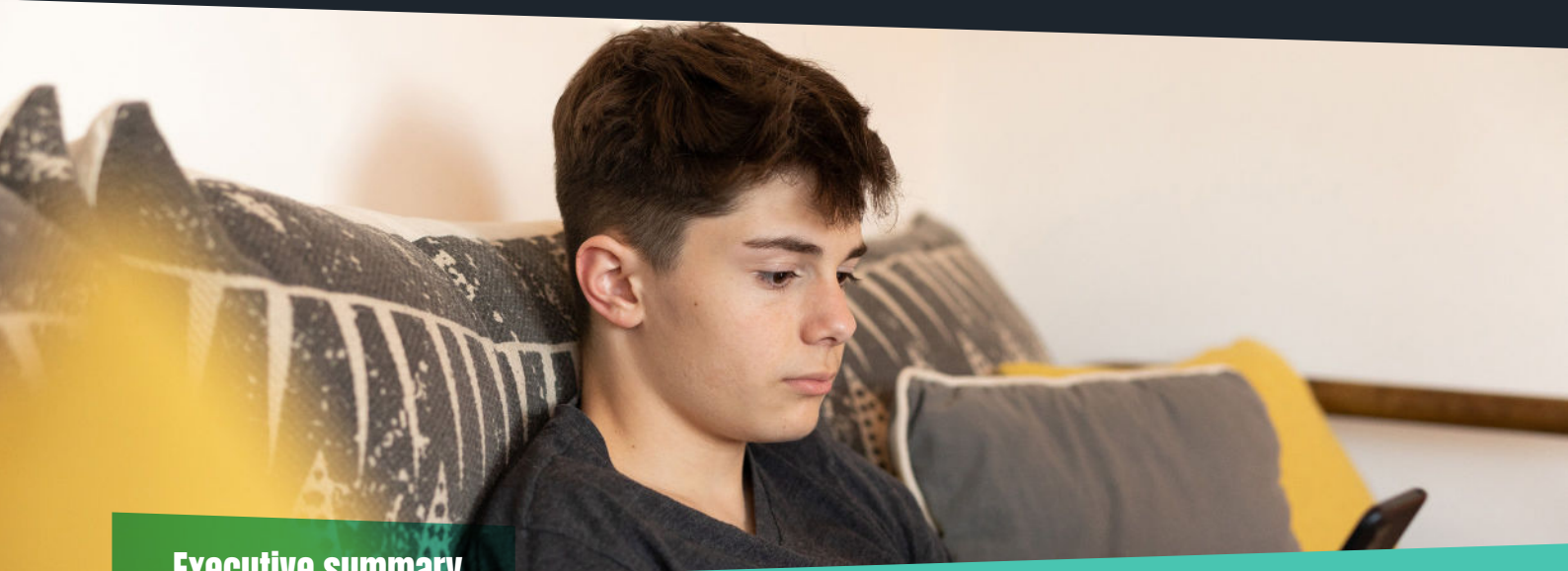




NOT IN SCHOOL

THE MENTAL HEALTH BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE



Executive summary

School attendance is at the centre of public, sector, and government discourse. This is likely due to the increase in persistent and severe absence, particularly following the pandemic. One in five children are currently persistently absent from school and in 2022/23 150,000 children were considered to be severely absent. A child or young person's school attendance is impacted by a complex interplay of factors, including but not limited to poor mental health, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), poverty, bullying, racism, discrimination, and caring responsibilities. Evidence suggests that children experiencing these issues are more likely to be absent from school. While these factors may not always prevent a child or young person from attending or taking part in some form of education, the lack of proper identification of need and subsequent support act as significant barriers to attendance.

Systemic and school-based barriers may also drive school absence, including the inaccessibility of timely mental health support and the use of sanctions. The Government has introduced several programmes, initiatives, and guidance over the last year to address the 'attendance crisis'. These have led to improvements in some areas, although results are inconsistent and often do not address the underlying causes of absenteeism, such as mental health difficulties, unmet SEND needs, and rises in child poverty.

Some of the Government's initiatives to support and maintain high levels of attendance have included attendance toolkits, mentors, hubs, and the formation of an 'attendance alliance' of professionals to monitor and provide guidance. Alongside these initiatives, there has also been an alarming increase in the use of fines to address non-attendance. Despite evidence suggesting that sanction-based approaches such as these are harmful to parents in an already challenging time, the Government has brought fines under a national framework to help tackle inconsistencies in use and has also increased the cost of fines.

While some of the initiatives, such as the attendance mentor programme, have been impactful on an individual pupil or family basis, most of the approaches fail to adequately consider or account for the wider determinants which may drive school absence. We recommend a range of alternative approaches that may encourage attendance and provide the necessary support for children, young people, and families.





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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, school attendance has been at the centre of sector, government, and public discourse. The conversation has become particularly prominent since levels of persistent and severe absence, and children being taken out of school, have continued to soar beyond pre-pandemic levels (Department for Education, 2024a). One in five children are persistently absent, which means they are currently missing 10% or more of their school time, the equivalent to an afternoon or more off every week of school (ibid). Prior to school closures during the pandemic, the Government had made some progress in addressing rising school absences. However, since schools have reopened, persistent absences have risen significantly, beyond pre-lockdown levels (Hutchinson and Crenna-Jennings, 2019).


Updated figures from the Department for Education also highlight that the proportion of children at state schools who were severely absent (missing over 50% of possible sessions), has increased. In 2022-23, the proportion reached 150,000 - 150% higher than the 60,000 pupils considered to be severely absent before the pandemic in 2018-19 (Department for Education, 2024a). The persistence of attendance issues may speak to a wider discontent with the education system, with more students expressing the desire for an education that reflects their diversity and the challenges of modern childhoods (Edge Foundation, 2021).

While parents and carers may be taking a more cautious approach to minor ailments such as coughs and colds, and as such keeping their children out of school, the rise in persistent and severe absence may be more reflective of structural issues and inequalities which have widened in the wake of the pandemic. Persistent and severe absence has risen in close relationship with:

- ⦿ Rising mental health issues among children and young people (NHS Digital, 2023)
- ⦿ Waiting times and rejected referrals for children and young people's mental health services being at an all-time high (Young Minds, 2023)
- ⦿ Rising levels of children and young people waiting to receive their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) (Children's Commissioner, 2024b)
- ⦿ Rising rates of childhood poverty in the UK (UNICEF, 2023).

The link between school attendance and educational outcomes is well documented and, furthermore, with outcomes in later life. Schools provide a place of safety and security that can help young people develop their personal interests, social skills, and ways to engage with their communities. While schools are well placed to support children and young people with mental health problems, too often they are inadequately resourced and restricted by the pressure to produce high performance outcomes.

To effectively support families, schools need to be aligned with and have access to local support services within their communities.



In September 2023, the absence rate peaked above levels seen in the same time period the previous year, despite government drives to increase school attendance. The Education Select Committee said that it was of “great concern” that absence rates had failed to return to pre-pandemic levels and made a range of recommendations to Government including introducing a mental health absence code, ensuring schools are adequately set up to support SEND pupils and reviewing the framework for supporting low-income families (Education Select Committee, 2023). While the Government committed to some of these recommendations, many of those that would address drivers of absence were overlooked.

In seeking to address the attendance crisis, there is an opportunity to examine the wider determinants of educational outcomes, and the education system as a whole. The issue of persistent absenteeism cannot be confronted without consideration of the broader societal issues that restrict people’s opportunities to take part in citizenship activities, like going to school, work and the polling station. A coordinated and flexible approach to school attendance is required; one that provides support to address the needs of the child or family. This briefing provides further insight on the underlying issues for persistent absence and sets out recommendations for change.

WHO IS MISSING SCHOOL?

THE LINK BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES AND ATTENDANCE

There are many drivers of school absence, and approaches to attendance cannot be viewed through a single lens. Children and young people who face inequalities and disadvantage are more likely to miss school and less likely to get the support they need. Covid-19 has had far-reaching effects across health, the economy and social inequalities, and children and young people have commented that their education and schools have to change to better reflect their needs in a post-Covid world (Edge Foundation, 2021).

One in five children and young people aged 8-25 reported a mental health problem such as anxiety and depression in 2023 – an increase from one in nine in 2017, and one in six in 2020 – demonstrating a sustained high level of need (NHS Digital, 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic has also exacerbated need, with analysis suggesting that 1.5 million children and young people under the age of 18 could need mental health support as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (O’Shea, 2021).

Evidence demonstrates a clear link between the rise in school absence and the rise of mental health and wellbeing challenges (NHS Digital, 2023). The emergence of mental health difficulties can stem from both within and outside of the school environment, such as bullying, trauma, caring responsibilities, or a stressful home environment (including inadequate housing). Children and young people with mental health problems may have additional difficulties engaging in learning and social interactions at school, which can further discourage school attendance due to a sense of not belonging. Emotional difficulties may also lead to symptoms such as fatigue, difficulty concentrating, lack of motivation, or anxiety provoked by stimuli in the school such as social interaction, performance situations or academic assessments, all of which may impact a child’s ability to attend school.

MENTAL HEALTH AND SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

- ⦿ Data from NHS Digital highlights 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)
- ⦿ Research from Mind, which surveyed 1,271 young people between the ages of 13 and 25, found that 82% of young people had personal experiences of mental health problems. Nearly seven in ten young people who participated reported being absent from school due to their mental health (Mind, 2021).

A lack of timely mental health support can further exacerbate attendance issues. Access to specialist support is limited due to demand drastically outstripping provision, leaving young people facing rejected referrals, services with high thresholds for support, and long wait lists. Recent Children's Commissioner research highlights that in 2022-23, of the 949,200 children and young people with active referrals to NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS), only 32% entered treatment and 28% were still waiting at the end of the year (Children's Commissioner, 2024a). It is also estimated that 75% of young people experiencing a mental health problem wait so long that their condition gets worse, or they are unable to access any treatment at all (Local Government Association, 2023).

THE DRIVERS OF SCHOOL ABSENCE

Some groups of children and young people are disproportionately impacted by mental health problems, largely driven by the social and environmental determinants of mental health. For example, recent research by Centre for Mental Health found that experiences of poverty, racism, inadequate housing, and limited access to green spaces increased the risk of childhood behavioural problems, which are among the most common childhood mental health difficulties (Davie *et al.*, 2023). These factors can compound disadvantage and subsequently impact school enjoyment and attendance. As a result, some groups of children and young people are more likely to be persistently and severely absent from school. Below we explore some of the challenges that disadvantaged pupils face. While this list is not exhaustive, we hope to highlight a few key examples that demonstrate the complexity of barriers to attendance.

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

In January 2023, over 1.5 million pupils in England had special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), an increase of 87,000 from 2022 (HM Government, 2023). Social, emotional, and mental health needs are identified as the second most common need in children with SEND, experienced by 229,700 pupils in England (ibid). Often, early-emerging and undiagnosed SEND needs can present as mental health difficulties, such as anxiety around attendance – sometimes referred to as emotionally based school avoidance (IPSEA, n.d.).

The Children and Families Act 2014 states that if a child with special educational needs has a named school on their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), that school must admit the child, regardless of whether places are available. However, investigative reports show that this commitment is not being realised and the number of appeals to EHCPs for improper placement is rising, reaching an increase of 24% in 2022/23 (Children's Commissioner, 2024a). Funding streams for SEND pupils have made it challenging for mainstream schools to support children and young people with SEND. Indeed, the SEND Reform England manifesto reports that 97% of school leaders think that funding for all SEND pupils is insufficient to meet their needs and begin to address the backlog of pupils waiting for an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Currently, only 24% of identified SEND pupils have an EHCP, which equates to 390,000 pupils in 2023 (SEND Reform England).

The challenges experienced by pupils with SEND often manifest in school absence, for instance:

- ⦿ Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are disproportionately represented in both absence and persistent absence figures (Department for Education, 2020)
- ⦿ Pupils with SEND support are more likely than non-SEND pupils to be absent, while those in receipt of EHCPs are even more likely to, suggesting a possible correlation between complexity of need and poor attendance levels (ibid)
- ⦿ Research from the University of Swansea highlights that children and young people with neurodevelopmental disorders, mental health problems, and those who self-harmed were much more likely to miss school than their peers (John *et al.*, 2021).

CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY AND HOUSING INSECURITY

The prevalence of child poverty has increased over the last decade, with 4.3 million children in the UK now living in poverty, and hundreds of thousands of children living in insecure housing (CPAG, 2024). Recent UNICEF data shows that the UK has seen the highest rise in child poverty rates among all the OECD countries (UNICEF, 2023). Destitution and temporary housing can become a catalyst for attendance problems through the development of mental health problems, issues around travelling to school and meeting uniform guidance, fatigue and period poverty. In 2022, one million UK children experienced destitution at one point and at the end of June 2023, 139,000 homeless children were living in temporary accommodation (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2023).

School policies and practices around uniform, dressing up days, transport costs and punctuality policies can also create barriers to attendance for families who are battling to make ends meet. For example, sending a child to school in England costs a minimum of £18.69 a week for primary aged children; for secondary school children, this increases to at least £39.01 a week (Child Poverty Action Group, 2023). Poverty and insecure housing are associated with both poor mental health and poor attendance and have been recommended as priority areas to tackle to improve attendance (Education Select Committee, 2023).

- ⦿ Children aged 8-16 with a mental health problem were more than twice as likely to live in a household that had fallen behind with rent, bills or mortgage payments (18.7%) than those without a mental health problem (6.8%) (NHS Digital, 2023)
- ⦿ Data highlights that children eligible for free school meals are more likely to be absent or persistently absent. For example, in 2021/22, 37.2% of pupils eligible for free school meals were persistently absent compared with 17.5% of pupils who were not eligible (Long and Danechi, 2023). While free school meals eligibility is not a direct indicator of childhood poverty, it is a useful reference point in understanding levels of destitution and changes to economic challenges.



- ⦿ 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).

Poverty not only affects a pupil's ability to attend school, but also the likelihood of their engagement with classes and social groups beneficial to their health and wellbeing (Robinson, 2024). In a cyclical nature this detachment can make school an intimidating or unpleasant place to be. Despite reforms and initiatives, the attainment gap between richer and poorer learners continues to widen (ADCS, 2024), and children in care, those with additional learning needs and children from racialised communities continue to be much more likely than their peers to be excluded (ibid). School attendance can play a vital role in improving pupil wellbeing and, in turn, educational outcomes, including health in later life.

CHILDREN EXPERIENCING BULLYING

Evidence suggests that one in five young people in the UK have experienced bullying (Department for Education, 2022a). Experiences of bullying have been linked to school absence. Research shows that the proportion of pupils who were absent from school due to anxiety or mental health problems was higher amongst pupils who had been bullied (32% compared to 16% of pupils who had not been bullied) (ibid). However, school records rarely record bullying as a reason for a young person missing school, often recording 'other reason' instead. This would suggest that the true number of young people who miss school because they are being bullied is even higher.

- ⦿ Children who had not attended school every weekday for the previous two weeks (28%), and those who had not attended at all (44%), were more likely to have experienced bullying (ibid)
- ⦿ In a survey of 13,387 12-18 year olds, 18% of respondents said they had missed school because they were being bullied within the past 12 months (Ditch the Label, 2020).

CHILDREN EXPERIENCING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Almost one third of children have heard racist comments at school and are likely to have experienced racism by about the age of 13 (Gayle, 2020). The Department for Education's guidance on the Equality Act 2010 highlights that schools have a responsibility to ensure that all forms of prejudice-motivated bullying are dealt with equally and taken seriously (Department for Education, 2013).

The challenges of racism in school are also reflected at an institutional level, impacting racialised children and young people's sense of belonging and safety, which are vital to improving their engagement and wellbeing. Some punitive behaviour techniques, including exclusions, are disproportionately used with students from some racialised communities such as Black Caribbean students and Gypsy and Roma pupils (Agenda Alliance, 2024; CYPMHC, 2023). The Agenda Alliance found that girls from Black Caribbean backgrounds were excluded at double the rate of white British girls, with similarly disproportionate numbers for Gypsy and Roma girls (Agenda Alliance, 2024). Behavioural policies often fail to consider the individual needs and challenges of racialised young people, and this – alongside experiences of racism and bullying – may drive absenteeism in racialised communities.

Experiencing racism, (micro)aggressions, discrimination and bullying are also interlinked with mental health difficulties and school attendance issues:

- ⦿ Research in Australia highlights that racism negatively impacts school attendance. Of those pupils who experienced bullying or unfair treatment due to their indigenous status (according to their carer), 16% missed school without permission, compared to only 7% of those who didn't experience bullying or unfair treatment (Biddle and Priest, 2014).



YOUNG CARERS

There are an estimated 800,000 young carers in the UK (The Children's Society, n.d.), and being a young person with caring responsibilities has been identified as a risk factor for poor mental health. Around one in three young carers are estimated to experience a mental health problem (The Children's Society, n.d.) and among carers aged 16-17, one in five report a long-term mental health condition compared to one in fifteen non-carers of the same age (Bennett, 2019).

Being a young carer is associated with having to juggle wide and varied responsibilities, including but not limited to physical tasks such as shopping and housework, managing family finances, emotional support, physical care and looking after siblings (Action for Children, 2023). These compounding challenges are likely drivers of school absence in young carers:

- ⦿ In 2022/23, the persistent absence rate for young carers was 39%, compared to an average of 21%, and the overall absence rate for young carers was 5% higher than the average (HM Government, 2024)
- ⦿ Over 25% of young carers aged 11-15 regularly miss school (Action for Children, 2023)
- ⦿ Young carers are more likely to have missed days of school (Department for Education, 2016) and struggle to balance caring with education. 40% report 'never' or 'not often' getting help in school, college, or university to balance caring responsibilities and their education (Carers Trust, 2023).

CARE EXPERIENCED CHILDREN

Care experienced children have featured significantly in school absence data (Children's Commissioner, 2023a). However, recent research indicates that they are more likely to be marked with authorised absence rather than unauthorised (Adoption UK, 2024). Some of the reasons for this high level of authorised absence may be due to the inappropriate use of part-time timetables when needs cannot be met in full-time education, time spent in internal exclusion, and time attending essential medical appointments, which all prevent care experienced children from accessing a suitable education (ibid).

Adoption UK's research also suggests that more than 40% of adopted children will have time off school each year due to mental health and wellbeing concerns, and 16% will miss five or more days for this reason (Adoption UK, 2024). Care experienced children and young people are more likely to have a mental health problem than the general population (Sanders, 2020). In 2021, 45% of care experienced children aged 5-15 had emotional and mental health problems (NICE, 2021). This is compared to a rate of 10% for those who aren't care experienced (ibid).

- ⦿ Many children in care have experienced significant trauma and abuse, and there are strong links between exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and mental illness (Crenna Jennings and Hutchinson, 2020; Sanders, 2020).
- ⦿ Negative experiences in care and of services can compound early emotional difficulties and increase barriers to school attendance. For example, research shows that five in six children in care experience a change of home, school or social worker which can re-trigger feelings of loss and experiences of separation (Sanders, 2020).
- ⦿ In March 2022, 1,363 looked after children (2.7%) were missing from school, 541 (1.1%) looked after children were not enrolled on any school roll, and 149 (0.3%) looked after children were unauthorised absent from 100% of sessions (Children's Commissioner, 2023a).

THE POLICY RESPONSE

GOVERNMENT ATTENDANCE INITIATIVES

In May 2022 the Department for Education published new guidance aiming to improve school attendance, which placed an emphasis on early help and multidisciplinary support (Department for Education, 2022b). The guidance was designed to support schools, trusts, governing bodies, and local authorities to maintain high levels of attendance, and summarises the various responsibilities of all groups to improve and support school attendance. Alongside this, the Government has also produced separate guidance which outlines the expectations of school staff, parents, carers, local authorities, academy trustees and governing bodies when mental health is affecting a pupil's attendance (Department for Education, 2023a). The guidance provides valuable advice and examples of best practice in supporting children and young people with mental health difficulties to attend school. Including this information in the updated main attendance guidance would be a beneficial way of ensuring that the impact of mental ill health is recognised and considered.

To date, the Government has implemented several initiatives to address the 'attendance crisis', including an attendance data tool and register, attendance champions, an attendance alliance, an attendance ambassador, an attendance mentor and hubs, and has offered guidance and toolkits. Thus far, initiatives have focused on individual pupils and families, but have not delved further into the drivers of school (non-)attendance.

To track attendance data, allow for early intervention and avoid absence becoming entrenched, the Government's attendance data tool provides information on state-funded primary, secondary and special schools (Department for Education, n.d.) and the department recently announced a requirement upon every state school to share their daily attendance register (Department for Education, 2024b).

Direct support to improve attendance has also been offered through the attendance mentor programme which supports families and children to overcome barriers to school attendance (Department for Education, 2024c; Adams, 2024) and the attendance hubs initiative, pairing leading schools with schools struggling with attendance to provide practical ideas and support (EdPsychEd, 2023). Last year the Government announced plans to expand attendance hubs, delivering 18 new ones. This initiative takes the lead from schools with excellent attendance records to introduce initiatives such as breakfast clubs and extracurricular activities to improve an individual school's attendance data. The Government's toolkit for schools also provides tips and evidence-based adaptable templates for communicating with parents and carers (Department for Education, 2023b).

Whilst these are positive steps to improving attendance that have been somewhat effective in working with individual children and families, absence rates are not falling, and these initiatives have not addressed many of the underlying causes of persistent absence. This sentiment is echoed by the Education Select Committee which, in its inquiry, suggested that while the recognition of the problem by the Department for Education is encouraging, there "has been no significant improvement in the speed and scale of the rate of which is needed to prevent long-term harm to pupils."

THE USE OF SANCTIONS

There has been an alarming increase in the number of parents being fined for their child's absence, with fines amounting to a total of £3.7 million in June 2022 alone (Contact, 2022). In addition, 22 of the 153 local authorities have been responsible for issuing more than half of these fines, suggesting that fines are being issued excessively in certain areas (Department for Education, 2024d).

Punitive approaches to address attendance, such as fines, can be harmful to the mental health of the young person and their family at an already challenging time. Parent-led organisations including Square Peg and Not Fine in School have shown how current approaches to attendance difficulties, which often use sanction-based measures, can be counterproductive – particularly when mental health diagnoses or support are difficult to access.

There is also evidence that taking a punitive approach to unauthorised absences can result in parents withdrawing their child from school. In 2019, the Children's Commissioner for England found that many parents are withdrawing their child from mainstream education, either because they are worried about their child's mental health, or because they are being faced with fines and prosecutions due to unauthorised absence (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

Mind's Education Inquiry also found that of the nine in ten parents (88%) who disclosed that their child had been absent from school because of their mental health, only one in four (28%) were successful in receiving authorisation from school. Given this low authorisation rate, many families found themselves facing court orders and fines from their local authorities, as well as opting to home-school their children instead (Mind, 2021).

In partnership with Impetus, Khulisa and School-Home Support, Public First published research investigating parents' views on school attendance (Burtonshow and Dorrell, 2023). Fines were perceived as failing to change parent behaviour, undermining the relationship between schools and parents, and making the situation worse. The report called for a review of the efficacy and implementation of fines, and the potential abolition of them if found to be ineffective.

Despite this evidence, 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. They state that a fine must be considered for 5 days of unauthorised absences and that the cost of fines will increase from £60 to £80 per parent as part of the strategy to return attendance to pre-pandemic levels (Department for Education, 2024e; The Education Hub, 2024).

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

In recent years the Government has taken steps to increase the availability of mental health support in schools and colleges through the *Transforming children and young people's mental health provision green paper*, which set out the Government's vision for early intervention and prevention support in education settings. The green paper committed to establish Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) to work across schools and colleges providing early intervention on some mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. The green paper pledged that MHSTs will reach a fifth to a quarter of the country by the end of 2022/23.

NHS England expected approximately 500 MHSTs to be up and running by 2024 and the Department for Education shared that they estimate coverage of 44% of pupils by April 2024, with work to increase this coverage to 50% by March 2025, expanding the initial target set out in the green paper (DfE written question, 2023).



An evaluation of the MHST programme so far (led by NHS England) has found some positive outcomes. These include staff feeling more confident talking to children about mental health problems, being able to access advice about mental health problems more easily, and having quicker access to support (Ellins *et al.*, 2023). However, the evaluation highlighted that some children and young people continue to fall through the gaps in support, with the evaluation highlighting challenges in defining the scope of 'mild to moderate' mental health needs, leading to concerns about children and young people falling through the gaps of support between MHSTs and specialist support. It also raised concerns that some of the most marginalised children (including those with special educational needs or who are neurodiverse, those from racialised communities and some religious backgrounds, and children with challenging family or social circumstances) remain underserved by MHSTs, due to a lack of clarity in their remit.

There have also been significant concerns about the implementation and ambition of the green paper proposals, and the speed at which all areas of the country will have access to this additional support. 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). Funding for MHSTs beyond 2023/24 is also yet to be decided, meaning there is no guarantee on how much further, or how quickly, MHSTs will be expanded. This risks leaving huge numbers of children and young people without this additional support, further fuelling the postcode lottery that already exists for children and young people's mental health services.

What is more, the links between schools and NHS CYPMHS are not consistently strong across all areas, and where NHS CYPMHS experience long waiting lists, there is subsequently an increased demand on schools to hold more complex cases for mental health support while children and families wait. Recent data shows that children and young people can wait as long as 21 weeks for an initial appointment (Smith, 2023) and the length of waiting times for follow up appointments is still unclear (Duggan, 2024).

A REGISTER OF HOME-EDUCATED CHILDREN

While non-attendance rates are growing, there has also been a rise in pupils being home-educated, although there is currently no measure or register to track this and ensure that every child gets the support needed for either home education or to return to school. In summer 2023, local authorities calculated that 97,600 children were in elective home school education, an increase from 80,900 in autumn 2022 (Department for Education, 2023c). Evidence from the Department for Education highlights SEND, mental health needs, and facing bullying and discrimination as some of the reasons for parents opting for home education, with mental health accounting for 15% of known reasons in January 2023 (ibid).

In May 2023, the House of Commons held the first reading for the Children Not in School Bill (UK Parliament, 2023). The aim of the bill was to place a duty on local authorities to keep a register of children who are not in school. This would improve local authorities' ability to fulfil their safeguarding and educational responsibilities related to children who do not attend mainstream school to ensure that every child is supported. Case studies from Square Peg have suggested this proposal is contentious with parents, who feel that such a register would only be beneficial if there were sufficient support services in place to support the needs of families. While we would welcome the implementation of a register for home-educated children, it needs to be ensured that data is collected on reasons for school withdrawal and that all families can access the same support as they would in school.

SOLUTIONS

Although current government initiatives will go some way in addressing attendance issues, they focus fundamentally on attendance in isolation, without addressing the wider social determinants and systemic barriers. If the Government is serious about addressing attendance issues within school, it must address the wider barriers and improve the availability of timely support for children, young people, and families.

IMPROVING ATTENDANCE MEASURES

The *Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance* guidance highlights that schools must record absences as authorised where pupils are unable to attend school due to both physical and mental health problems (Department for Education, 2023a). Further, it states that medical evidence of a mental health related absence should only be sought when there is reasonable doubt of the authenticity of the illness or when the illness is likely to prevent attendance for extended periods. Despite this, children and young people with mental health difficulties and SEND still experience absences being registered as unauthorised. Further clarity is needed in the main guidance to ensure that absences relating to mental health problems are consistently reported and authorised without challenge across schools. There is currently no separate mechanism for education settings to record absences for pupils with mental health problems, meaning that mental health related absence is not commonly authorised by schools due to rigidity around providing medical evidence (Education Select Committee, 2023). Square Peg highlights the challenges in attaining authorisation for mental health issues which include schools prioritising attendance and attainment outcomes, and a lack of understanding about mental health (Square Peg, n.d). Research from Mind highlights that schools' insistence on ascertaining medical evidence before authorising absence can be challenging for young people who face lengthy delays to accessing mental health support (Mind, 2021).

There have been widespread calls to introduce an authorised 'mental health and wellbeing registration code', first recommended by Square Peg, in order to eliminate the need for medical evidence in the case of mental health problems and reduce the need for intervention via prosecution (Education Select Committee, 2023b). This would go a long way to 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. A new mental health and wellbeing registration code can provide a clear framework for pupils, parents, and schools, as well as facilitating careful consideration of the barriers faced by pupils in being able to obtain diagnosis and medical evidence from the health care system.

Furthermore, under the Equality Act, in order for conditions such as mental ill health to be treated as a disability, the effects must be considered 'long term', which underserves many young people experiencing mental health problems for the first time, particularly in relation to authorising school absences.

In addition to the mental health and wellbeing registration code, Square Peg has also called for the introduction of a code for those awaiting assessment or support for mental health or special educational needs. This would protect families from being punished for a child's non-attendance due to inaccessibility of and long waiting times for support, which would increase understanding of the challenges faced by the pupil, and boost rapport between the school and the family.

Responses that fail to address the underlying causes of absenteeism can often default to harmful mechanisms, such as discipline and fines, that worsen the mental health impact and break down trust between parents and schools. The current use of fines and other penalties, which can be discriminatory to those with mental health problems, do not address the core issues which are keeping pupils out of school and often serve to make matters worse by putting additional financial strain on families and negatively impacting wellbeing. The Department for Education should review the current approach to sanctions in relation to attendance and re-consider decisions to increase fines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Department for Education should provide clarity on the need for medical evidence in authorisation of mental health related absence in the revised statutory guidance on school attendance.
2. The Department for Education should introduce a mental health and wellbeing absence code, and set clear and realistic thresholds for its use as part of the revised statutory guidance on school attendance.
3. The Department for Education should review disciplinary measures around attendance and the approach to sanctions, taking a less punitive approach and ensuring that they acknowledge the deep-rooted challenges which prevent young people from participating in school.

A WHOLE EDUCATION APPROACH

Education settings have an important role to play in promoting and protecting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. Schools are well placed to nurture resilience through developing healthy environments, building relationships, and prioritising wellness in pupils. A whole education approach to mental health can help to achieve this, encompassing a setting-wide and multi-component approach to children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and placing mental health as foundational to all aspects of educational life for students and staff.

While mental health is not the primary responsibility of education settings, they are well placed to help children and young people by providing a welcoming and inclusive space, and the opportunity to speak with trusted adults outside of family or care settings. Yet currently over 70% of students say that there is not someone that fulfils this role for them in school (Global Equity Collective, n.d.). Ensuring that schools are a positive place to be, by taking a flexible approach to children's diverse needs (including around attendance), is likely to have the biggest overall impact on attendance.

In their 2022 report on school attendance and persistent absence, Ofsted highlighted that school leaders who have improved attendance have seldom focused on attendance in isolation. Leaders emphasise the importance of making school a safe place where pupils really want to be (Ofsted, 2022). A study by UCL and the National Education Union also demonstrates the impact of a sense of safety, belonging and wellbeing on student performance and engagement (National Education Union, 2020). This is essential given that 59% of pupils surveyed by Ditch the Label reported that pressure at school was negatively impacting their mental health (Ditch the Label, 2020).

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 is not resourced by the Government (Department for Education, 2021). As a result, whole education approaches are not yet routinely embedded in all settings and remain optional. We believe that the Government should fully embed whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing 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.

Alongside this, it is crucial that the provision of mental health support in schools is increased. Further funding for the full national roll out of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) needs to be guaranteed to ensure that all children and young people can access mental health support within schools. The role that MHSTs can play in supporting children and young people struggling with school attendance should also be considered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4. 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.
5. 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.

WIDER SYSTEM SUPPORT

To be able to effectively support children, young people and families, 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. This should include measures to improve access to mental health support through investment in a national rollout of early support hubs and funding NHS CYPMHS to cope with the increased level of mental health needs.

More accessible support could help to address the barriers that young people face, including difficulties in identifying and receiving support for mental health problems due to high referral thresholds and long waiting times. Increased investment in NHS CYPMHS will allow children to access timely support, reducing the barrier of long wait times to attendance. Furthermore, greater support in the community through early support hubs would offer a supportive space for young people who for various reasons may be unable to or reluctant to access support in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

6. The Department of Health and Social Care should commit to additional funding for Integrated Care Systems to offer a comprehensive pathway of mental health and SEND support for children and young people.
7. The Department of Health and Social Care should invest in a national network of early support hubs in every local area to increase the provision of early intervention support in the community.

ADDRESSING THE UNDERLYING CAUSES

In order to adequately address attendance issues, the social determinants and wider barriers must be considered and addressed. Tackling disparities and risk factors for poor mental health in the early years and childhood are some of the most effective preventative measures that can be taken, yet there has been a significant lack of action by the Government in this area. There have been substantial cuts to preventative support, with analysis highlighting a 26% reduction in the public health grant on a real terms per person basis since 2015/16, risking essential services for babies, children and young people, such as school nurses and health visitors, being axed (Finch, 2023).

We are clear that without action to address social determinants like poverty, racism and discrimination, and environmental factors including housing, efforts to improve mental health and school attendance will be ineffective.

Addressing these social determinants will reduce the risk factors for poor mental health for children and young people and, in turn, reduce the barriers to attendance. Children who are free from the constraints of poverty, who are not burdened by racism and discrimination, and who live in supported families will 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.

The various determinants of attendance issues must also be better acknowledged in current guidance. The content covered in the *Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance* should also be incorporated and referenced within new statutory guidance. In addition to this, this new guidance should provide practical support for schools and local authorities to effectively utilise the SEND code of practice and the Equality Act, to ensure that it does not disadvantage young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

8. The Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and HM Treasury should work to deliver on the Association of Directors of Public Health's call for a new Child Poverty Act to eradicate child poverty by 2030.
9. The Department of Health and Social Care should prioritise whole family approaches to support and implement comprehensive support for families, including evidence-based parenting programmes.
10. The Government should make a commitment to tackling all forms of racism, discrimination, and exclusion through a comprehensive strategy. This should include action to address the specific injustices faced by children and young people from racialised communities within key settings such as health, education, and the criminal justice system.
11. The Department for Education should recognise the challenges faced by young carers in the statutory guidance on attendance, providing greater clarity on how young carers can be supported to attend school.
12. 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.



CONCLUSION

The rising levels of persistent absenteeism suggest there is a crisis in school attendance, but the drivers of this are more complex than often perceived. Social determinants of poor mental health such as poverty, housing insecurity, racism, bullying, caring responsibilities, and unmet SEND needs, amongst others, contribute to poor attendance at school. In addition to this, wider systemic challenges such as the inaccessibility of mental health support and SEN diagnoses, inappropriate use of fines, and sanction-based approaches also contribute to attendance issues. While some current government initiatives are beneficial and have the potential to bring about change, the work cannot stretch far enough with a single-lens focus.

In seeking to address the attendance crisis, the Government has an opportunity to examine the wider causes and systemic barriers to attendance. Introducing a mental health and wellbeing code of absence allows mental health and SEND related absence to be authorised, reducing the inappropriate use of sanction-based approaches. A whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing further addresses attendance challenges by fostering a school environment in which children have their needs adequately met and, as a result, they are keen to attend.

Furthermore, increasing the availability of mental health provision and investing in the wider system will address many of the barriers to attendance by giving children and young people access to much-needed support. Through tackling the underlying causes and systematic challenges, the barriers which drive school absence can be managed. Without providing the necessary support, or tackling the social determinants and drivers, the 'attendance crisis' cannot be tackled.

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CENTRE FOR MENTAL HEALTH



NOT IN SCHOOL

THE MENTAL HEALTH BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Authors: Zainab Shafan-Azhar and Bethan Bottomley

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