

SCHOOL ABSENCE TRACKER

A termly analysis of official data relating to absence from schools

142,487

The number of severely absent pupils has soared by 136.5 per cent since before the pandemic. In Autumn 2023, 142,487 pupils were absent from school more than they were present (severely absent), which is 1.97 per cent of the school population. This compares with 60,244 pupils who were severely absent in Autumn 2019 (pre-pandemic), equating to an additional 82,243 pupils.

1,407,802

Persistent absence has increased by 52.6 per cent since before the pandemic. 1,407,802 pupils were persistently absent in Autumn 2023, which equates to 19.44 per cent of all pupils. This compares to 922,566 pupils before the pandemic.

6.69%

The overall absence rate in Autumn 2023 was 6.69 per cent. This is an increase of 35.7 per cent since before the pandemic.

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Headline statistics

The number of severely absent pupils has soared by 136.5 per cent since before the pandemic. In Autumn 2023, 142,487 pupils were absent from school more often than they were present (severely absent), which is 1.97 per cent of the school population. This compares with 60,244 who were severely absent in Autumn 2019, the last full term before the pandemic. This means an additional 82,243 pupils are now severely absent from school.

It is vulnerable children who are affected most. In the 2022/23 academic year, children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) had a severe absence rate more than triple the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. Children in receipt of special educational needs (SEN) support are also more likely to be severely absent than their peers.

While persistent absence has decreased slightly, it is still at a concerningly high level compared to pre-pandemic. 1,407,802 pupils were persistently absent in Autumn 2023, which equates to 19.44 per cent of all pupils. This is an increase of 52.6 per cent since before the pandemic.

The overall absence rate in Autumn 2023 was 6.69 per cent. This is an increase of 35.7 per cent since before the pandemic.

About the Centre for Social Justice

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

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

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

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

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2024 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

Foreword

The latest school attendance data has shown that the number of children who are severely absent remains at crisis levels. These are the ‘ghost children’ who are absent from school more than they attend school and the latest figures show that these levels of absence now risk becoming entrenched.

In the Autumn term of 2023, over 142,000 children missed at least 50 per cent of their school time and were classed as severely absent. Severe absence follows a seasonal trend, so there is an expected slight decrease from the summer term, but these figures show a record high number of children severely absent in an autumn term. The number of severely absent children is up 13.7 per cent from this time last year, representing a shocking 136.5 per cent rise compared to before the pandemic.

We also still have over 1.4 million children who were missing at least 10 per cent of their school time in the autumn term 2023. This is the equivalent to missing an afternoon of school a week.

With a national challenge of economic inactivity, and a fast-rising cohort of 16–25-year-olds who are out of work and not required to seek it, we are facing a bow-wave of young people who are missing out on education, work and opportunity.

The Secretary of State for Education has said that tackling absence is ‘a top priority’, and small steps in the right direction have been made. But the Government response doesn’t yet match the scale of the crisis. The government must accelerate the roll out of attendance mentors across the nation, waiting for the current attendance pilots to finish will be too late.

This lost generation are growing up fast. Babies born in the first months of the lockdown are starting school in September. Children who were in year 7 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic are sitting their GCSEs. This is the last year that pupils will get additional support in their exams to mitigate the pandemic impact, but the harms are far from over.

This is why, alongside the attendance mentors, working with parents must be at the heart of tackling the absence crisis. The Centre for Social Justice is asking for an urgent national parental participation strategy so that schools and families are supported to work together on a shared mission of getting kids back into school. CSJ polling published in January this year found that the previous sense of education as a pathway out of poverty has collapsed as nearly three in ten parents believe lockdown showed its not essential for children to attend school every day. Until this changes, Government will be fighting an uphill battle it is highly unlikely to win.

This is fundamentally a matter of social justice. It is the most vulnerable children who are affected the most. Children in receipt of Free School Meals had a severe absence rate more than triple the rate for children who were not eligible. Children in receipt of special educational needs support are also more likely to be severely absent than their peers.

Every day of school missed reduces a child’s future life chances. We must see concerted action by Government to shift the dial on these numbers. Failure to change this now will result in a whole generation left behind.



Rt. Hon. Sir Iain Duncan Smith MP

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

Executive summary

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

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

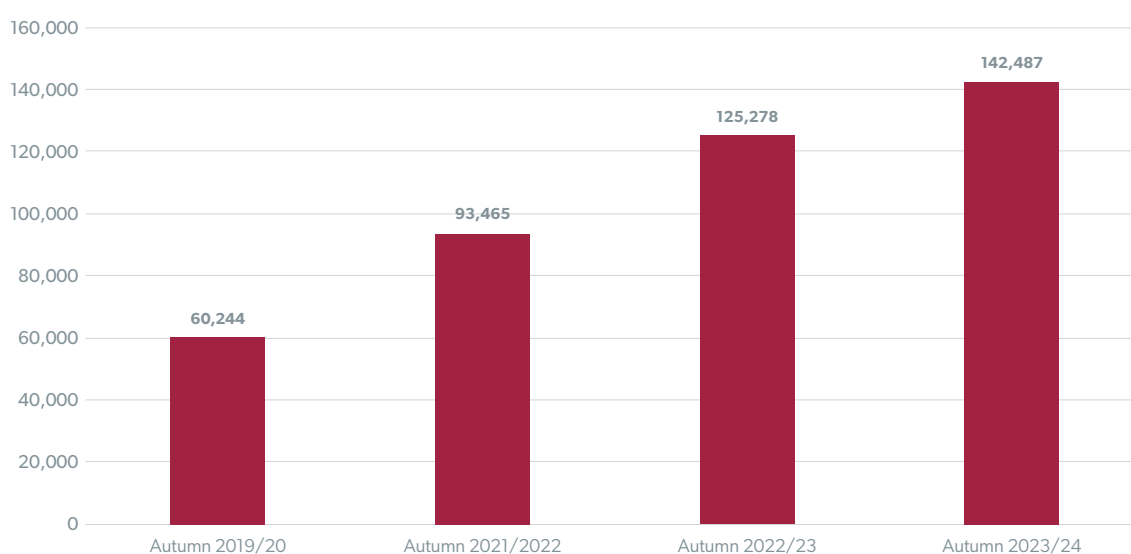
This report was followed by *'Lost but Not Forgotten'*, which found that vulnerable pupils are the most likely to have disengaged from school. In March 2023 we published *'Lost and Not Found'*, setting out the conclusions of our inquiry into the drivers behind school absence, which include anxiety and poor mental health, unmet special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), poverty/disadvantage, and changing parental attitudes towards education following the pandemic.

In January 2024, we published *'The Missing Link'* which detailed the results of polling commissioned by the CSJ on parental attitudes towards attendance and parental perceptions of school engagement. 28 per cent of parents polled agree that the pandemic has shown it is not essential for children to attend school every day.

In May 2023, we launched the *'School Absence Tracker'*, which examined government figures on absence levels for Autumn 2022 and tracked steps taken by government to tackle school absence. Since then, we have launched updated trackers in [October 2023](#) and [March 2024](#).

This latest *'School Absence Tracker'* analyses absence figures for Autumn 2023 (unless otherwise stated), revealing that the number of children severely absent in Autumn term 2023 was the highest on record for an autumn term – an increase of 13.7 per cent when compared to Autumn 2022.

Figure 1: Severe Absence in Autumn Terms



Our analysis shows that, in Autumn 2023, 142,487 children were severely absent, an increase of 136.5 per cent since before the pandemic (Autumn 2019).

Our analysis also shows 1,407,802 children were persistently absent in Autumn 2023. This is an increase of 52.6 per cent on pre-pandemic levels.

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

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

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

Absence data review

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

This chapter explores the most recent pupil level data collected by the Department for Education on attendance in the Autumn term of the 2023/24 academic year.

Indicative fortnightly data released from the Department for Education's attendance survey shows that absence rates remain much higher than before the pandemic. As of the week commencing 29th April 2024, the overall absence rate for the year-to-date was 7.0 per cent.¹ The authorised absence rate was 4.7 per cent and the unauthorised absence rate was 2.3 per cent.²

1 Department for Education, 2024. "Week 10 2024 Pupil attendance in schools" [accessed via: [Pupil attendance in schools, Week 18 2024 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)]

2 Ibid.

Persistent absence

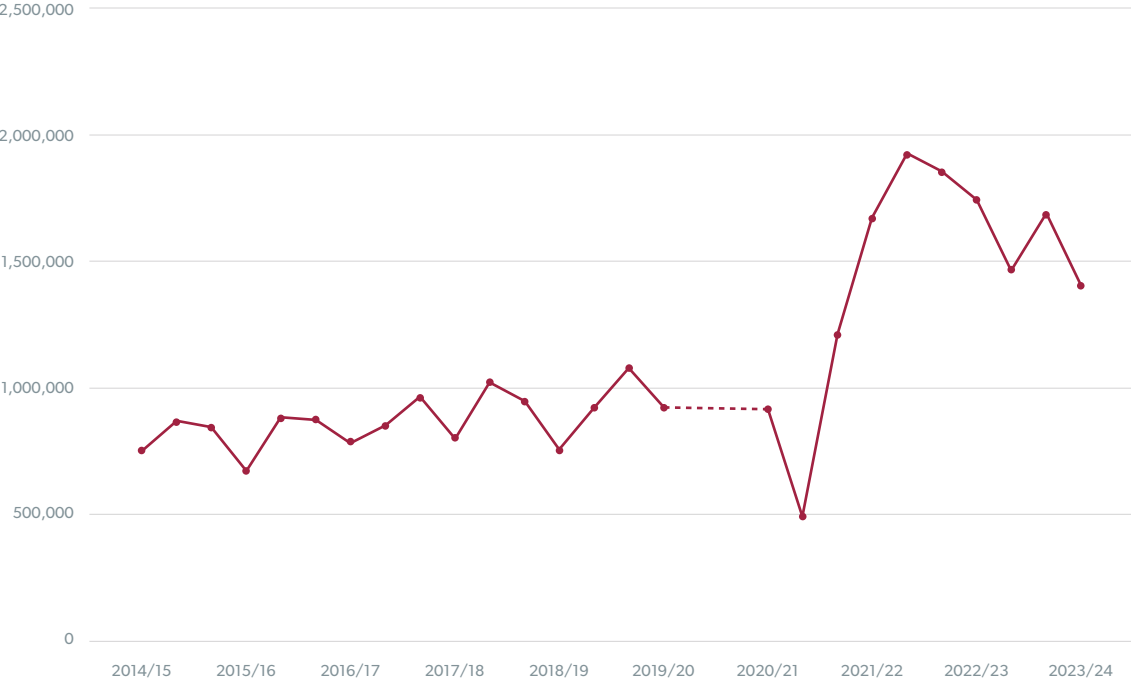
Children who are persistently absent miss 10 per cent or more of possible sessions in school. This is equivalent to missing at least one afternoon every week.

In Autumn 2023, 1,407,802 children were persistently absent. This is equivalent to nearly a fifth (19.44 per cent) of all children educated in state-funded mainstream or special schools.³

The number of persistently absent children has decreased by 16.6 per cent since the previous term, Summer 2023, a decrease of 280,847 children.⁴

The number of persistently absent children remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels. In Autumn 2019, the last full term before schools closed for the pandemic, 922,566 pupils were persistently absent (13.14 per cent of all children in state-funded mainstream and special schools).⁵ Persistent absence therefore has grown by 52.6 per cent relative to pre-pandemic.⁶

Figure 2: Persistent Absence Over Time



3 Department for Education, 2024. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn Term 2023/24" [Accessed via: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2023-24-autumn-term>]

4 Ibid.

5 Department for Education, 2024. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn Term 2023/24" [Accessed via: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2023-24-autumn-term>]

6 Ibid.

Severe absence

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

In Autumn 2023, 142,487 children were severely absent, a new record high for autumn term figures. This equates to 1.96 per cent of children in state-funded mainstream and special schools.⁷

The number of severely absent children remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels. In Autumn 2019, 60,244 pupils were severely absent.⁸ Compared to pre-pandemic, the number of children who were severely absent in Autumn 2023 has increased by 82,243.⁹

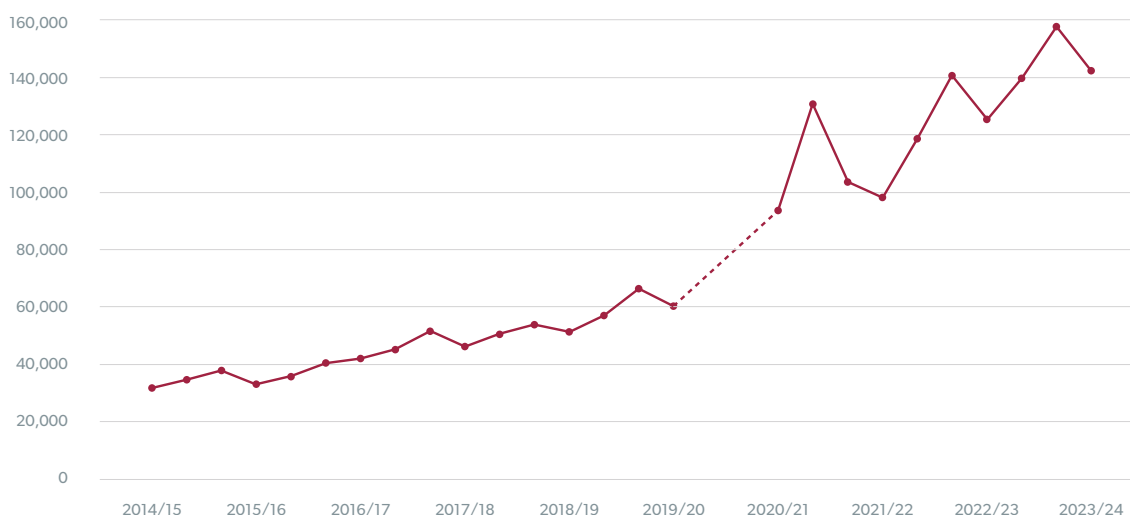
The number of severely absent children has decreased by 15,235 since Summer term 2023, a decrease of 9.7 per cent.¹⁰

There is a degree of seasonal volatility in the termly severe absence figures. Most years for which we have data show that the number of severely absent children increases term on term throughout the academic year, peaking in Summer. The following Autumn term, the number of severely absent children falls relative to the previous Summer term.

The figures for Autumn 2023 repeat this pattern. In Summer 2023, the number of severely absent children peaked at a record high of 157,722 pupils. This number has fallen by 15,235 children in Autumn 2023. This fall is consistent with termly patterns for severe absence.

Given the seasonal volatility, it is important to compare severe absence figures relative to the same term in the previous year. The figures show that in Autumn 2023, the number of severely absent children were the highest on record for any Autumn term.

Figure 3: Severe Absence Over Time



7 Ibid.

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

9 Department for Education, 2024. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn Term 2023/24" [Accessed via: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2023-24-autumn-term>]

10 Ibid.

Reasons for absence

In total, in Autumn 2023, 6.69 per cent of sessions were marked as absent.¹¹ 4.51 per cent of sessions were marked as authorised absences and 2.17 per cent were marked as unauthorised absences.¹²

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 Autumn 2023 are higher than Autumn 2019 – the last full-term before school closures – and 1 percentage point lower than Autumn 2022.¹³

Unauthorised Other absence rates have grown since before the pandemic. These rates indicate where children are off school without permission and for an unknown reason. In Autumn 2023, 1.48 per cent of all sessions were marked Unauthorised Other; in Autumn 2019 (pre-pandemic) it stood at 0.83 per cent.¹⁴

In Autumn 2023, 0.47 per cent of sessions were marked absent for unauthorised holidays. This compares to 0.36 per cent pre-pandemic and 0.44 per cent in Autumn 2022.¹⁵

The rate of authorised holidays in Autumn 2023 was 0.05 per cent, a similar level to previous autumn terms.¹⁶

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

Breakdown of absence data

Absence by school type

In Autumn 2023, 23.44 per cent of all children in state-funded secondary schools were persistently absent.¹⁷ 768,699 children in total were persistently absent in state-funded secondary schools.¹⁸

15.41 per cent of children in state-funded primary schools were persistently absent in Autumn 2023, equating to 589,965 children.¹⁹

The rate of persistent absence is higher in special schools. In Autumn 2023, 49,138 children educated in state-funded special schools were persistently absent.²⁰ This represents 36.19 per cent of all children educated in special schools.²¹

The rate is much higher in Alternative Provision (AP) settings. Across the Autumn 2023 term, 79.97 per cent of children educated in AP (23,595 children) were persistently absent.²² AP figures only reflect pupil enrolments in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), which are a type of state-maintained AP setting. It is worth noting that, due to the transience of the AP population, the absence figures are counted separately and not included in the total absence figures (which only includes state-funded primary, secondary and special schools). This is to prevent double counting, where a child may have been counted as absent in their mainstream setting, before then moving into AP and being counted as absent there.

In Autumn 2023, 3.14 per cent of all secondary school children were severely absent, accounting for 72.3 per cent of all severely absent children.²³ This is equivalent to 1 in every 32 children. This would equate to having nearly 98 secondary schools where all the children are absent for at least half of all possible sessions.

Primary school pupils account for 21.83 per cent of all severely absent children. 0.81 per cent of children in primary schools were severely absent in Autumn 2023.²⁴

As with persistent absence, the rate of severe absence is higher in special schools. In Autumn 2023, 8,357 children educated in special schools were severely absent. This represents 6.15 per cent of all children educated in special schools.²⁵

The rate is also much higher in AP settings. In Autumn 2023/24 term, 37.57 per cent of children in Pupil Referral Units (11,086 in total) were severely absent. As above, these figures are not counted as part of the total absence figures, to avoid double counting.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

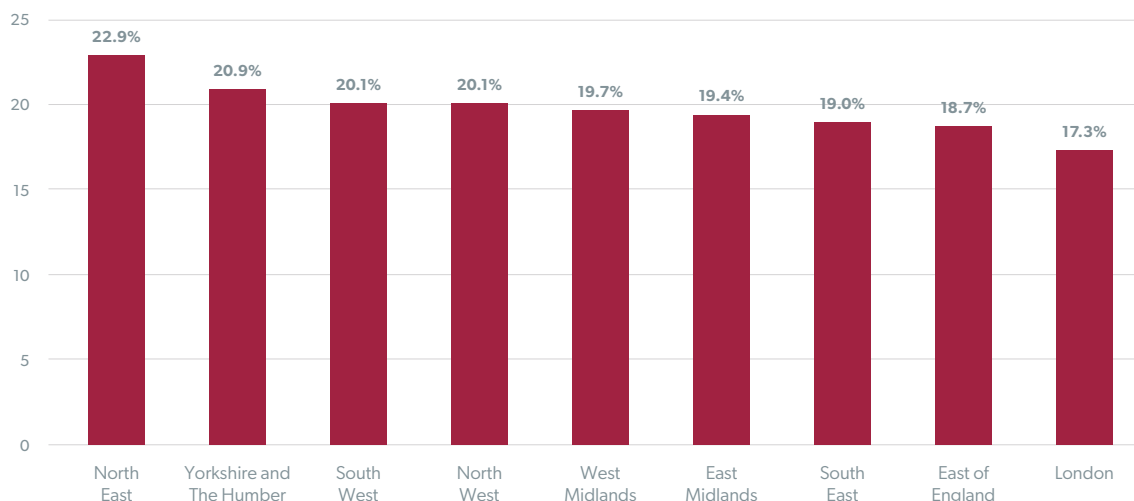
Absence by region

Patterns of absence vary across England.

The North East had the highest rate of persistent absence in Autumn 2023 (22.85 per cent) followed by Yorkshire and the Humber (20.89 per cent).²⁶ The North East and Yorkshire and the Humber have consistently had the highest rates of persistent absence in the Autumn term since 2016/2017.

London had the lowest rate of persistent absence in Autumn 2023 (17.29 per cent), followed by The East of England (18.66 per cent).²⁷

Figure 4: Persistent Absence Rate by Region



The local authority with the highest rate of persistent absence in Autumn 2023 is Knowsley (25.94 per cent). The local authority with the lowest rate of persistent absence is the City of London at (11.05 per cent).²⁸

Table 1: Local Authorities with highest rates of persistent absence

LOCAL AUTHORITY	PERSISTENT ABSENCE RATE
Knowsley	25.94
Blackpool	25.17
Sunderland	24.55
County Durham	24.34
Middlesbrough	24.25
South Tyneside	23.81
Hartlepool	23.35
Bradford	23.34
Plymouth	23.19
Rochdale	22.87
Sefton	22.83

²⁶ Ibid.

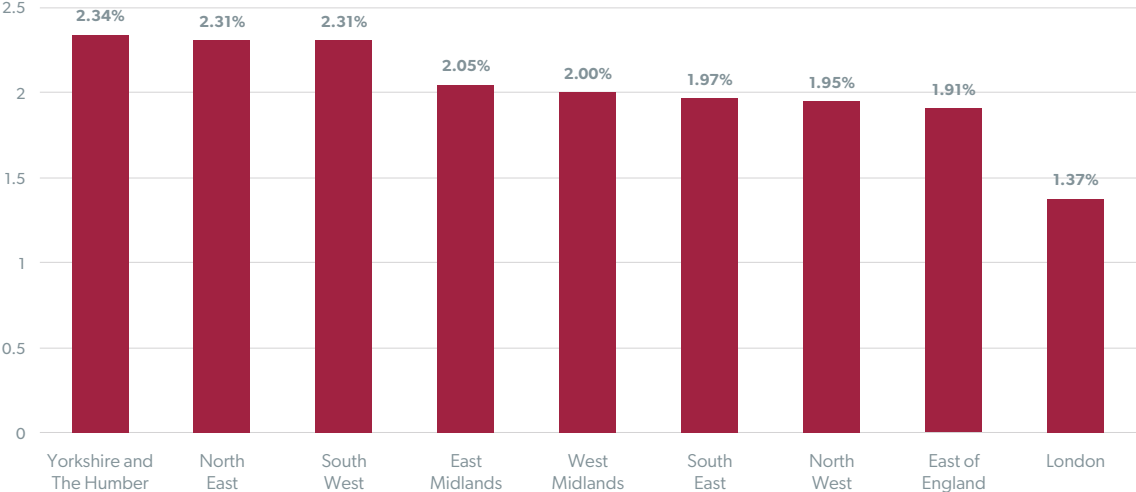
²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Yorkshire and the Humber had the highest rate of severe absence in Autumn 2023 (2.34 per cent) followed by The North East (2.31 per cent).²⁹ Yorkshire and the Humber consistently has the highest rate of severe absence in the Autumn term. Since 2016/17, it had the highest rate every Autumn except in 2018/2019 when it had the second highest rate of severe absence (behind the North East).

London had the lowest rate of severe absence in Autumn 2023 (1.37 per cent), followed by East of England (1.91 per cent).³⁰

Figure 5: Severe Absence Rate by Region



The local authority with the highest rate of severe absence in Autumn 2023 was Torbay (3.01 per cent). City of London had the lowest rate of severe absence (0.0 per cent), followed by Tower Hamlets (0.81 per cent).³¹

Table 2: Local Authorities with highest rates of severe absence

LOCAL AUTHORITY	SEVERE ABSENCE RATE
Torbay	3.01
Middlesbrough	2.98
Newcastle upon Tyne	2.88
Sheffield	2.86
City of Bristol	2.84
Bradford	2.83
East Sussex	2.77
Portsmouth	2.77
Liverpool	2.70
Gateshead	2.69
Somerset	2.69

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Absence by pupil characteristics

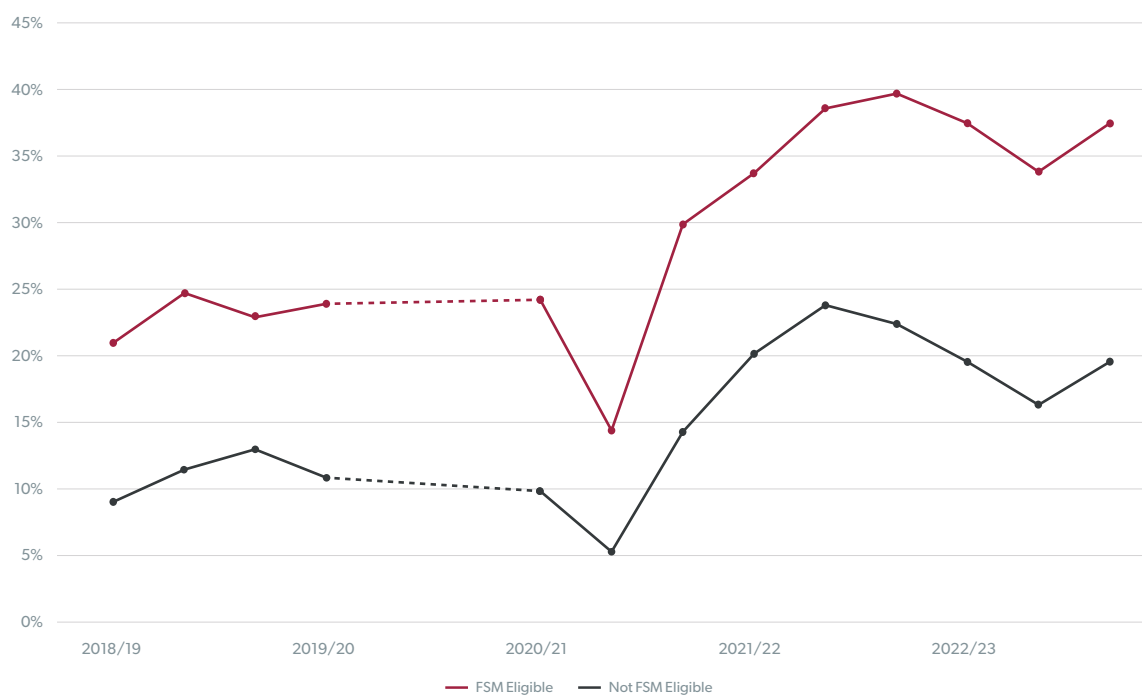
The following section, the data is from the summer term 2023 and the 2022/23 academic year – the most up-to-date data currently available.

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 term 2023, children eligible for FSM had a persistent absence rate which was almost double the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. A total of 37.4 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were persistently absent, compared to 19.4 per cent of children not eligible.³²

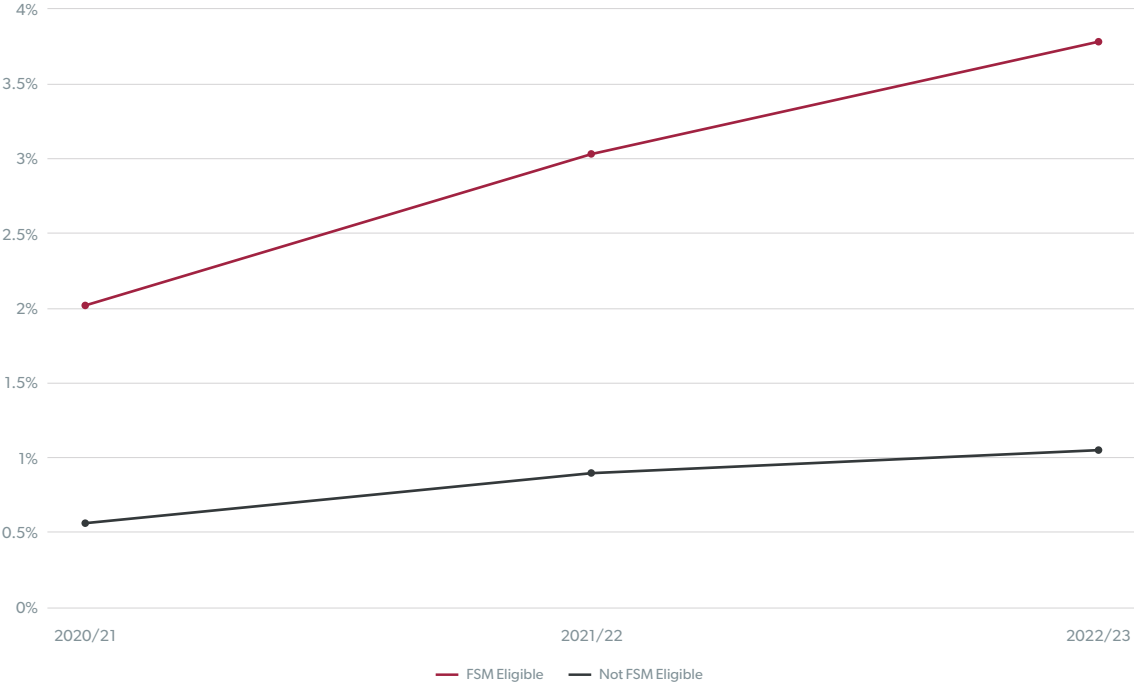
Figure 6: Persistent Absence Rates by Free School Meal Eligibility (Summer 2023)



32 Ibid.

In the 2022/23 academic year, children eligible for FSM had a severe absence rate which was more than three times the rate of children who were not eligible for FSM. 3.8 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were severely absent, compared to 1.1 per cent of children not eligible.³³

Figure 7: Severe Absence Rates by Free School Meal Eligibility (Academic Year 2022/23)



Absence by special educational needs/disabilities

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

In the 2022/23 summer term, 102,163 children with an EHCP were persistently absent and 299,174 children in receipt of SEN support were persistently absent.³⁴

The rate of persistent absence was 32.0 per cent for children with SEN support, 34.1 per cent for children with an EHCP and 22.1 per cent for children with no identified SEN.³⁵

The data also provides annual breakdowns for different SEN primary need types. Overall, in the 2022/23 academic year, children with profound and multiple learning difficulties, social, emotional, and mental health, and physical disabilities SEN primary needs had the highest rates of absence.³⁶

In 2022/23, 54.5 per cent of all children with profound and multiple learning difficulties were persistently absent. 41.1 per cent of children with social and emotional mental health needs were persistently absent.

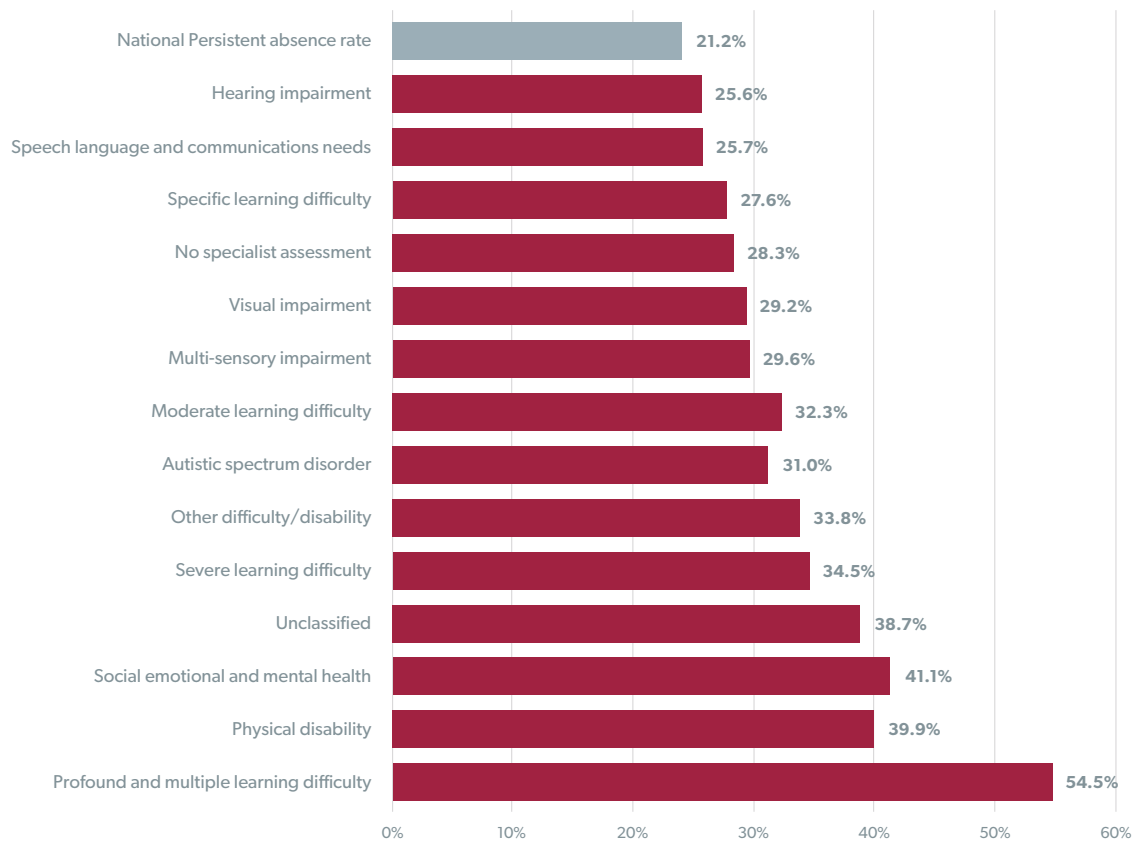
33 Department for Education, 2024. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Academic Year 2022/23" [Accessed via: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2022-23>]

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

Figure 8: Persistent Absence by SEN Primary Need



In the 2022/23 academic year, 37,814 children in receipt of SEN support were severely absent and 18,639 children with an EHCP were severely absent.³⁷

The rate of severe absence was 3.8 per cent for children with SEN Support, 6.0 per cent for children with a SEN statement or EHCP, and 1.2 per cent for children with no identified SEN.³⁸

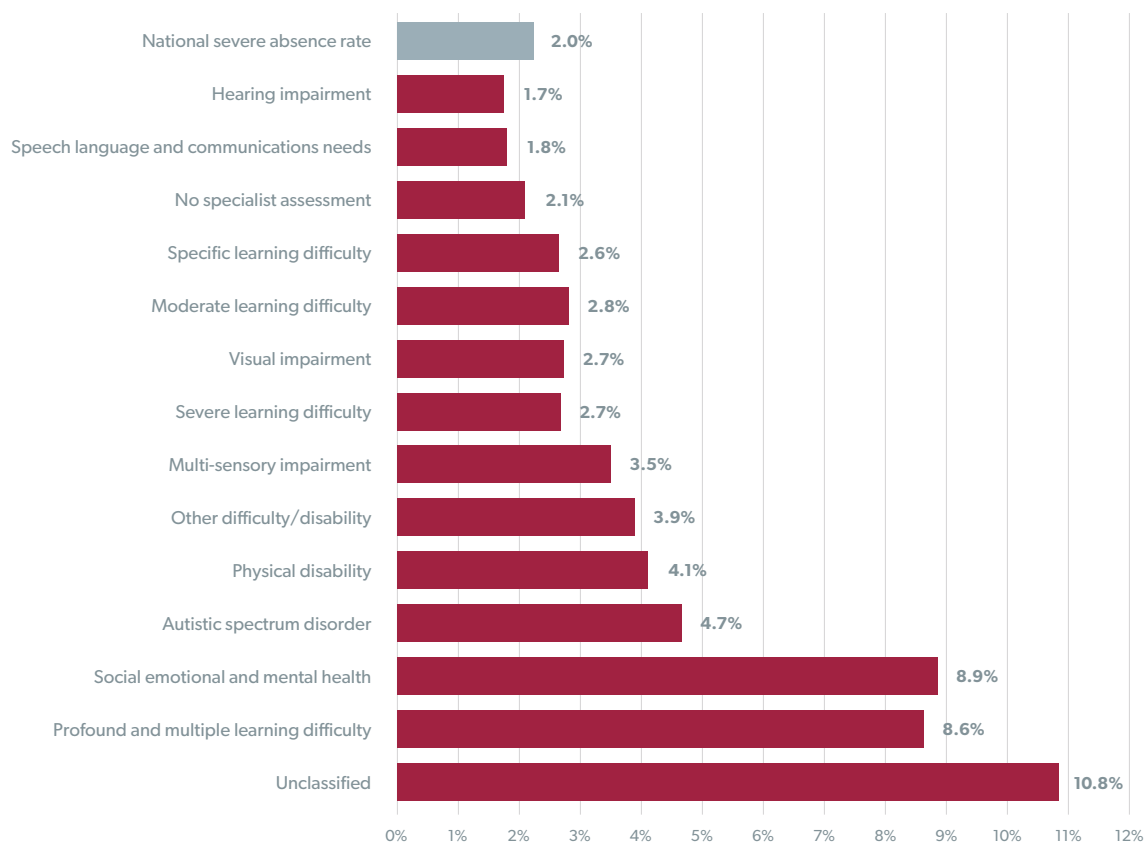
Aside from pupils with an unclassified primary need, children with social and emotional mental needs had the highest rates of severe absence, at 8.9 per cent.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Figure 9: Severe Absence by SEN Primary Need



Absence by gender

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

In the 2022/23 academic year, 21.4 per cent of female pupils and 21.0 per cent of male pupils were persistently absent.⁴⁰

In 2022/23, 2.1 per cent of females and 2.0 per cent of males were severely absent.⁴¹

Absence by ethnicity

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

In the 2022/23 academic year, 72.0 per cent of Traveller of Irish heritage and 64.9 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were persistently absent.⁴² For comparison, 20.1 per cent of White British pupils were absent over this period.⁴³

15.0 per cent of Traveller of Irish heritage and 8.9 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were severely absent last year.⁴⁴ For comparison, the rate of severe absence for White British pupils was 2.3 per cent.⁴⁵

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

Absence by pupil residency

29.3 per cent of children living in the most disadvantaged areas were persistently absent over the course of 2022/23.⁴⁶

For comparison, 12.0 per cent of children living in the most affluent areas were persistently absent over the same period.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

School absence tracker

The number of severely absent children remains at crisis levels more than three years after schools reopened their doors following COVID-19 closures. The Government must accelerate its response to get this cohort of children back into the classroom.

The Government has taken several welcome steps, including:

- The issuing of new attendance guidance which will become statutory from August 2024.
- Additional regular data published by the Government on absence has allowed a more detailed picture to be built to deepen the understanding of absence.
- The Attendance Alliance was established in December 2021 and has so far met 19 times, most recently in March 2024, to discuss other actions that can be taken to improve attendance.
- The introduction of local pilots for Attendance Mentors, offering some support to councils with higher rates of absence. The initial three-year pilot is in its second year and the government recently announced the pilot would be extended to ten further areas in September 2024.
- The Government is also in the process of further rolling out attendance hubs, which will bring the total number of attendance hubs to 32. These attendance hubs bring together schools to share best practice on attendance and offer additional support to pupils. The Attendance Ambassador is also compiling a toolkit drawn from existing attendance hubs.

However, the approach so far is not ambitious enough to meet the scale of the challenge.

The current pilots for attendance mentors and attendance hubs are only reaching an extremely limited number of children. When considering both the initial pilot and the expansion announced in January 2024, still just 3 per cent of severely absent children at most will be supported in a single year. This does not represent a serious response to this unfolding crisis in our education system. A child who started year 7 in lockdown will be leaving school by the time the initial three-year pilot is complete.

It is welcome that Education Ministers have finally made attendance guidance statutory and set out plans for better attendance data (both longstanding CSJ recommendations, as per the below tracker). However, the government needs to keep a careful watch on the blanket use of fines to punish absenteeism – which to date has not prevented the crisis in school absence.

To address the absence crisis, we must address the underlying causes of absence. Our severe absence inquiry uncovered that children miss school for a variety of reasons, including unmet mental health needs, unmet and undiagnosed special educational needs and a lack of access to basic necessities as a result of financial disadvantage.

Any plan to tackle absence must also consider how to repair the breakdown of contract between families and schools, with recent CSJ polling showing that over a quarter of parents agree that the pandemic has shown it is not essential for children to attend school every day.

The CSJ has a seven-point plan for reform which would help to reengage absent children. This plan has been designed to tackle the underlying drivers of absence cost-effectively, focusing on support for the whole family. The CSJ will continue to track progress made by the Government on implementing recommendations to turn the tide on school absence.

Our plan for reform

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

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

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

Recommendation

The Department for Education should roll out a national programme of 2,000 attendance mentors. These mentors would work with families to understand and remove the underlying barriers to school attendance. A national programme would cost an estimated £80 million per year.

Progress update: limited action taken, further action planned.

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 in September 2023.

The pilot will roll out to ten additional areas in September 2024. This addition to the trial is expected to support 3,600 pupils per year, in addition to the 1,700 being supported over the course of the three-year initial pilot.

In March 2024, the Department for Education released an evaluation of the initial rollout of the attendance mentors pilot which suggests a change in approach is needed if it is to deliver on its potential. While the Government-backed pilot achieved an improvement in attendance for 59 per cent of severely absent pupils and 45 per cent of persistently absent pupils, the charity School Home Support – which pioneered the attendance mentor model to support absent children – achieved an improvement in attendance for 86 per cent of severely absent pupils and 73 per cent of persistently absent pupils. This suggests the importance of working with organisations deeply embedded in their local communities to maximise the benefits of attendance mentors. As part of the ongoing pilot, the government must engage with charities and community organisations who are already having an impact.

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

The Department also supports individual children to engage them in education through the AP Specialist Taskforces (APST) and SAFE programmes. This is 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.

2. Ensure families can access the right support.

Recommendation

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

Progress update: Complete.

The DfE announced in February 2024 that the guidance has been updated and will be made statutory from August 2024.

The update guidance sets out a support first approach, including advice on the important of supporting pupils with SEND and mental health. It also encourages multi-agency partners (including schools and local authorities) to work closer together to support the most at-risk absent children, with a focus on early intervention.

A private member’s bill was introduced in December 2023 by Vicky Ford MP, to enshrine this change in primary legislation. This bill is proceeding through the legislative process and successfully passed the Committee Stage on 1st May 2024. It will return to the House of Commons for the Report Stage on 17th May 2024.

3. Put more support in place in schools.

Recommendation

The Department for Education should create a National Parental Participation Strategy, which should create a new duty for schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs) to focus on parental participation and publish parental participation plans. Trusts and schools should design these plans in consultation with parents and guardians to reflect the needs of local families. As part of a broader Parental Participation Strategy, the Government should release additional guidance on the best practice for engaging parents of children who are severely absent. This should include specific guidance on communicating with parents who no longer live together.

Progress update: limited action taken, further action under consideration.

New guidance for schools on how to communicate with families about school attendance was published in September 2023. This contains guidance for schools on different ways to engage with parents regarding attendance. The updated guidance on absence also advises schools to work with families to understand the barriers to attendance

The DfE are continuing to engage with the CSJ with this updated recommendation and to consider what progress on a parental participation strategy may look like.

Recommendation

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

Progress update: some action taken, further action planned.

The DfE is currently investing over £300m in 75 Local Authorities (LAs) to develop and open Family Hubs and start for life services. The Family Hubs policy framework sets out that LAs should review collocation of services.

The DfE are in the process of developing a guidance module for schools and LAs on how to best integrate schools into family hub networks. This is being developed by the National Centre for Family Hubs led by the Anna Freud Centre.

The National Centre for Family Hubs have also developed resources to enable family hub professionals to join the wider effort to help families overcome complex barriers to school attendance.

Recommendation

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

Progress update: some action taken, further action planned.

Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) offer support in schools and colleges, including for common mental wellbeing issues such as anxiety and low mood. MHSTs also support a setting to develop their approach to mental health and wellbeing, and to liaise with specialist services in the community where needed.

As of the latest update published in May 2024, MHSTs covered 44 per cent of pupils in schools and learners in Further Education (FE) in England. This will be extended to at least 50 per cent by the end of March 2025.

The government remains committed to offering all state schools and colleges a grant to train a senior mental health lead by 2025, enabling them to introduce effective whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing. As of the latest update in May 2024, 16,700 eligible schools and colleges have

claimed a grant so far, including over 80 per cent of all state secondary schools. Schools and colleges are encouraged to claim a grant now and book training this academic year.

The DfE are also now offering second grants of up to £1,200 to eligible schools and colleges where they have lost their senior mental health lead before embedding a whole school or college approach to mental health and wellbeing.

4. Improve school attendance data.

Recommendation

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

Progress update: complete.

In February 2024, the DfE announced it would be mandatory for every state school in England to share their daily attendance registers.

89 per cent of schools had previously been doing this voluntarily, since the DfE first announced the initiative. This data collection now being compulsory will allow the DfE, local authorities and schools to draw more accurate and more regular conclusions about patterns of absence, spot pupils in need of support earlier and compare attendance figures locally and nationally.

In February, DfE also launched two new features on the secure tool that schools, trusts and LAs can access.

1. Schools can now benchmark themselves nationally for absence and persistent absence (including for vulnerable cohorts such as those with special educational needs or those in receipt of free school meals).
2. Local authorities and Trusts can now download underlying data to support a better multi-agency response to absence.

In May 2024, the DfE launched the new in-depth daily attendance tool, which will enable schools to identify patterns of absence across different year groups and different pupil characteristics. This will allow schools to better understand and monitor patterns of absence and take targeted action to improve school attendance. The DfE also published absence data by 5 per cent bands, allowing for even more understanding of patterns of absence.

5. Recognise the value of relational work.

Recommendation

The Government should build on its 2019 manifesto commitment to invest £500 million in new youth clubs and services, with a new match fund scheme designed to inspire major businesses, charities and third sector organisations to support a national mission of returning our young people to school.

Progress update: some action taken.

In 2022, DCMS announced a National Youth Guarantee. The goal was that by 2025, every young person in England will have access to regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home, and volunteering opportunities, supported by a three-year investment of over £500 million.

DCMS have made progress in delivering the Guarantee, in particular:

- **Progress on the Youth Investment Fund** building and refurbishing up to 300 youth clubs up and down the country. Over £160 million have so far been granted to 87 organisations to build, renovate and expand youth provision.
- **#iwill** - announcing the projects that have received a total of £12 million in the latest round to create over 60,000 new volunteering opportunities, specifically supporting young people from low socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Uniformed Youth Fund** - progress announcement of creation of 144 new groups and over 2,800 additional places since 2022.

However, the government is going further to ensure that every young person to have someone to talk to, something to do and somewhere to go. Action being taken includes:

- Giving 5,000 vulnerable young people aged 14-16 access to mentoring through the 'Building Futures' programme.
- Opening the second phase of the Million Hours Fund - creating more than a million hours of youth activities in antisocial behaviour hotspots (£19 million)
- Providing bursaries for 500 people who would otherwise be unable to afford to undertake youth work qualifications.
- Creating new local youth partnerships via the Young People's Foundation to foster greater collaboration between youth organisations, funders and local businesses.
- Publishing clearer statutory guidance for local authorities' youth provision to help local authorities meet young people's needs in their local areas, as well as funding to support councils to peer review other their different youth offers.

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

Recommendation

The Government should introduce a new 'enrichment guarantee' in schools. When activities take place in the morning, breakfast clubs should be incorporated as part of the enrichment guarantee. This should also include the introduction of a new Right to Sport for all secondary school pupils to unlock five hours of extracurricular activity for every pupil in secondary school in England

Progress update: plans for action, limited action taken.

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

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

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

7. Ensure fines are working.

Recommendation

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

Progress update: significant action taken.

The Department consulted on setting national thresholds for fixed penalty notices in 2022 and published its response in August 2023. The response made clear that the Department remains committed to improving the consistency of local approaches to enforcement.

The DfE used this consultation to inform changes to enforcement for attendance, announced in February 2024. The DfE has announced a new National Framework for Penalty Notices, designed to improve consistency of use, which includes guidance that a fine must be considered if a child misses five or more days for unauthorised absence. As part of this, the DfE increased costs of fines from £60 to £80 (if paid within 21 days).

The 'Working Together to Improve Attendance' guidance – now to be made statutory – is clear that in complex cases, local agencies working together to provide 'support first' is the right approach to tackle attendance problems.

Recommendation

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

Progress update: in progress.

Changes to the fine for breach of SAO to bring SAOs to the same level as a parent knowingly failing to secure regular attendance at school will feature as part of Flick Drummond's Children Not in School (Registers, Support and Orders) Private Member's Bill. The Bill passed its Second Reading on 15 March and will move onto Committee Stage.



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