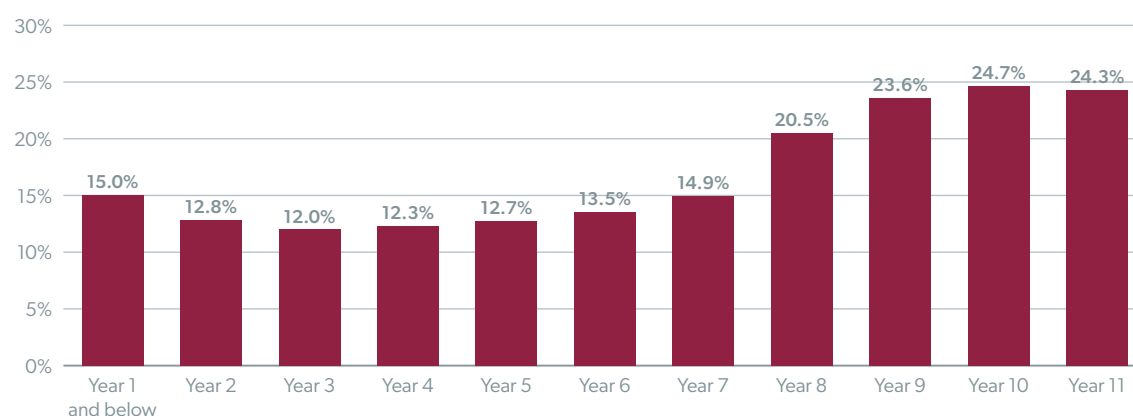
School absence is generally lowest in the middle primary years and highest in the later secondary years. Rates fall between Year 1 and below and Year 3, when persistent and severe absence reach their lowest levels at 12.0 and 0.7 per cent respectively. They then rise gradually through the remaining primary years. Persistent absence then peaks in Year 10 at 24.7 per cent, while severe absence and overall absence peak in Year 11, at 4.6 and 9.6 per cent respectively.

Absence rises at the transition to secondary school and continues to worsen in later years. Between Years 6 and 7, persistent absence rises from 13.5 to 14.9 per cent, overall absence rises from 5.4 to 5.9 per cent, and severe absence rises from 0.8 to 1.4 per cent. The largest percentage-point rise in both persistent and severe absence is between Years 7 and 8. Between Years 7 and 8, persistent absence rises from 14.9 to 20.5 per cent, while severe absence rises from 1.4 to 2.7 per cent. This suggests that attendance difficulties become more pronounced as pupils progress through secondary school, beyond the immediate transition.

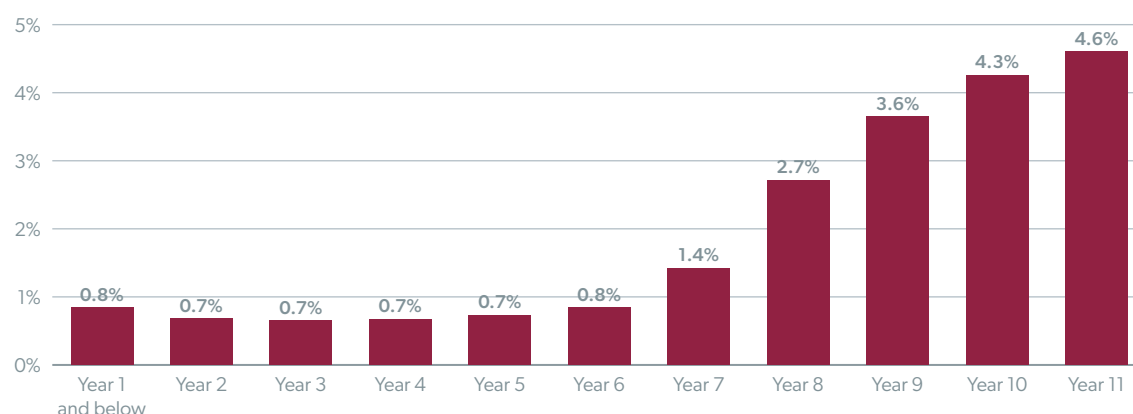
Across the primary and secondary years, the increase is far starker for severe absence. By Year 11, the severe absence rate is 7.1 times that in Year 3, compared with 2.0 times for persistent absence.

Figures 11 and 12 – Persistent and severe absence rates by Year Group, Autumn and Spring terms 2025/26

Persistent absence rate by year group, autumn and spring terms 2025/26



Severe absence rate by year group, autumn and spring terms 2025/26



Tackling school absence

The Government's plan to get children back in school

The number of severely absent children continues its relentless march upwards more than five years on from the pandemic. The Government is at risk of ignoring the need to get this cohort of children back into the classroom by solely focusing on the overall absence figure.

In the Schools White Paper in February 2026, the Government set a target to raise overall school attendance to over 94 per cent by 2028/29, equivalent to 20 million additional days in school each year compared with 2023/24. This has come with a plan to reduce absence that combines school-wide improvement, targeted support and wider reforms affecting attendance.

School-wide attendance improvement

When addressing absence as a 'volume' issue – looking at the large numbers with low level absence – the government has:

- › Established 93 RISE Attendance and Behaviour Hubs, with capacity to support more than 3,000 schools annually through training, sharing effective practice and intensive support for schools facing greater challenges. Attendance is a priority within the wider Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence programme.
- › Introduced a new Ofsted inspection framework in November 2025, with attendance and behaviour as a separately graded evaluation area. Inspectors now have access to more timely attendance data.
- › Expanded attendance data tools for schools, trusts and local authorities, including AI-assisted comparisons with 20 schools with similar characteristics. Introduced indicative Attendance Baseline Improvement Expectations in 2025/26, setting out the minimum improvement expected for individual schools, with full introduction having recently launched.
- › Continued implementing *Working together to improve school attendance*, which became statutory in August 2024 and was updated in July 2026. This sets expectations for schools and local authorities on early identification, support for families and legal intervention where appropriate.

Targeted support for absent and vulnerable pupils

When addressing absence as a 'severity' issue – looking at the smaller numbers with high levels of absence – the government has:

- › Expanded attendance mentoring into ten additional areas, with delivery by Etio and evaluation by the Youth Endowment Fund. The Government also published the years 2 and 3 evaluation of the original Barnardo's intervention in May 2026, with corrected delivery figures published in June.

- › Published guidance for social workers and other practitioners in March 2026, bringing together expectations on attendance within child protection and child-in-need planning, family support, the use of live data and joint working with schools.
- › Introduced a duty, effective from September 2026, requiring local housing authorities to notify schools, GP practices and health visiting services when a child is placed in temporary accommodation. This is intended to improve coordination and support for affected children.
- › Legislated for local authority Children Not in School registers through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026. The Government has committed to implementation by the end of this Parliament, following regulations, statutory guidance and a preparation period.

Wider reforms affecting attendance

When looking at the wider issues affecting absence, the government has:

- › Begun the phased national rollout of free breakfast clubs in every state-funded school with primary-aged pupils. The Government announced provision in more than 2,700 schools from September 2026.
- › Committed to minimum expectations for home-school partnerships, covering communication and the responsibilities of schools and families. A separate pupil engagement framework remains in development: DfE has indicated that publication is now expected before the end of 2026/27, to inform planning for September 2027.
- › Announced a core enrichment entitlement in the February 2026 Schools White Paper and published an Enrichment Framework for schools and colleges in June 2026 to support provision.
- › Continued expanding Mental Health Support Teams, which were working in almost 11,800 schools and colleges by June 2026. The Government has committed to every school and college having access by the end of 2029.
- › Consulted on major SEND reforms between February and May 2026, including proposals for earlier support and stronger provision in mainstream settings. The Government is reviewing responses ahead of publishing its response and next steps.

In many ways, this response has been effective, with absence rates continuing to come down four years on from the peak. However, clearly the shock of the pandemic has left endemic issues in our education system that policy has yet to fully unpick.

As we near the end of 2026 and observe the comprehensive plan seeking to tackle school absence week to week, it is no longer sufficient to decry a lack of action. We must unpick the underlying issues of school absence, and build a system for the future that is protected against educational disengagement.

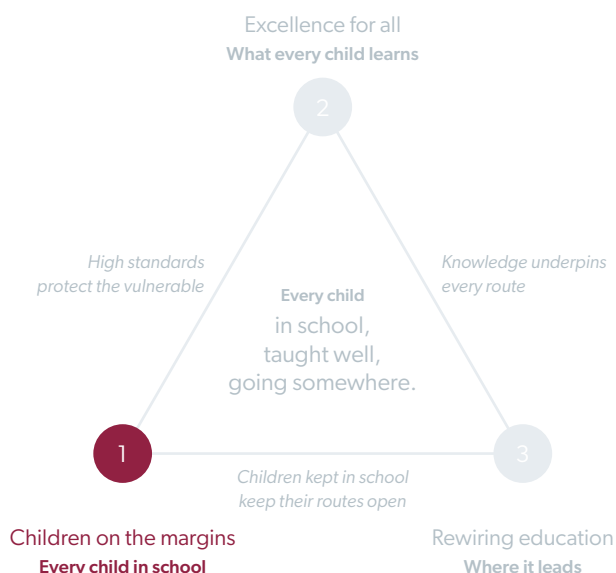
The CSJ's plan for reform has been designed to tackle the underlying drivers of absence cost-effectively, focusing on support for the whole family. The CSJ will continue to track progress made by the Government on implementing recommendations to reduce crisis levels of school absence.

But these reforms on their own would not be enough; we need a cultural change in attitude towards schooling that begins in the home. A nation where almost half of parents consider persistent absence 'reasonable' attendance is selling its children's futures short.

Our plan for reform

Every child should be in school, taught well, and going somewhere.

This requires three things: children on the margins to be kept in education and engaged, a rewired system where every child is on a meaningful path, and everything built on foundations of rigour and excellence for all.



Absent children are one of the key groups of children on the margins of the education system who need to be re-engaged with school life. Our plan for reform starts by looking at how to directly engage those on the edges of the education system.

Crisis response

Every day that the absence 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.

1) Scale up attendance mentors and put Family Support Workers in schools

RECOMMENDATION

Families facing severe and persistent absence need two kinds of support: intensive help for the most complex cases, and a consistent, trusted adult in school for those at risk of becoming complex cases.

Attendance mentors are currently the main crisis intervention support mechanism for families facing severe and persistent absence.

Family Support Workers are like Family Liaison Officers and non-teaching pastoral staff that act as a single point of contact for families.

The DfE should set out a framework for the role of the Family Support Worker, establishing how it complements that of Designated Safeguarding Leads and Special Educational Needs Coordinators, with a view to a national rollout. Alongside this, it should launch a pilot evaluation of the effectiveness of Family Support Workers in addressing school absence. The two roles should work together: mentors for the most complex cases, and Family Support Workers as the everyday link between home and school.

Progress update: action taken on mentors, but the evidence is still thin; none yet on family support

The Department for Education (DfE) invested £2.3 million in a three-year pilot of attendance mentors delivered by Barnardo's. It began in Middlesbrough in September 2022 and was extended to Salford, Doncaster, Knowsley and Stoke-on-Trent in September 2023. Over three years the pilot supported 1,698 pupils.³

The first-year evaluation, published in March 2024, found that half of supported pupils improved their attendance, but attendance declined in over a third of cases (36 per cent).⁴ The final evaluation of years two and three, published in May 2026, could not settle the question. Attendance records were of too poor quality to measure change over time, so the evaluators relied on pupils' own reports: 54 per cent said their attendance had improved by the end of mentoring. In several cases, improvements weakened once the mentoring ended.⁵ Nearly four years on, there is still a lack of robust evidence on attendance mentors improving attendance.

The expanded programme, now delivered by Etio in ten further areas, is being evaluated by the Youth Endowment Fund through a randomised controlled trial. A crisis response intervention for severe absence remains essential, and attendance mentors remain a possible intervention. However, the cautious expansion while evaluations of effectiveness continue to be inconclusive is sensible policymaking.

3 Department for Education (2026). Attendance mentors intervention: year 2 and 3 evaluation (RR1616). Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/attendance-mentors-intervention-year-2-and-3-evaluation (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

4 Department for Education (2024). Evaluation of the attendance mentors pilot: Year 1 findings. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fb20d3703c423c5158ef03/Evaluation_of_the_attendance_mentors_pilot_-_Year_1_findings.pdf (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

5 Department for Education (2026). Attendance mentors intervention: year 2 and 3 evaluation (RR1616). Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/attendance-mentors-intervention-year-2-and-3-evaluation (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

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 being associated with a £10,000 loss in income at age 28. Three in ten parents said it is no longer essential to attend school every day.

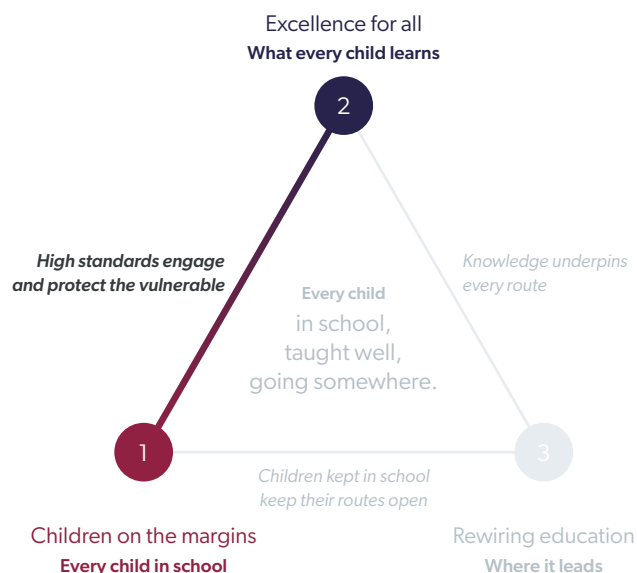
The Government should tackle low awareness of the harms of absence and draw from evidence of similar interventions to introduce a new mandatory Attendance Awareness Course at the beginning of the legal intervention process for unauthorised absence. After voluntary routes have been exhausted, parents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

Progress update: concerning lack of action

Although the 2026 Schools White Paper did emphasise the importance of parental attitudes to attendance, and of home-to-school relationships, it disappointingly did not announce the introduction of an attendance awareness course.

Longer term reform – excellence for all

Alongside crisis response, we need long-term solutions that address the root causes of school absence. The next set of reforms recommended by the CSJ are necessary to support ‘Children on the margins’ and to deliver ‘Excellence for all’.



Expectations of attendance, behaviour and participation protect the most disadvantaged children. These reforms raise what every child can expect from school in a full offer of sport and enrichment and raise what schools and parents can expect of each other, in a renewed relationship between home and school. This must also be built on the foundation of high standards for school readiness and the early years learning environment.

3) Engaging and enriching school life – Introduce a Right to Sport and enrichment activities

RECOMMENDATION

Sport has been shown to increase attendance, grades and engagement, yet stubborn disparities in access to sport exist between poorer and more affluent pupils and the state and independent sectors.⁶

To ensure consistent delivery and equitable access to enrichment and extra-curricular sport and physical activity, the government should offer secondary schools an Enrichment Guarantee and Right to Sport grant. Schools would commit to providing a 2 + 5 sport and enrichment guarantee, including:

- A minimum of 2 hours a week of timetabled PE for every pupil
- A minimum of 5 hours a week of extra-curricular enrichment for every pupil, of which at least 2 hours must be extra-curricular sport or physical activity⁷

A costed delivery plan for the Right to Sport can be found in *Inactive Nation 2*.⁸

Progress update: some action taken

In the 2026 White Paper, the government announced plans for a major expansion of enrichment provision in schools, committing to an “enrichment entitlement” for every child.⁹

In June 2026 the Department for Education published the *Enrichment Framework*, which provides helpful guidance for schools with benchmarks explaining what their enrichment offer should constitute.¹⁰ However, it is non-statutory, contains no minimum number of hours for enrichment activities, and comes without an adequate funding stream for schools to deliver what it expects.

The £22.5 million Enrichment Expansion Programme will only support 400 out of 3,458 secondary schools,¹¹ and even then £16.8 million is being paid to a delivery partner, with very little making its way into school grants. Similarly, the ‘Every Child Can’ initiative, backed by £132.5 million, is welcome, but it is a one-off injection that cannot realistically allow schools to expand their enrichment provision over medium-to-long-term, while questions also remain on how this funding will be accessed and distributed.¹²

The government has announced that from Spring 2027, the primary school PE premium funding scheme will be replaced by a new School Sport Partnerships Network (SSPN), aiming to strengthen links between

6 Centre for Social Justice (2026). *Inactive Nation part 2: Getting England’s teenagers moving*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/CSJ-Inactive_Nation_2.pdf (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

7 Offering more than 2 hours a week of timetabled PE or Games would count towards meeting this requirement

8 Centre for Social Justice (2026). *Inactive Nation part 2: Getting England’s teenagers moving*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/CSJ-Inactive_Nation_2.pdf (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

9 Department for Education (2026). *Every child achieving and thriving*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

10 Department for Education (2026). *The enrichment framework for schools and colleges*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/the-enrichment-framework-for-schools-and-colleges (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

11 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (13 June 2026). *Every child to get access to enriching activities to build skills and confidence for life*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/every-child-to-get-access-to-enriching-activities-to-build-skills-and-confidence-for-life (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

12 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (13 June 2026). *Every child to get access to enriching activities to build skills and confidence for life*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/every-child-to-get-access-to-enriching-activities-to-build-skills-and-confidence-for-life (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

schools, sports clubs and local community providers.¹³ The SSPN has £580 million of dedicated funding, alongside the ‘almost £200 million’ capital injection to improve school sport facilities.¹⁴ These steps mark a small increase in secondary school sport funding (and a large cut in primary school sport funding), but it is spread across all schools, and the scope has expanded far more than the resource has.

The CSJ’s Right to Sport policy is a more ambitious vision for school sport than the government’s existing plans, building on the delivery infrastructure laid by the new School Sport Partnerships model to provide every secondary school pupil with high-quality sport and physical activity opportunities at school.

At a time when too many young people are disengaged from their education, access to enrichment cannot be left to chance. The CSJ will continue to campaign for the government to deliver a ‘Right to Sport’ to ensure that children and young people can consistently reap the benefits of physical activity in the school week.

4) Overhaul parental engagement at schools

RECOMMENDATION

Many parents told the CSJ that when dealing with an absent child they often feel “on their own”.¹⁵ Alongside the expansion of support, long-term relationship building between schools and parents should be strengthened. The DfE 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 to secondary school.
- Guidance on including fathers.
- 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 remain

The Government has taken large steps in this direction over the last year, including in the 2026 Schools White Paper. Most striking is the commitment to the introduction of minimum standards for home-to-school partnerships. These are at an early stage of implementation, so it is too soon to say whether they will move the dial or whether a further upstream solution will be needed, but the Government has made an encouraging start.

¹³ Department for Education (2026). *£1bn boost to PE and school sport to end fitness postcode lottery*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/1bn-boost-to-pe-and-school-sport-to-end-fitness-postcode-lottery (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

¹⁴ Department for Education (2026). *£1bn boost to PE and school sport to end fitness postcode lottery*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/1bn-boost-to-pe-and-school-sport-to-end-fitness-postcode-lottery (Accessed: 15 October 2026).

¹⁵ Centre for Social Justice (2025), *Absent Ambition*.

5) Improve school readiness in the early years

RECOMMENDATION

Our landmark Absent Ambition inquiry found that the seeds of school absence are often sown in the early years. The DfE should introduce 'Starting Reception' as the single, agreed definition of 'school ready' and use the health visitor review at age 2 to 2½ to guide parents on their child's progress towards school readiness, including the offer of a supportive 'Starting Reception' class to all parents. Alongside this, the Government should move birth registrations to Family Hubs and introduce a relationship support fund, so that midwives and health visitors can hold targeted conversations with couples at higher risk of separation and help them engage with 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 encouraging 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 importance of family relationships to school absence.

Longer term reform: rewiring education

The second set of reforms sits on the line between "Children on the margins" and "Rewiring education." We cannot ignore that absence has become increasingly concentrated in secondary school years, with young people disengaging with school over the course of their teenage years.



Too many young people see little point in being at school: 42 per cent of secondary school parents told the CSJ that most of what their child is taught is unlikely to help them later in life.¹⁶ Alongside high expectations and an enriching offer, children need something to aspire to and a path to success to keep them focused on their education.

¹⁶ Centre for Social Justice (2025), Absent Ambition.

6) Rewiring education in secondary school

RECOMMENDATION

The other fundamental, structural reform needed to stop young people drifting out of school is a comprehensive rewiring of our technical and vocational education system, so that education is purposeful and gives young people a clear line of sight into the workplace. Too much of the system is built around a single academic route. Just 7 per cent of 18-year-olds start an apprenticeship, one for every five who go to university.

Routes into work must be built from age 14 rather than left until a young person has already fallen behind.¹⁷

- **Education and Career Guidance from Year 7.** The DfE should develop a mandatory Education and Career Guidance (ECG) course for all secondary school pupils, starting in Year 7 and inspired by Singapore's provision, with one lesson a week. It should include modules that build resilience and other soft skills for work readiness, with interactive materials so that parents can reinforce at home what is taught in school.
- **A Technical Baccalaureate from age 14.** The DfE should develop a Technical Baccalaureate (TBacc): a technically oriented performance measure recognising pupils who take English language and literature, maths and the sciences, plus at least two technically oriented optional GCSEs. This would give pupils for whom the EBacc is not the right fit a rigorous technical route.

So that these routes are taught well, the Government should also create a Technical Educator Passport, a dedicated pathway to Qualified Teacher Status for holders of a recognised professional qualification in a technical field.¹⁸

Progress update: major action announced

In July 2026 the Prime Minister announced that schools will offer technical pathways from age 14 (Year 10), with an ambition to begin rolling them out from September 2028. Pupils would combine English, maths and science with technical education linked to the jobs available in their area, in sectors such as engineering, digital technology, construction, and health and care. Mayors, local leaders, schools, colleges and employers would shape the offer. This is a welcome step towards a rewired education system, but the big question now becomes implementation.

For the full list of policy recommendations, see [Absent Ambition and Rewiring Education Part 2](#).

¹⁷ Centre for Social Justice (2026), Rewiring Education Part 2.

¹⁸ Centre for Social Justice (2026), Rewiring Education Part 2.

