

Not in school: The mental health barriers to school attendance

Parliamentary Briefing

April 2024

School attendance has been at the forefront of parliamentary debate in recent times. Often, issues with attendance are linked to children and young people's needs, and growing evidence supports a link between mental health problems and special educational needs and disabilities with absence from school. Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (CYPMHC) new report '[Not in school: The mental health barriers to school attendance](#)' explores these drivers of school absences and reviews the potential solutions to the attendance crisis.

Summary

- There has been an increase in levels of persistent and severe absence in recent years: one in five children are currently persistently absent and in 2022-23 150,000 children were severely absent (Department for Education, 2024).
- There are links between mental health problems and school absence: according to data from NHS Digital, children and young people with mental health problems are almost seven times as likely to have had 15 or more days off school in one term (NHS Digital, 2023).
- Children can experience many barriers to school attendance including but not limited to children with special educational needs, children experiencing poverty, racism, discrimination, being care experienced or being a young carer.
- Many of the Government initiatives introduced to tackle school absenteeism do not consider the wider determinants and therefore will likely fail to create the change that is required.
- Centre for Mental Health and CYPMHC are calling for:
 - **The introduction of a mental health absence code**
 - **The full, national roll out of Mental Health Support Teams in all schools and colleges**
 - **A fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school and college to adopt a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing**
 - **Action to address the drivers of school absence such as a new Child Poverty Act and support to utilise the SEND code of practice and Equality Act.**

The drivers of school absenteeism

In recent years there has been an increase in the levels of school absence. Most recent data shows that one in five children are currently persistently absent, missing 10% or more of school time (Long & Roberts, 2024) and 150,000 children are severely absent, missing over 50% of possible sessions, in 2022-23 (Department for Education, 2024).

School absence has risen in close relationship with rising levels of mental health issues. In 2023, one in five children and young people aged 8 to 25 had a mental health problem (NHS

Digital, 2023). Further data suggests a link between school absence rates and mental health problems. Children with a mental health problem were seven times more likely to have missed 15 days of school in the Autumn term 2022, compared to those without a mental health problem (NHS Digital, 2023).

Whilst attendance is often perceived through a single lens, the wider barriers to attendance, cannot be ignored. Groups of children and young people, such as those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those living in poverty, those experience bullying or racism, young carers and care experienced children, can be disproportionately impacted by both school absence and mental health problems. For example:

- Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are disproportionately represented in both absence and persistent absence figures (Department for Education, 2020)
- Research by the Centre for Young Lives found that 57% of persistently absent pupils were eligible for free school meals, and children growing up in poverty were three times more likely to miss school (Centre for Young Lives, 2024).

What needs to change?

The Government has introduced various initiatives to tackle the attendance crisis such as attendance mentors and attendance hubs. However, whilst some initiatives have the potential to bring about change, most initiatives fail to consider the wide variety of drivers of school absence and therefore cannot achieve the level of change that is required.

1. Introducing a Mental Health Code of Absence

There is currently no separate mechanism for education settings to record absence for pupils with mental health problems (Education Select Committee, 2023). Despite guidance indicating that medical evidence should only be sought when there is reasonable doubt of authenticity or illness is preventing attendance for extended periods (Department for Education, 2023), children and young people with SEND or mental health needs continue to experience absence being registered as unauthorised and as a result may receive sanctions or experience punitive measures due to absence. Square Peg highlights that the challenges in attaining authorisation for mental health issues can be rooted in schools prioritising attendance and attainment outcomes, and a lack of understanding about mental health (Square Peg, n.d).

We support calls for the introduction of a mental health and wellbeing absence code, which would ensure that mental health is registered as an authorised absence. The introduction of such a code would also go a long way in achieving parity of esteem between physical health and mental health, identifying need at an early stage, and empowering schools to acknowledge and track the impact of mental health on attendance.

Sanctions also continue to form a major part of the Government's response to school absenteeism, despite increasing evidence that the use of fines and penalties are harmful to

families. The Department for Education recently announced that parent fines for unauthorised absence will be brought under a national framework to tackle inconsistencies in their use which would involve an increase in the cost of fines from £60 to £80 (Department for Education, 2024b). The current use of fines and other penalties, which remain discriminatory to those with mental health problems, do not address the core issues which are keeping pupils out of school and only make matters worse by putting additional financial strain on families and negatively impacting wellbeing.

Recommendation:

- The Department for Education should introduce a mental health and wellbeing absence code setting clear and realistic thresholds for its use.

2. Improving the availability of mental health support

Education settings have an important role to play in promoting and protecting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. In recent years, the Government has taken steps to increase the availability of mental health support in schools through the introduction of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs). There are currently 398 teams operational, covering 35% of pupils in schools and learners as of Spring 2023 and coverage is expected to expand to 50% by March 2025 (DfE written question, 2023). However, the future funding and rollout of the programme remains uncertain. Findings from Barnardo's suggest that the current timetable for the roll out of MHSTs leaves around 6.5 million children without access in the medium term, further exacerbating inequality in access to support (Barnardo's, 2023). Further funding for the full national roll out of MHSTs therefore needs to be guaranteed to ensure equity in provision for all children and young people.

This should be supported by the full implementation of whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing. A whole education approach has been the foundation for the Government's work on improving mental health support in education settings, however, it is not a requirement for education settings to implement such an approach and therefore not resourced by the Government (Department for Education, 2021). Fully embedding such approaches would ensure to ensure that all education settings actively put positive mental health and wellbeing at the centre of their work. Such an approach should also be used as a framework to develop policies and initiatives to support pupils, including on school attendance.

What is more, schools need to be aligned with and have access to local support services. Increased funding for the NHS and increased provision of community support would allow for a system of support around schools, reduce the barrier of long waiting times for mental health support to attendance and provide a space of support for young people who for various reasons may be unable to or may not want to access support in schools. This should include measures to improve access to mental health support through the investment in a national rollout of early support hubs and funding NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services to cope with the increased level of mental health needs.

Recommendations:



- The Department for Education should develop a fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school, college and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing.
- The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care should commit to and fund the full national roll out of Mental Health Support Teams across all schools and colleges in England until 100% coverage is reached.

3. Addressing the drivers of school absenteeism

We are clear that without action to address social determinants, like poverty, racism and discrimination, and environmental factors, efforts to improve mental health and school attendance will not be effective in creating change. Children who are free from the constraints of poverty, who are not burdened by racism and discrimination, and who live in supported families are likely to be more able to access, enjoy and partake in education. Adequately acknowledging and supporting their mental health needs, SEND or caring responsibilities will go a long way to ensuring that school is an accessible place where children want to be.

Recommendations:

- The Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and HM Treasury should work to deliver a new Child Poverty Act to eradicate child poverty by 2030.
- The Department for Education should provide practical support so that schools and local authorities can effectively refer to and utilise the SEND code of practice and Equality Act.

What can you do to support?

- Raise the report and key findings in oral questions and parliamentary debates
- Share the report on social media using #MoreThanJustAbsence
- Meet with us to discuss the key findings from the report and how we can support you in your work

Questions to Government

- Will the Government commit to the introduction of a mental health absence code?
- Will the Government commit to and fund the national roll out of Mental Health Support teams across all schools and colleges in England?
- Will the Government review disciplinary measures around attendance and the use of sanctions?

About Centre for Mental Health

Centre for Mental Health is an independent charity. We take the lead in challenging injustices in policies, systems and society, so that everyone can have better mental health. By building research evidence to create fairer mental health policy, we are pursuing equality, social justice and good mental health for all. Centre for Mental Health are proud hosts of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition.

About the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition is a collaborative network of nearly 300 organisations and individuals dedicated to advocating for and influencing policy in relation to the mental health needs of babies, children and young people. Our Coalition consists of diverse stakeholders, including mental health organisations, youth support services, educational institutions, and concerned individuals, all united by a shared commitment to improving the wellbeing of children. We aim to raise awareness of the importance of mental health and ensure that children and young people have access to the necessary support and services.

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