

SCHOOL ABSENCE TRACKER

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

172,938

The number of severely absent pupils has soared by **187.06** per cent since before the pandemic. In Summer 2024, **172,938** pupils were absent from school more than they were present (severely absent), which is **2.42** 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 **112,694** pupils.

1,644,813

Persistent absence has increased by **78.29** per cent since before the pandemic. **1,644,813** pupils were persistently absent in Summer 2024, which equates to **23.05** per cent of all pupils. This compares to **922,566** pupils before the pandemic.

7.59%

The overall absence rate in Summer 2024 was **7.59** per cent. This is an increase of **53.99** per cent since before the pandemic.

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Headline statistics

The number of severely absent pupils has soared by 187.06 per cent since before the pandemic. In Summer 2024, 172,938 pupils were absent from school more often than they were present (severely absent), which is 2.42 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 112,694 pupils are now severely absent from school.

It is vulnerable children who are affected most. In Summer 2024, children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) had a severe absence rate nearly four times 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.

Persistent absence is still at a concerningly high level compared to pre-pandemic. 1,644,813 pupils were persistently absent in Summer 2024, which equates to 23.05 per cent of all pupils. This is an increase of 78.29 per cent since before the pandemic.

The overall absence rate in Summer 2024 was 7.59 per cent. This is an increase of 53.99 per cent since before the pandemic.

We are grateful to The Rigby Foundation, and in particular Steve Rigby, for their support – without which this work would not have been possible.



THE RIGBY FOUNDATION

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 2025 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

Foreword

On 20 March 2020 – five years ago today – schools dismissed their classes at the end of the day and closed their doors ahead of the first COVID-19 lockdown. Five years on, and the damaging impact of the pandemic continues to proliferate across education.

The latest data, for Summer term 2024, shows that 172,938 children were severely absent from school, missing half or more of their school time. This is an increase of 9.6 per cent compared to the previous summer term – the previous record - and 187 per cent higher than pre-pandemic.

The data also reveals that over 1.6 million children – nearly one in four – were persistently absent in Summer term 2024, missing 10 per cent or more of school time. This is a slight decrease compared to Summer term 2023, but up 6.2 per cent on the previous spring term and 78.3 per cent higher than pre-pandemic.

This week's figures come with an added poignancy. They come in a week dominated by discussion on welfare. Parliament has been consumed by conversations around economic inactivity and the rising number of young people opting out of work or training altogether. The focus has been almost exclusively on the Department for Work and Pensions, tweaks to the welfare system, and cuts to individuals' payments.

Today's absence figures, however, remind us that the trajectory into work begins years before children leave school. Their life chances are being formed day-by-day, week-by-week by those small choices – among other things, whether or not to go to school today.

Attendance is one of the best predictors we have of educational outcomes. But GCSE scores are not the end in itself. It is a route to work, self-reliance, and responsibility: both individual personal growth, and national economic growth.

School absence is not just an education issue. We need to view it as the building blocks of both individual potential and national growth. Unless we return school absence to pre-pandemic levels the CSJ has calculated that we should expect to add about 20,000 to the NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training) statistics each year.

It's why action is crucial.

It is welcome that the Government has recommitted to the expanded pilot of attendance mentors. For those children who benefit, attendance mentors can provide a crucial bridge between home and school. As welcome as this expansion is, the number of children that will be reached pales in comparison with the scale of the problem. CSJ analysis estimates that, when combining both the original pilot and the expansion, just 2.5 per cent of the most severely absent children will be supported in a single year.

The Government must go further still and employ every tool in the armoury to tackle this sustained crisis. Parents are central to getting our kids back to school. That is why we need a National Parental Participation Strategy to set out clear and constructive guidance to support schools and families to work together – and not against each other. The Government must ensure that Family Hubs – which offer wrap around support to families with children all the way up to aged 18 (or aged 25 for children with SEND) – continue to receive funding and are expanded into more Local Authorities.

But most of all it must recognise that today's school absences are tomorrow's economic problem, and unless we get ahead of this there will be more weeks in Parliament where we will be discussing difficult trade-offs in the welfare bill.



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 (CSJ) 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 published updated trackers to coincide with every new termly data release, most recently in *October 2024*.

This latest *'School Absence Tracker'* analyses absence figures for Summer 2024 (unless otherwise stated), revealing that the number of children severely absent in the Summer term of the 2023/24 academic year was 172,938, an increase of 187.06 per cent since before the pandemic (Autumn 2019).

Our analysis also shows 1,644,813 children were persistently absent in Summer 2024. This is an increase of 78.29 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 Summer term of the 2023/24 academic year.

Indicative fortnightly data released from the Department for Education's attendance survey shows that absence rates remain higher than before the pandemic. As of the week commencing 3rd March 2025, the overall absence rate for the academic year-to-date was 6.6 per cent.¹ The authorised absence rate was 4.5 per cent and the unauthorised absence rate was 2.1 per cent. The academic year-to-date persistent absence figure was 18.4 per cent.²

1 Department for Education, 2025. "Week 10 2025 Pupil attendance in schools" [<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-attendance-in-schools>]

2 Ibid.

Persistent absence

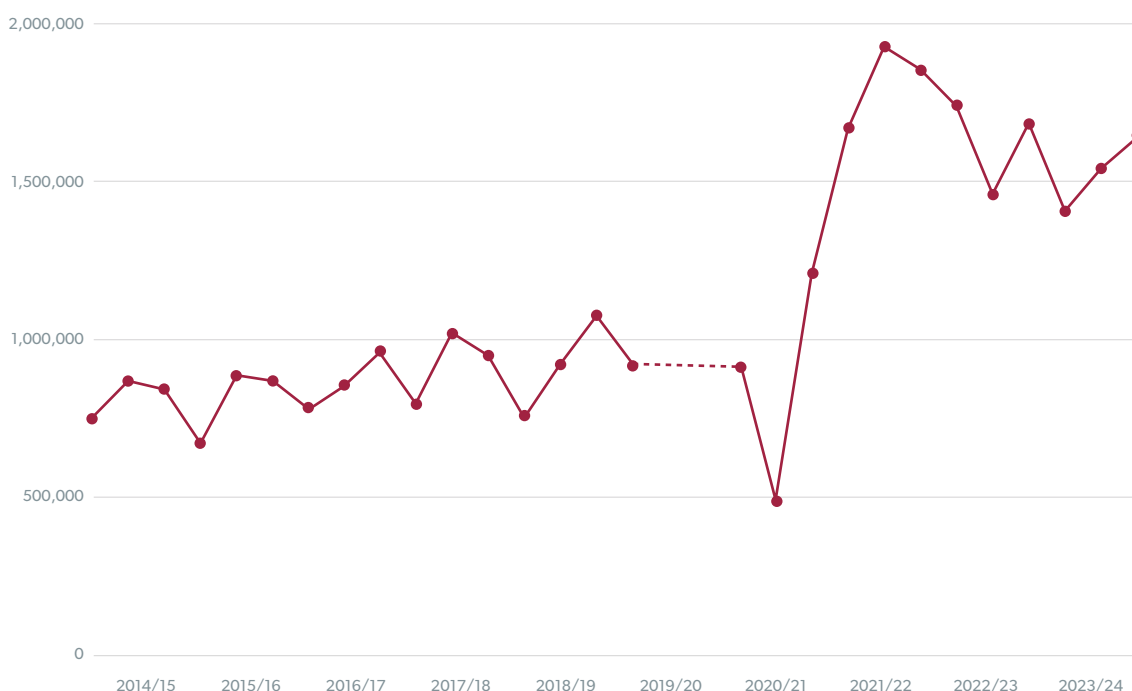
Children who are persistently absent miss ten per cent or more of possible sessions in school. This is equivalent to missing at least one afternoon every week.

In Summer 2024, 1,644,813 children were persistently absent. This is equivalent to nearly one in four (23.05 per cent) of all children educated in state-funded mainstream or special schools.³

The number of persistently absent children has increased 6.23 per cent since the previous term, Spring 2024, an increase of 96,484 children. The number of persistently absent children has decreased 2.6 per cent since the previous year's Summer term, Summer 2023, a decrease of 43,836 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). Persistent absence therefore has grown by 78.29 per cent relative to pre-pandemic.⁵

Figure 1: Persistent Absence Over Time



3 Department for Education, 2025. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Academic Year 2023/24" [Accessed via: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>]

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Severe absence

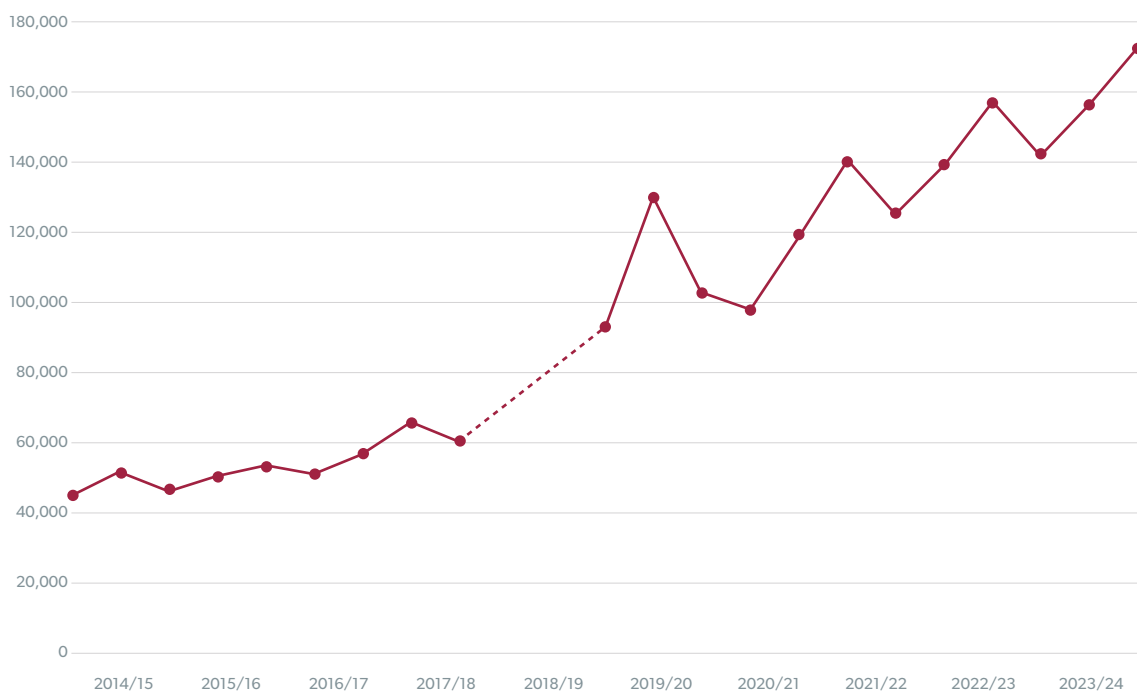
Children who are severely absent miss 50 per cent or more of possible sessions. This is equivalent to missing at least every morning of school. They are a subgroup of persistently absent children and are absent more often than they are present.⁶

In Summer 2024, 172,938 children were severely absent, a new record high. This equates to 2.42 per cent of children in state-funded schools.⁷

The number of severely absent children remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels. In Autumn 2019, 60,244 pupils were severely absent. Compared to pre-pandemic, the number of children who were severely absent in Summer 2024 has increased by 187.06 per cent.⁸

The number of severely absent children has increased by 15,898 since Spring 2024, an increase of 10.12 per cent. The number of severely absent children has also increase by 9.6 per cent since the previous year's Summer term, Summer 2023, an increase of 15,216 children.⁹

Figure 2: Severe Absence Over Time



6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

Reasons for absence

In total, in Summer 2024, 7.59 per cent of sessions were marked as absent. 4.62 per cent of sessions were marked as authorised absences and 2.97 per cent were marked as unauthorised absences.¹⁰

Illness absences make up the majority of overall absences and have done consistently throughout the period for which data has been collected. Illness rates for Summer 2024 are 0.3 percentage points higher than Autumn 2019 – the last full-term before school closures – and 0.2 percentage points higher than Summer 2023.¹¹

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 Summer 2024, 1.9 per cent of all sessions were marked Unauthorised Other; in Autumn 2019 (pre-pandemic) it stood at 0.83 per cent.¹²

In Summer 2024, 0.79 per cent of sessions were marked absent for unauthorised holidays. This compares to 0.36 per cent pre-pandemic and 0.79 per cent in Summer 2023.¹³

The rate of authorised holidays in Summer 2024 was 0.07 per cent, compared to 0.08 in the previous Summer term.¹⁴

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

Breakdown of absence data

Absence by school type

In Summer 2024, 909,622 children were persistently absent in state-funded secondary schools, which is 28.2 per cent of all children in these schools.¹⁵

18.17 per cent of children in state-funded primary schools were persistently absent in Summer 2024, equating to 686,954 children.¹⁶

The rate of persistent absence is higher in special schools. In Summer 2024, 48,237 children educated in special schools were persistently absent. This represents 35.47 per cent of all children educated in special schools.¹⁷

The rate is much higher in Alternative Provision (AP) settings. In the 2023/2024 academic year, 82.74 per cent of children educated in AP (33,594 children) were persistently absent.¹⁸ AP figures only reflect pupil enrolments in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), which are a type of state-maintained AP setting. It is worth nothing 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 Summer 2024, 4.06 per cent of all secondary school children were severely absent, accounting for 75.53 per cent of all severely absent children.¹⁹ This is equivalent to nearly 1 in every 25 children. This would equate to having nearly 123 secondary schools where all the children are absent for at least half of all possible sessions.

Primary school pupils account for 18.77 per cent of all severely absent children. 0.86 per cent of children in primary schools were severely absent in Summer 2024.²⁰

As with persistent absence, the rate of severe absence is higher in special schools. In Summer 2024, 9,857 children educated in special schools were severely absent. This represents 7.25 per cent of all children educated in special schools.²¹

The rate is also much higher in AP settings. In the 2023/24 academic year, 39.25 per cent of children in Pupil Referral Units (15,935 in total) were severely absent.²² As above, these figures are not counted as part of the total absence figures, to avoid double counting.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

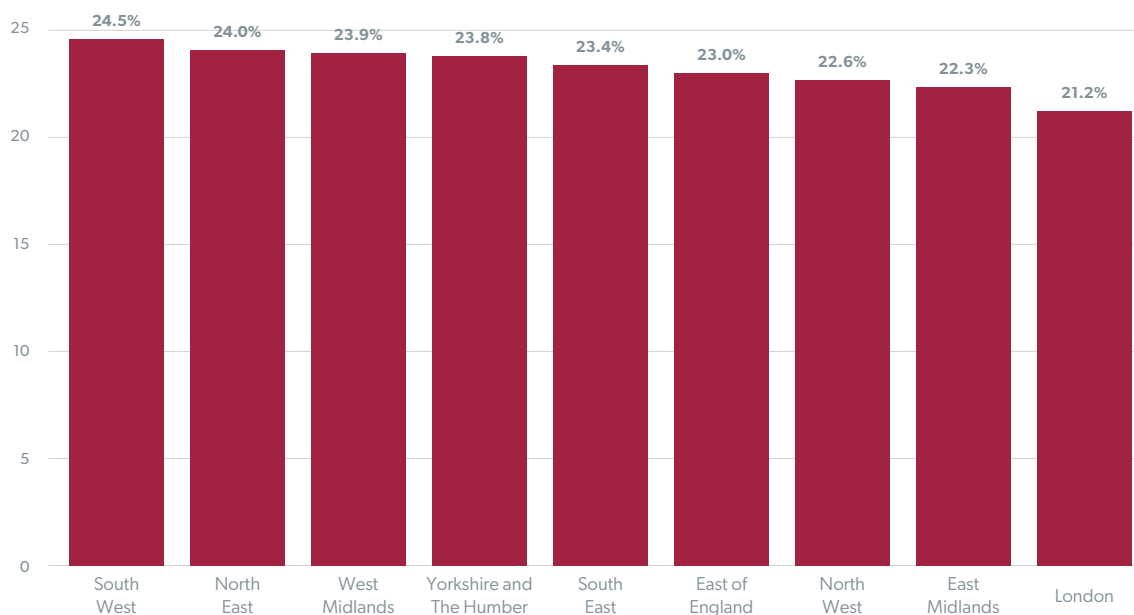
Absence by region

Patterns of absence vary across England.

The South West had the highest rate of persistent absence in Summer 2024 (24.55 per cent) followed by the North East (24.02 per cent).²³

London had the lowest rate of persistent absence in Summer 2024 (21.18 per cent), followed by the East Midlands (22.30 per cent).²⁴

Figure 3: Persistent Absence Rates by Region



The local authority with the highest rate of persistent absence in Summer 2024 is Torbay (27.89 per cent). The local authority with the lowest rate of persistent absence is the City of London at (12.14 per cent).²⁵

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

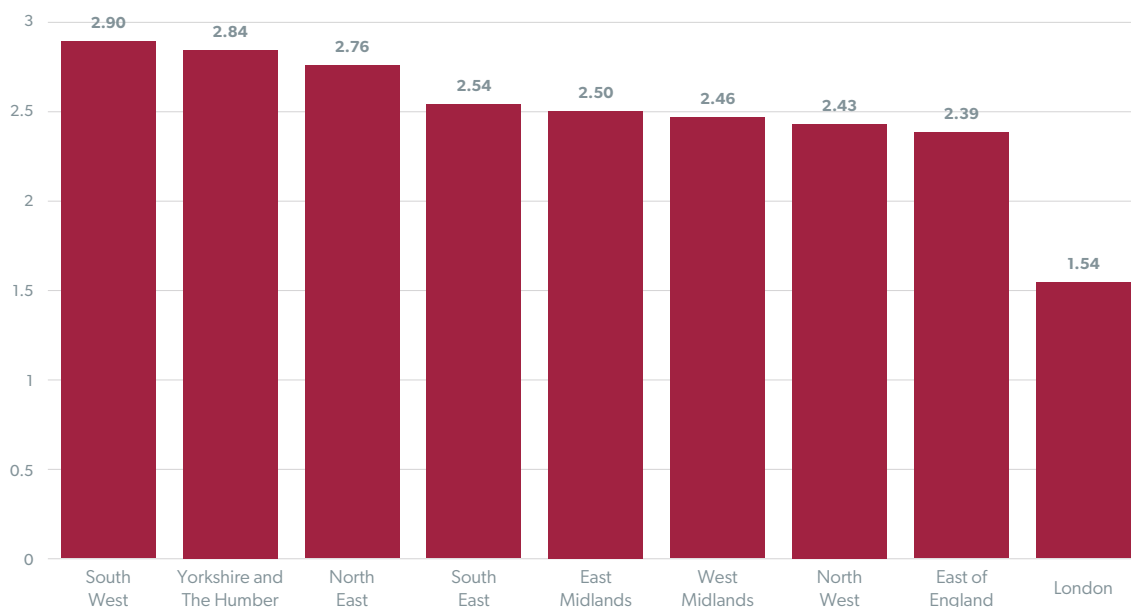
Table 1: Local Authorities with Highest Rates of Persistent Absence

LOCAL AUTHORITY	PERSISTENT ABSENCE RATE
Torbay	27.89
Birmingham	27.73
Bradford	27.31
Plymouth	27.26
Bristol, City of	27.22
Knowsley	26.84
Dorset	26.59
Brighton and Hove	26.42
Cornwall	26.17
North Somerset	25.99

The South West had the highest rate of severe absence in Summer 2024 (2.90 per cent) followed by Yorkshire and The Humber (2.76 per cent).²⁶

London had the lowest rate of severe absence in Summer 2024 (1.54 per cent), followed by the East of England (2.39 per cent).²⁷

Figure 4: Severe Absence Rate by Region



²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

The local authority with the highest rate of severe absence in Summer 2024 was Torbay (3.61 per cent). The City of London had the lowest rate of severe absence (0.58 per cent), followed by Redbridge (1.09 per cent).²⁸

Table 2: Local Authorities with Highest Rates of Severe Absence

LOCAL AUTHORITY	SEVERE ABSENCE RATE
Torbay	3.61
Bradford	3.47
Middlesbrough	3.43
Sheffield	3.41
Portsmouth	3.39
East Sussex	3.37
Southampton	3.34
Plymouth	3.33
York	3.28
Somerset	3.27

²⁸ Ibid.

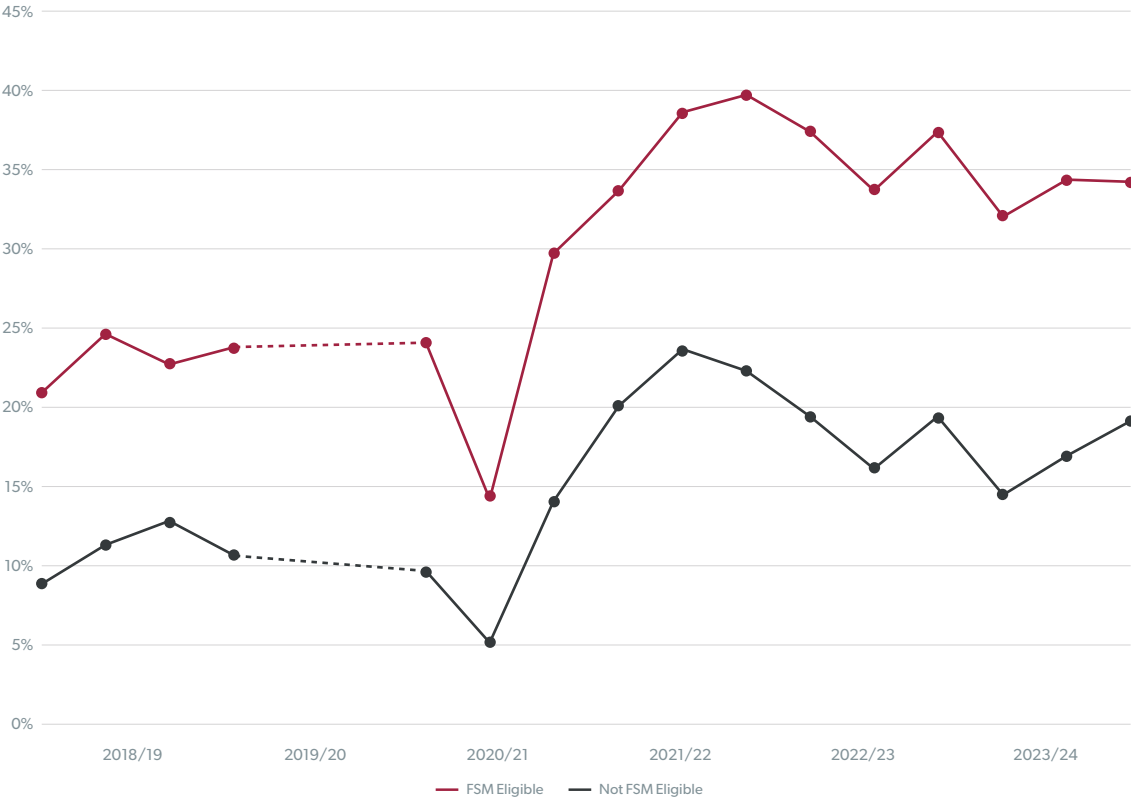
Absence by pupil characteristics

Absence by Free School Meal eligibility

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

In Summer 2024, children eligible for FSM had a persistent absence rate which was nearly twice the rate for children who were not eligible for FSM. A total of 34.22 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were persistently absent, compared to 19.1 per cent of children not eligible.²⁹

Figure 5: Persistent Absence Rates by Free School Meal Eligibility



In the 2023/24 academic year, children eligible for FSM had a severe absence rate which was nearly four times the rate of children who were not eligible for FSM. 4.25 per cent of all children eligible for FSM were severely absent, compared to 1.15 per cent of children not eligible.³⁰

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid

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.

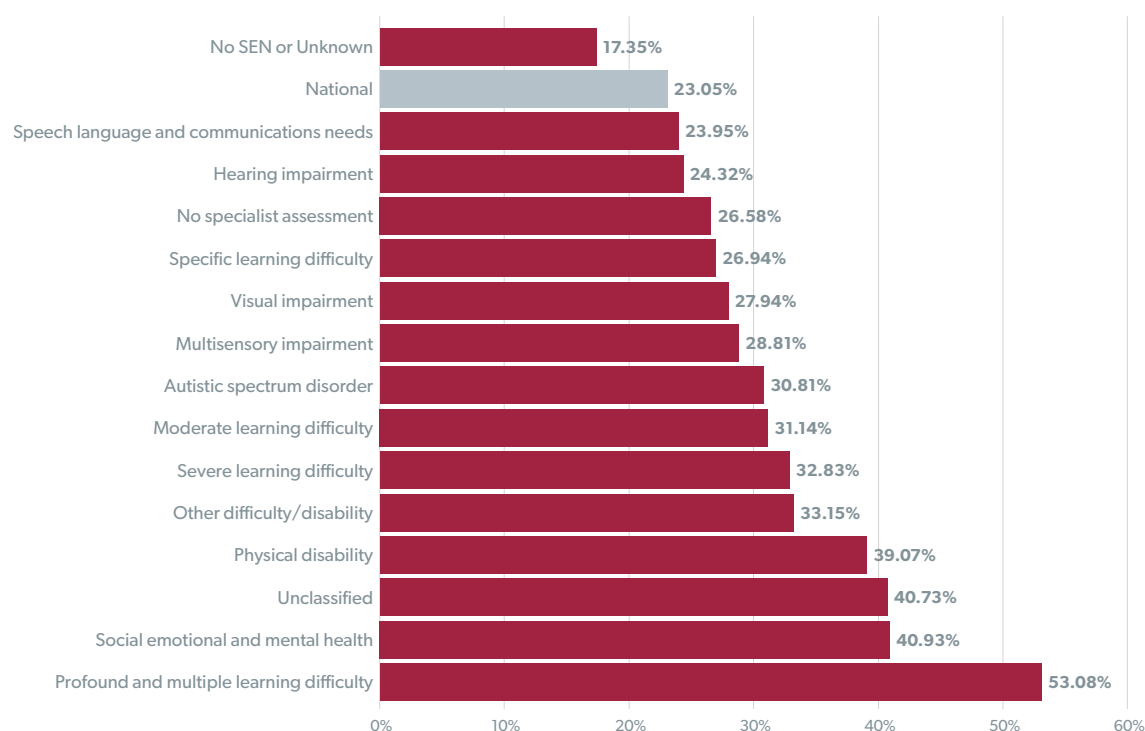
In the Summer 2024, 113,666 children with an EHCP were persistently absent and 300,575 children with SEN support were persistently absent.³¹

The rate of persistent absence was 30.68 per cent for children with SEN support, 34.20 per cent for children with an EHCP and 21.08 per cent for children with no identified SEN.³²

The data also provides breakdowns for different SEN primary need types. Overall, in Summer 2024, children with profound and multiple learning difficulties, social, emotional, unclassified and physical disabilities had the highest rates of persistent absence.³³

In Summer 2024, 53.08 per cent of all children with profound and multiple learning difficulties were persistently absent. 40.93 per cent of children with social and emotional mental health needs were persistently absent.³⁴

Figure 6: Persistent Absence by SEN Primary Need



In the 2023/24 academic year, 45,004 children in receipt of SEN support were severely absent and 23,758 children with an EHCP were severely absent.³⁵

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

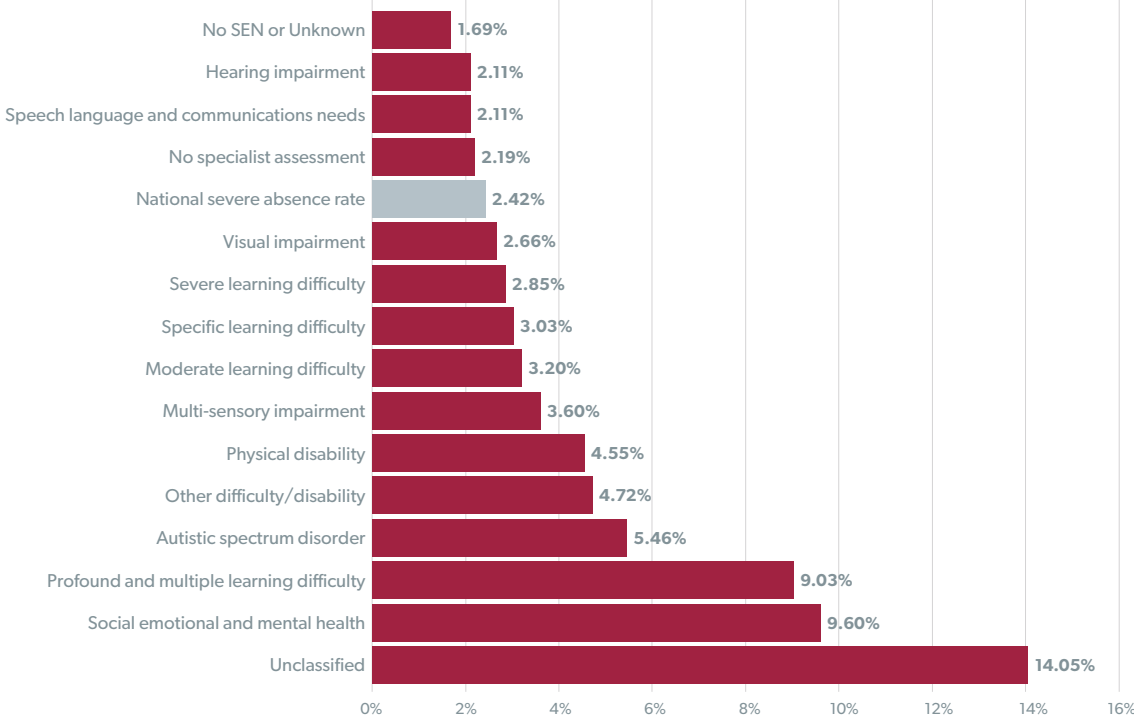
34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

The rate of severe absence was 4.39 per cent for children with SEN Support, 6.85 per cent for children with an EHCP, and 1.28 per cent for children with no identified SEN.³⁶

Children with unclassified needs had the highest rates of severe absence, at 14.05 per cent.³⁷

Figure 7: Severe Absence by SEN Primary Need



Absence by gender

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

In Summer 2024, 23.46 per cent of female pupils and 22.65 per cent of male pupils were persistently absent.³⁸

In the 2023/24 academic year, 2.35 per cent of females and 2.25 per cent of males were severely absent.³⁹

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

Absence by ethnicity

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

In Summer 2024, 60.01 per cent of Traveller of Irish Heritage and 53.38 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were persistently absent. For comparison, 23.88 per cent of White British pupils were absent over this period.⁴⁰

14.20 per cent of Traveller of Irish Heritage and 8.99 per cent of Gypsy/Roma children were severely absent in the 2023/24 academic year. For comparison, the rate of severe absence for White British pupils was 2.62 per cent.⁴¹

Absence by year group

In the 2023/24 academic year, pupils in Year 11 experienced the highest rates of severe absence, at 4.84 per cent. Pupils in Year 3 experienced the lowest rates, at 0.52 per cent.⁴²

Table 3: Severe Absence 2023/24 by Year Group

YEAR GROUP	SEVERE ABSENCE RATE
Year 1 and below	0.65
Year 2	0.54
Year 3	0.52
Year 4	0.56
Year 5	0.65
Year 6	0.74
Year 7	1.72
Year 8	3.01
Year 9	3.95
Year 10	4.67
Year 11	4.84
Year 12 and above	4.19

In Summer 2024, pupils in Year 12 and above experienced the highest rates of persistent absence, at 43.03 per cent, closely followed by Year 11 at 38.98 per cent. Pupils in Year 6 experienced the lowest rates, at 16.63 per cent.⁴³

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

Table 4: Persistent Absence Summer 2024 by Year Group

YEAR GROUP	PERSISTENT ABSENCE RATE
Year 1 and below	19.86
Year 2	18.57
Year 3	18.09
Year 4	18.21
Year 5	18.85
Year 6	16.63
Year 7	23.04
Year 8	25.75
Year 9	27.82
Year 10	28.32
Year 11	38.98
Year 12 and above	43.03

School absence tracker

This latest termly absence data release covers the time period during which the July 2024 General Election and subsequent change of government took place. Therefore, this tracker will consider both action by the previous Conservative Government (referred to throughout as ‘the previous Government’) prior to the General Election, as well as proposals made by the new Labour Government (referred to throughout as ‘the Government’).

While there has been a change of government, the issues facing children and families have remained, with the number of severely absent children remaining at crisis levels more than three years after schools reopened their doors.

Prior to the General Election, the previous Government took a number of welcome steps, including:

- The issuing of new attendance guidance which became statutory in August 2024.
- Publishing additional regular data on absence.
- Establishing the Attendance Alliance in December 2021, which has so far met 20 times, most recently in May 2024.
- Introducing 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 previous government announced the pilot would be extended to ten further areas, which has recently been re-confirmed by the Government.
- Further rolling out attendance hubs.

However, the approach by the previous Government was not ambitious enough to meet the scale of the challenge and much more action was needed.

One example of the inadequacy of the response of the previous Government is the scale of the attendance mentor pilots that are only reaching an extremely limited number of children. When considering both the initial pilot and the expansion announced in January 2024, (reconfirmed by the Government in October 2024), still just 2.5 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 during the pandemic has already now left school, before the initial three-year pilot is complete.

Since the General Election, the Government has taken some small steps including:

- Launching the curriculum review, conducting a public consultation as part of the review and publishing an interim report.
- Re-confirming the expansion of the attendance mentors’ pilot (due to commence in Spring 2025,) announcing the delivery and evaluation partners and the ten extra areas the pilot will now expand in to.
- Proposals for universal free breakfast clubs in every primary school, a single unique identifier for children and plans for a Register of Children Not in School in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

- Confirming attendance is one of the first national priorities for the new Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams.
- Delivering a series of regional attendance conferences, to which every secondary school leader has been invited.
- Publishing a new attendance toolkit for schools.

The Government also previously outlined additional proposals in the build-up to the General Election, which included:

- Using Ofsted to review school absence as part of annual safeguarding checks.
- Using AI to spot trends in absence data, by joining up existing records for children and improving coordination between education, social care and wider services.
- Providing access to specialist mental health professionals in every school.
- Delivering evidence-based early language interventions, to help children form a strong foundation in speech and language development.

However, with only limited action having been taken so far, today's crisis figures further highlight the need for the Government to accelerate its response and deliver a much more ambitious and nationwide plan to tackle the school absence crisis.

In order to fully address the absence crisis, the underlying causes of absence must be addressed. The CSJ's 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.⁴⁴

Any plan to tackle absence must also consider how to repair the breakdown of contract between families and schools, with CSJ polling showing that over a quarter of parents (28 per cent) agree that the pandemic has shown it is not essential for children to attend school every day.⁴⁵

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

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

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

Our plan for reform

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

The CSJ has a plan to turn the tide on school absence. 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.⁴⁶ 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 Middlesborough in September 2022 and was extended to four additional local authorities (Salford, Doncaster, Knowsley and Stoke-on-Trent) in September 2023.

It was announced in January 2024 that the pilot would be rolled out to ten additional areas. This addition to the trial is expected to support 3,600 pupils per year, in addition to the 1,700 being supported over the course of the three-year initial pilot. In October 2024, the Government confirmed this expansion, announcing Etio as the delivery partner and naming the ten additional local authority areas that will be included. The ten additional local authority areas are Nottingham, Walsall, West Somerset, Ipswich, Hastings, Blackpool, Norwich, Hartlepool, Portsmouth and Rochdale. The Government also announced that the Youth Endowment Fund will oversee a full external evaluation of the programme. The expanded programme will commence in March 2025.

In March 2024, the DfE 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 previous 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 designed and 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.

⁴⁶ Centre for Social Justice, Lost and not found, 2022 [Accessed via: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CSJ-Lost_and_Not_Found.pdf]

This shows 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 DfE also supports individual children in order 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 this came into force in August 2024.

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

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 National Parental Participation Strategy, the Government should release additional guidance on 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 professionals working in Family Hubs 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.

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.

The Government have also previously announced a commitment to provide specialist mental health professionals in every school.

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. This has since come into force at the start of the 2024/25 academic school year.

89 per cent of schools had previously been doing this voluntarily, since the DfE first announced the initiative. This compulsory collection of this data 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.

The DfE has continued to publish more data tools for schools, trusts and local authorities, to help them make best use of the daily attendance data. The DfE has produced new 'touch of a button' summary reports for schools, trusts and local authorities which has now also been expanded to include primary schools. These tools can help schools and local authorities spot trends of school absence and respond accordingly.

The Government has included plans to give every child a single unique identifying number, to improve data sharing across services, in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill. The Government has also announced proposals to use AI to spot trends in absence data, by joining up existing records for children and improving coordination between education and other relevant services.

In December 2024, in its response to the consultation on improving support for children missing education, the DfE confirmed it will continue to run termly data collections on children missing education, which began on a voluntary basis in Autumn 2022 and became mandatory in Autumn 2024.

5. Recognise the value of relational work.

Recommendation

The Government should build on the previous Government’s 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.

The previous Government also took further action to ensure that every young person can have someone to talk to, something to do and somewhere to go. Action included:

- 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 different youth offers.

In November 2024, the Government announced plans to create a new National Youth Strategy. As part of this, the Government confirmed that over £85 million will be allocated to deliver more youth facilities and that £100 million from the next tranche of dormant assets funding will be used to support the provision of youth services and facilities. In March 2025, the Government launched a consultation for young people on the strategy.

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, with up to two hours of sport, for every pupil in secondary school in England.

Progress update: plans for action, limited action taken.

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

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

In August 2023 the previous Government launched its new sport and physical activity strategy, with a focus on increasing participation rates for people of all ages and backgrounds. The strategy acknowledges other areas in which sport and physical activity can play a positive role, for example in academic disengagement. However, there was an absence of clear policy commitments in the strategy. We now need a clear, strategic national plan delivering on those ambitions — especially for disadvantaged children and young people who are disengaged with their education, such as that outlined in the recent CSJ report *Game Changer: A Plan to Transform Young Lives Through Sport*.⁴⁷

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

In March 2025, the Government announced it is developing a new enrichment framework, in partnership with a panel of experts. This framework will highlight best practice on enrichment and provide advice for schools on how to deliver a high-quality enrichment offer.

⁴⁷ Centre for Social Justice, *Game Changer*, 2023 [Accessed via: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSJ-Game_Changer.pdf]

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). This came into force in August 2024.

The 'Working Together to Improve Attendance' guidance – now 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.

The Government included plans for a Children Not in School Register in the King's Speech in July 2024 and in the subsequent Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is currently making its way through Parliament. The detail of the Bill includes proposals to align the maximum penalty for breaching an SAO with the offence of knowingly failing to ensure a child attends school.

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 had previously featured as part of Flick Drummond's Children Not in School (Registers, Support and Orders) Private Members' Bill. This Bill fell when Parliament was dissolved at the July 2024 General Election.



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