A country that works for all children and young people

An evidence-based plan for improving school attendance

Child of the North

N8 RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

HEALTH EQUITY NORTH

CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES

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Please sign our petition if you share our vision for building a better UK that invests in its future (the next generation of children and young people)

Foreword by Anne Longfield and Camilla Kingdon

Tackling the rise in children not attending school is one of the Government's most urgent challenges.

The Department for Education has school absence near the top of its list of barriers holding back the life chances of many children. It is widely recognised that the number of children who are missing out on learning has rocketed since Covid, and that there are around 150,000 children who are severely absent – either not in school at all or only attending less than half of their lessons.

The numbers have risen sharply since the Covid pandemic with the overall absence rate in England rising by 57% between 2015/16 and 2023/24.

The negative consequences of children missing school are well known. In 2018/19 only 36% of persistently absent pupils achieved expected grades in English and Maths GCSEs compared to 78% of pupils who were rarely absent.

For some young people, school absence is also a safeguarding issue. Children who are missing school can be at greater risk of criminal or sexual exploitation and/or serious violence. We have heard from many teaching professionals about their concerns that some children go off the radar when they are no longer attending school regularly.

This report, the tenth in the year-long series of reports produced by the Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives, puts forward an evidence-based plan to Government to tackle the non-attendance crisis.

This is not an easy task. There is no silver bullet. The reasons why a child is not in school are often complex and quick and easy solutions are not always possible. The report argues that the one-size-fits-all and often punitive approach that previous Governments have taken to tackle absence needs to be consigned to the past. A holistic, place-based approach, that focuses on identifying the reasons why children are missing school, and then devising tailored support and interventions is proposed.

School absence is often a reflection of the existing wider inequalities in our society. For example, school absence disproportionately affects children from disadvantaged regions of the UK, particularly the South West and North of England. Over three and a half years on from the last lockdown, the North continues to experience higher absence rates. 36% of children receiving free school meals were persistently absent in 2023/24.

The absence crisis is affecting some of the most vulnerable children. Children at special schools are at increased risk of school absence. Children with SEND are also at higher risk of struggling at school, and the absence levels for those children are substantially higher than for those without special needs. For example, autistic pupils experience high rates of persistent absence, with a rate of 31% in 2020/21. Autistic young people are also twice as likely to be excluded compared to those without SEND.

As our previous report highlighted, there is a significant number of children who are not 'school ready'. This report reveals that children who are deemed "not school ready" are nearly three times as likely to become a persistent absentee at some point over their academic career, compared to their "school ready" peers.

Children experiencing problems with their mental health are also more likely to be absent from school.

The crucial message this report puts forward is the need to intervene early. Children who are absent from school in the earliest years are more likely to be absent in secondary school. Investing early in supporting children at risk of disengagement from education is the best way of preventing problems further down the line.

The report builds on the argument made in our previous reports that schools are an anchor in the lives of children and families and a community asset. They can act as a 'hub' that brings together different resources, agencies, organisations, and interventions.

It also highlights the bluntness of an absence strategy that has relied for too long on fines and prosecutions. Often it is the families least able to afford to pay fines who are threatened with them,

"School absence is often a reflection of the **existing wider inequalities in our society.**"

"Often it is the **families least able to afford to pay fines who are threatened with them,** despite these families being those with some of the biggest problems."

despite these families being those with some of the biggest problems. Unsurprisingly, threats of fines can be a trigger for a breakdown in relationships between schools and parents. As headteachers tell us, some of the strategies to tackle absence that may have had some success before Covid are no longer as effective post-pandemic.

This report emphasises that there is no panacea for solving the attendance crisis. The individual reasons behind absence are often so complex and multiple, ranging from fear of bullying to negative experiences of learning, to mental health problems, there will never be one solution that applies to every child.

Children have a clear message – they say that earlier identification and support could have helped them to attend school. Some describe how problems can build up over time, leading to a feeling that they have missed so much school that they can't go back.

This emphasises the importance of spotting problems when they first appear, and then providing individually tailored interventions.

There are universal approaches and many schools already recognise the huge importance of building strong relationships, communicating effectively with families and children, and providing curricula that engage and encourage learning to ensure schools are places where children want to be. They recognise that enrichment activities, such as after school clubs are important in promoting individual self-worth, social connections, engagement and identity and are linked to increased sense of school belonging and increased attendance.

The report shares many excellent examples of projects and areas that are innovating and developing new methods of tackling school absence. Sharing evidence-informed best practice and successful examples of multi-agency collaboration, the report shows there is already much for both Government and local authorities to build on.

It will require an education system that is able to identify and support the thousands of children who are not learning in school as early as possible.

It will mean developing a more inclusive school environment and encouraging and supporting schools to build much stronger relationships with families, local communities, agencies, councils, universities and other academic institutions, and charities.

Tackling the school attendance crisis is crucial to Britain's future success, and breaking down the barriers that are preventing some children from learning is vital if the Government is to realise its core mission of breaking down the barriers to opportunity.

This report sets out innovative and affordable ways to deliver it.

Anne Longfield CBE,
Executive Chair of
the Centre for Young Lives

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This report is a collaborative programme of work between Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives.

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A full list of authors and contributors can be found at the end of this report.

A note about language

Children and young people

In this report, CYP is used to refer to children and young people. A "young person" in this context is a person over compulsory school age (the end of the academic year in which they turn 16 years old) and under 25 years old. In keeping with this definition, we use the words "child" and "children" in this report to refer to individuals from birth to the end of compulsory school age.

Schools, nurseries, and educational settings

In this report, we often use "schools" as shorthand for "schools, nurseries, and other educational settings". A central message of this report is the need for a "whole system" approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system.

Acronyms used in this report:

AP - Alternative Provision
CME - Children Missing Education
EBSA - Emotionally Based School Avoidance
EBSNA - Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance
EHCP - Education Health and Care Plan
IDACI - Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index
LA - Local Authority
SEND - Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SSCs - Student Support Champions

A note about the statistics

Previously unpublished analyses in this report use publicly available data and the source is referred to in the appropriate part(s) of the report.

About Child of the North initiative

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North, which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. @ChildoftheNort1

Who is the Child of the North?

The "Child of the North" is an archetype (like the "unknown soldier"), representing all the millions of children throughout the UK whose lives are blighted by inequalities. We use the Child of the North as a means of illustrating the inequities that affect children and young people. These inequalities are well captured by the differences in opportunities available to the child growing up in the North of England versus the South. But inequalities are present throughout the UK at both a national and regional level. These inequalities are bad for almost everyone and the future of the UK depends on their urgent eradication. The Child of the North represents every child who deserves a better start to life, regardless of where they live.

About the N8 Research Partnership

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. www.n8research.org.uk @N8research

Health Equity North

Health Equity North is a virtual institute focused on place-based solutions to public health problems and health inequalities across the North of England. It brings together world-leading academic expertise, from the Northern Health Science Alliance's members of leading universities and hospitals, to fight health inequalities through research excellence and collaboration.
www.healthequitynorth.co.uk @_HENorth

About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives is a dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children's issues for decades, the Centre's agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is already widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people's futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for Government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous.
www.centreforyounglives.org.uk @CfYoungLives

About the N8+

Collaboration lies at the heart of "Child of The North". The N8 has proved a useful organising structure but the Child of The North vision is to: (i) use the North-South England divide to show the impact of inequity on all children in the UK; (ii) bring together stakeholders from across the UK to build a better country for CYP. One aspiration is to link researchers from across the UK to support evidence-based approaches to policymaking. In particular, there is a desire to unite Higher Education institutes across the North of England so we can address problems in partnership.

Quotations

The illustrative quotations throughout the report were taken from extensive qualitative and consultation work with children, families, and professionals.

Acknowledgements

We would also like to thank everyone who participated in the research that is described in this report and would like to particularly highlight the contributions made by the participants working with organisations that provided the case studies and the quotes. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the National Institute for Health and Care Research or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Key insights

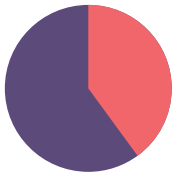
1 in 10 children in the Northern regions are (unauthorised) persistent absentees.

In 2023-24, the rate of **persistent absence** was:

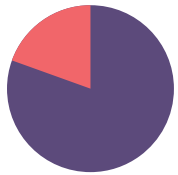
- 38% in **SEND** schools,
- 15% in **primary** schools, and
- 27% in **secondary** schools.

In 2018-19:

Only **36%** of persistently absent pupils achieved expected grades in English and Maths GCSEs.



78% of rarely absent pupils achieved expected grades in English and Maths GCSEs.



In 2023

- 37% of CYP on free school meals
- 46% of CYP supported by a social worker
- 67% of CYP supported by a youth offending team reported **skipping school due to feeling unsafe.**

Between 2015-16 and 2023-24, overall absence rate in England **rose from 4.6% to 7.2%** - a

57% INCREASE.

32

Attendance hubs across the country have been proposed.

In 2020, approximately

250,000

children were missing from education.

In the 2020-21 school year,

40,000

more children were home-schooled.

Persistently absent children have nearly

4X

increased risk of becoming **not in education, employment or training (NEET).**

Rates of unauthorised absence were

34%

higher in the North of England than in the South.

Autistic young people are

2X

as likely to be excluded compared to those without SEND.

Children not “school ready” are nearly

3X

as likely to become a persistent absentee compared to their “school ready” peers.

Families can face an

£80 FINE

if their child misses five days of school.

1/3

In 2022-23, **over a third** of pupils identified as **young carers** were persistently absent.

Defining school attendance

UK policymakers describe children who do not attend school as coming from several different, but not mutually exclusive groups: those not on a school roll (children missing education), those who are excluded or suspended, children with health needs which mean they are unable to attend school, and children who are registered at a school but not attending regularly. Parents and carers also have a legal right to elect to home educate their child. Increases in children who are not attending school and parents electing to home educate highlight parents' concerns that the school system is not able to meet their children's needs, particularly the needs of children with SEND [1,2]. Increases in rates of exclusion and suspension also highlight the difficulties schools experience in enabling all pupils to access their right to education [3].

Researchers conceptualise non-attendance using categorical and dimensional approaches [4]. Initial attempts to understand school attendance focused on categorising pupils into distinct groups, which included truancy, school refusal/school avoidance, school withdrawal, and school exclusion.

Truancy refers to unexcused absence, which parents may or may not be aware of. It is often associated with behaviour problems and linked to wider social issues such a poverty and lack of access to resources. Truancy is also more likely to be viewed negatively by school staff and responded to with punitive consequences.

School refusal/avoidance focuses on attendance problems related to emotional difficulties such as emotional distress, separation anxiety or fear of attending school. In the UK, this is often referred to as EBSA or EBSNA and the increasing numbers of children with these needs has led to a proliferation of local guidance documents for schools.

Unlike truancy, school withdrawal refers to situations where parents choose to keep their child at home in response to concerns such as a children's anxiety, economic reasons or to conceal child protection issues.

Finally, school exclusion refers to school-initiated absenteeism. This might be a formal process following a student breaching school rules and being suspended or excluded, or a student being informally sent home.

In the UK, CME is also used to refer to children who have left the state education system and are not registered at a school or known to be receiving an education [2].

In recent years, researchers have moved towards more dimensional conceptualisations of school absence and a recognition that patterns of non-attendance are more nuanced and may shift over time. One example is school refusal-truancy [4]. School refusal-truancy highlights the similarities and differences between school refusal linked to internalising difficulties, such as anxiety, and externalising behavioural difficulties associated with truancy. Differences between the two include how parents might not be aware of truancy but are more likely to be aware of school refusal. Similarities include truancy and school refusal both being associated with pupils having learning difficulties or experiencing bullying or social difficulties. Overlaps between the two concepts such as anxiety being a feature for both groups, particularly during reintegration are also helpful and enable the more negative and simplistic perceptions of truancy to be challenged.

The Department for Education defines school absence in specific ways:

Overall absence: This term refers to the aggregate of all authorised and unauthorised absences. Authorised absences are those permitted by a teacher or school representative, such as absences due to illness, while unauthorised absences lack such permission.

Persistent absenteeism: A pupil is classified as a persistent absentee if they miss 10% or more of their possible school sessions. This threshold is crucial for identifying students at risk of falling behind academically due to frequent absences.

Severe absenteeism: A pupil is classified as a severely persistent absentee if they miss 50% or more of their possible sessions. The severe absence rate is calculated similarly to the persistent absence rate, highlighting the extreme end of absenteeism where students miss half or more of their schooling.

The concept of persistent absence has evolved over time, reflecting changes in educational policy and societal expectations. The measure was first introduced in the 2005/06 academic year, initially being defined as missing around 20% or more of sessions. This threshold was gradually lowered to 15% in the 2010/11 academic year and then to 10% from 2015/16 onwards. This progressive tightening of the definition underscores a growing recognition of the importance of regular school attendance in ensuring educational success. As such, in the data included in this report, we focus only on the period including and after 2015/16 to allow a consistent definition.

Policy recommendations

The UK is facing a school absence crisis, and the new government's Opportunity Mission must address this issue as a matter of priority. The evidence is clear about the deleterious personal impact of school absence with all the associated safeguarding concerns, loss of social interaction, and barriers to learning. Moreover, the evidence highlights the significant downstream costs and burdens on public services and the economy, and the research allows us to quantify these effects. Investing early in supporting at-risk students would create long-term benefits for both individuals, families, and society - outweighing the initial investment in young people at risk of disengaging from education.

Enhancing early intervention for at-risk pupils involves schools using all available information (data) to systematically identify those at risk of persistent absence. This must then provoke a concerted effort to address underlying factors, such as mental health, family stress, and socioeconomic challenge. Key strategies might include daily attendance monitoring, collaboration between schools, social services, and healthcare providers, and implementing targeted support plans.

The evidence is clear that these efforts must start as early as possible. Absence in the early years is related to absence in later years, and is associated with a range of negative secondary downstream impacts across physical health, mental wellbeing, workforce involvement, criminal justice interaction etc.

1

Enhance early intervention for students at risk of absence

Central and local government should support schools to implement systematic early identification of students at risk of persistent absence, focusing on those from disadvantaged backgrounds, children with special educational needs and disability (SEND), and those living in high-deprivation areas. Interventions should include targeted support plans, regular attendance monitoring, and collaboration between schools, social services, and health providers to address underlying issues such as mental health and family stress.

Schools must establish early screening methods to identify at-risk pupils before attendance issues escalate. In some cases, mentoring programmes, where trained mentors provide both academic and emotional support, should be offered. Mentors can build positive relationships and offer guidance, helping pupils stay engaged with their education. Schools must be supported to engage with parents in creating realistic, individual support plans that address both academic and personal challenges.

The current national approach to absence is uniform and punitive. Research consistently demonstrates that absence varies significantly across geographies, schools, and students. Interventions must be targeted to address specific challenges and be supported by robust evaluation frameworks that reflect the complexity and context-specific nature of school environments. Such targeted strategies can effectively support those most in need by addressing their specific challenges. The implementation of targeted strategies allows the development of an evidence base capable of identifying what works, for whom, and in what context.

2

Foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity

Government – via frameworks such as Ofsted - must reward schools that promote inclusive environments that emphasise relational approaches, helping pupils feel valued and safe. Schools should focus on creating a supportive culture through peer support systems, extracurricular activities, and a focus on mental health. Ensuring that children feel connected to their school community can improve attendance rates and reduce disengagement.

There is a need to support schools to provide extracurricular activities as these play a crucial role in fostering belonging. Participation in enrichment programmes, peer support systems, and volunteer opportunities help students feel engaged and develop a sense of identity within the school. These activities are particularly beneficial for disadvantaged students, as they provide a platform for building self-worth and social connections.

Communication between schools and parents is vital. Engaging parents and ensuring clear, supportive communication strengthens the home-school relationship. Schools should be supported in their efforts to be sensitive to community needs, providing culturally relevant resources and translation services to foster inclusivity and given the flexibility to organise their educational offer in a way that best reflects the needs of the communities they serve.

3

Develop cross-service collaboration for holistic support

In central and local government, there must be major efforts made to encourage closer collaboration between education, healthcare, and social services to provide integrated support for students facing complex challenges. Schools should serve as hubs for receiving multi-agency assistance, ensuring that health and social issues are addressed within the school setting, reducing barriers to attendance, and improving overall wellbeing. Schools are effective hubs for bringing together various resources, but addressing negative trends in attendance requires the coordinated support of multiple agencies. Young people's lives are shaped by a dynamic interplay of factors, and a holistic approach involving education, health, social services, and community organisations is essential to improve attendance. Breakfast Clubs, Children's Centres and Family Hubs provide the essential infrastructure that will help the new government address the school attendance crisis through multi-agency work.

A key strategy includes building multi-agency partnerships, involving local authorities, community organisations, and healthcare services to tackle issues like school attendance. These partnerships will help identify the root causes of absenteeism - whether due to mental health, family circumstances, or other factors - and the networks should work collaboratively to provide targeted, individualised support. Effective collaboration is particularly vital when supporting CYP with complex needs or attendance difficulties.

Local Authorities must play a central role in facilitating this approach by bringing together partners to provide strategic oversight and develop the professional networks capable of connecting and coordinating activity across different Academies and Multiple Academy Trusts within a region. Programmes such as attendance hubs have the potential to allow schools to share effective practices, while initiatives like the deployment of online approaches enable CYP with medical or mental health needs to stay engaged with their education remotely (decreasing the barriers to school return).

These recommendations offer immense potential for decreasing the long-term costs associated with not acting early enough (e.g., the health, social care and criminal justice bills that result from not supporting children's needs sooner); they will help the UK benefit from the sustainable economic growth available when the talents of every child can be deployed effectively within the workforce. Whilst there are resource implications, the recommendations do not require unfeasible levels of investment.

Principles

Engaging in education is essential for doing well in school and succeeding later in life. If attendance issues are not addressed, many young people miss out on their right to education, which stops them from reaching their potential and raises the chances of negative outcomes in the future.

Our new government must act immediately to ensure CYP receive the timely provision of the high-quality support to which they are entitled, ensuring they remain engaged with the education system. Our recommendations are based on seven principles, and the evidence that underpins the recommendations and the principles is laid out within this report. Whilst it is clear there needs to be significant financial investment in the UK's future, the recommendations we make are pragmatic in nature and recognise that the UK is in a perilous financial state. These recommendations do not pretend there is a magic wand that will immediately fix the system. Rather, they avoid the trap where the impossibility of perfection prevents change. Further, they provide a platform that would allow us to harness research and scientific evidence to learn what works best for which community – noting that science is one of society's most powerful tools for improving education, health, and wellbeing.

Our seven principles

1 **Putting our children first** – The future of a country depends on a healthy workforce, equipped with the skills needed by the economy and society. Educational settings play a critical role in helping children acquire the core skills needed to function and be economically productive within society. Supporting all children to engage in school will ensure that they can reach their full potential, and reduce the longer-term demand for health, social care, and other services.

2 **Addressing inequity** – Equitable engagement with education opportunities will reduce the financial burden of poor health literacy on public services. The evidence shows that school absence occurs disproportionately in areas of socioeconomic deprivation. These areas must be prioritised in initial efforts to address the school attendance crisis and break the intergenerational patterns of educational disengagement. A failure to support all CYP will entrench inequity and starve the UK of talented individuals within the future workforce.

3 **Adopting place-based approaches** – Geography, culture, economic activity, and other factors vary between localities, changing the way that support needs manifest, and the way communities prefer to engage with services such as schools. Thus, approaches to school absence must be planned and aligned to the needs and preferences of the locality and its communities. There are many cultural factors that drive school absence, including stigma and biases, and these local contexts must be addressed if we are to help all children thrive within educational settings.

4 **Working together effectively across our public services** – The multifaceted factors that affect school absence mean that we must find new ways of delivering connected public services with and through schools so that the necessary holistic ("whole system") solutions to school absence can be implemented. Public services should work together to co-develop initiatives to improve support for children disengaging from education.

5 **Putting education at the heart of public service delivery** – School absence needs to be viewed as a public health crisis. Persistent absenteeism must be seen as a "red flag" indicating the need for a holistic response from across all our public services. This requires new ways of working. For example, typical "outside support" from specialist services (e.g., child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)) needs to be delivered within the school gates. In doing so, we start to remove the additional barriers to attending school encountered by the most disadvantaged children and reduce the burden placed on families. A genuine attempt to improve attendance and the timely provision of support will necessarily involve closer working between health services and education settings.

6 **Establishing universities as the "Research and Development" departments for local public services** – Universities can bring together insights from across multiple disciplines about the factors driving attendance, ensure decisions are based on the best possible evidence, oversee evaluation of innovative approaches, and train the education professionals of the future to have the knowledge base necessary to support all children. Universities have the capabilities to draw on existing evidence and conduct new research on school absence to support schools, public service colleagues, and families. Universities can also encourage their students to support schools in their localities via mentoring schemes and the provision of extracurricular activities.

7 **Using and sharing information across public service providers effectively** – Schools need to be supported in the effective use of information to identify children at risk of school disengagement. Data are currently collected within organisational silos, which fails to reflect the reality of how families interact with services. Only by connecting our public service data (i.e., education, healthcare, social care etc.), can we ensure that children at risk of absence are identified and provided with effective tailored help that allows them to attend school and have their needs met. For example, information held within health systems could help schools to identify CYP with a greater likelihood of being persistently absent from school because of health barriers and lead to a coordinated effort across education and health to support a child's complex needs.

The evidence

A multitude of risk factors contribute to attendance difficulties. Depending on the wider context and the young person, risk factors may lead to CYP becoming absent from school, suspended/excluded, or becoming CME. Illustrative examples of how risk factors interact with the school attendance of CYP living in the UK are provided below.

School absence is connected to bigger issues of unfairness in the UK

School absence reflects many of the wider inequalities in the UK [5]. First, **geographical inequalities** are important to consider. School absence disproportionately affects children from disadvantaged regions of the UK, with the overall persistent absence rate being highest in the South West (22.2%) and Yorkshire and The Humber (22.1%). Inner London and Outer London recorded the lowest overall persistent absence rate of 18.9% and 18.7%, respectively (Figure 1). Focusing on unauthorised persistent absence, the highest rates are observed in the north of England, where on average 1 in 10 children were considered persistently absent for unauthorised reasons (Yorkshire and The Humber (11.1%); North East (10.4%); North West (9.7%)).

Region	Authorised persistent absence rate	Unauthorised persistent absence rate	Overall persistent absence rate
South West	13.9	8.2	22.2
Yorkshire and The Humber	11	11.1	22.1
North East	11.4	10.4	21.8
East Midlands	12.8	8.8	21.6
South East	13.4	8	21.5
North West	11.4	9.7	21.1
East of England	13.2	7.8	21
West Midlands	11.9	8.9	20.8
Inner London	10.5	8.4	18.9
Outer London	10.9	7.8	18.7

Figure 1: Overall persistent absence rate (%) by region in England (2022/23)

Children in the North of England experienced longer COVID-19 lockdowns and continue to experience higher levels of poverty and reduced educational funding [6,7]. These regional disparities have affected young people in various ways, notably increasing the risk of school attendance difficulties. In Figure 2, pre-COVID-19 data (2015-16 to 2019-20) show overall absence rates across all three regions remained relatively stable, with some fluctuations. The North consistently recorded higher overall absence rates compared to the Midlands and the South. Notably, the North had higher rates of unauthorised absence, indicating more frequent instances of absences without school permission, and lower rates of authorised absence compared to the other two regions. During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21 to 2021-22), we see a significant surge in overall absence rates across all regions due to school closures, remote learning challenges, and health concerns. Both authorised and unauthorised absences increased during that period, with the North still showing the highest absence rate. Data post-COVID-19 (2022 to 2022-23) show that overall absence rates remain higher than pre-pandemic levels but reduced in the surge of absence rate compared to the COVID-19 pandemic period. The North continues to experience elevated absence rates compared to the Midlands and the South, with a persistent trend of higher unauthorised absence rates and lower authorised absence rates. Also, authorised absence rates started to decline while unauthorised absence rates remained on the rise.

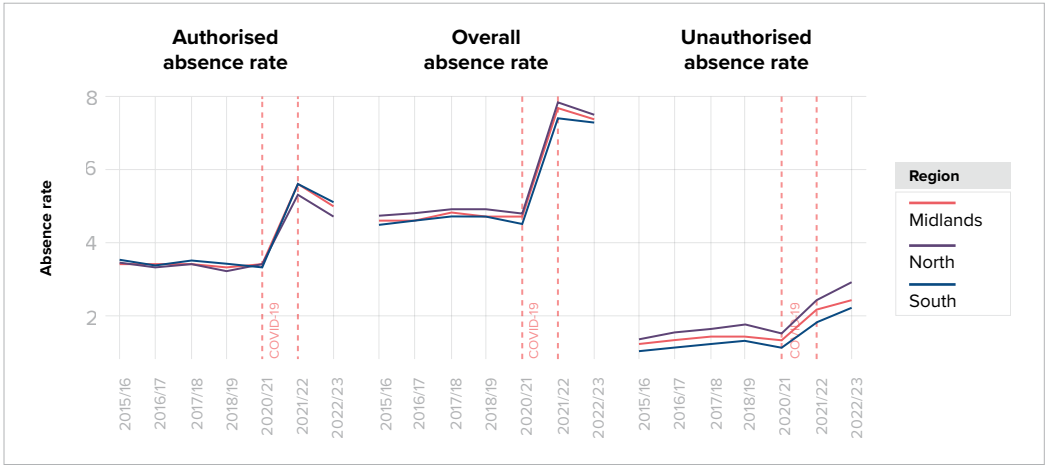


Figure 2: Trend in absence rate (%) by the three regions North, South, and Midlands pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post pandemic.

School absence is higher for pupils in disadvantaged communities.

For the 2023-24 academic year, persistent non-attendance rates were 20.7%, increasing to 37% for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and 35.7% for those receiving free school meals. International research shows that low-income neighbourhoods are often associated with higher levels of crime, domestic violence, inadequate housing, and reduced access to resources [5,8,9].

Using bivariate mapping, the spatial relationship between absence rate and the IDACI across local authorities was explored (Figure 3). There was a larger concentration of local authorities in the North of England experiencing both high absence rates and elevated IDACI scores, compared to other regions. This suggests that the North of England has more local authorities with higher rates of both school absence and higher deprivation.

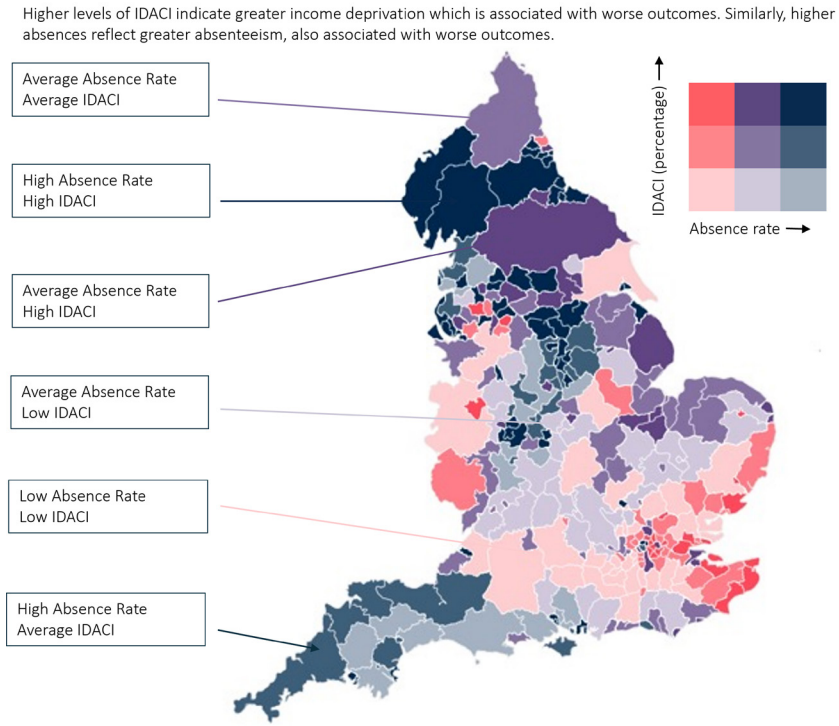


Figure 3: Spatial relationship between absence rate and IDACI by Local Authority

Attendance rates also vary by school type, with evidence suggesting that pupils attending special schools are at increased risk of school absence. In 2023-24, persistent absence was 37.6% in special schools, often being associated with medical needs and exacerbated by COVID-19. In the same period, persistent absence was 15.2% among primary school pupils and 26.7% among secondary school pupils. Overall absence rates are highest in special schools, followed by state-funded secondary schools, with state-funded primary schools reporting the lowest absence rates. Among special schools, the South West and Inner London exhibit the highest overall absence rates, at 13.6% and 13.5%, respectively. In contrast, the East Midlands and West Midlands show the lowest rates of overall absence, with figures of 12.7% and 12.7%, respectively.

Minority groups

Many pupils, particularly those from minority or marginalised groups, find secondary school stressful and feel less respected [10]. In 2022-23, 64.9% of children of Gypsy or Roma heritage and 72% of Irish Traveller young people were recorded as persistently absent, with Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller CYP over-represented among families electing to home educate. Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller CYP have reported that bullying and discrimination contribute to their absence [2]. Overall rates for school suspension were 9.33% in 2022-23 but higher for pupils of white and black Caribbean heritage (17.36%), Irish Traveller (21.77%), and Gypsy Roma pupils (33.71%) [3].

Individual pupil factors

At the pupil level, children with SEND are at risk of struggling at school. The highest level of SEND support is an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). In 2023-24, the persistent absence rate for pupils with an EHCP was 37.6% [3]. This is substantially higher than for those without special needs (18.6%). Autistic pupils experience high rates of persistent absence, with a rate of 31% in 2020-21 [11]. Autistic young people are also twice as likely to be excluded compared to those without SEND [11]. They are vulnerable to being bullied and 54% of autistic young people reported that the worst thing about school was that teachers did not understand them [12]. Since 2016, there has been a 60% rise in the number of children with EHCPs, with the largest rise among disadvantaged families [5]. This rapid increase has put substantial pressure on the SEND system, and more schools report difficulties accessing the support they need to meet SEND needs [13].

Also at the individual pupil level, children who are not considered "school ready" can face more challenges in school. During the Reception year, children are assessed by their class teachers on how "school ready" they are; considering both academic and non-academic competencies. Children who were deemed "not school ready" are nearly three times as likely to become a persistent absentee at some point over their academic career, compared to their "school ready" peers [14]. Therefore, using available data, schools can identify children at increased risk and provide targeted support as needed.

> "How far does it have to get? Sometimes you sit there and you think what do I have to actually do to get the support, **how far do I have to go?"**
>
> - Young person

Figure 4 presents the percentage of children achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception for each of the regions of England using the most up-to-date data (from the 2022-23 school year). All three Northern regions have below average rates of school readiness.

The North West (64.3%) had the lowest rate in the country, followed by Yorkshire and the Humber (66.1%), and the North East (66.3%). Meanwhile, the South East (69.6%) and London (69.1%) had the highest rates.

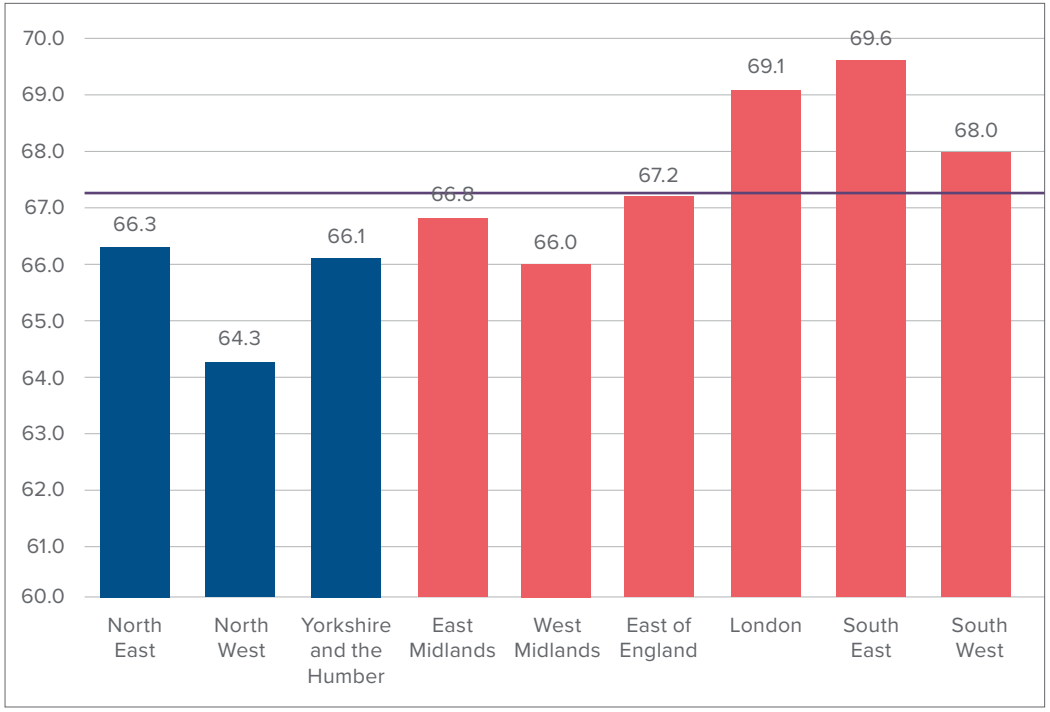


Figure 4: School readiness (percentage of children achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception, aged 5 years) by region of England in 2022-23

Young people's mental health needs have been increasing since 2011; the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated those needs [15,16]. In 2022, the rate of missing more than 15 days among 7-16-year-olds was 4%, but this rate for children with a probable mental health disorder was 12.6% [17]. School leaders continue to report high levels of pupil mental health needs, with 25% of primary school children and 29% of young people in secondary school needing mental health support [13]. Schools also report increasing difficulties accessing support from social and welfare services [13]. Figure 5 shows the percentage of school pupils with social, emotional, and mental health needs by region of England using the most up-to-date data (from the 2022-23 school year). The national average was 3.3%, but the rates were higher in the North East (3.6%) and North West (3.4%), although lower in Yorkshire and the Humber (3.1%). The region with the highest rate was the South West (3.9%), whereas London (2.8%) had the lowest rate.

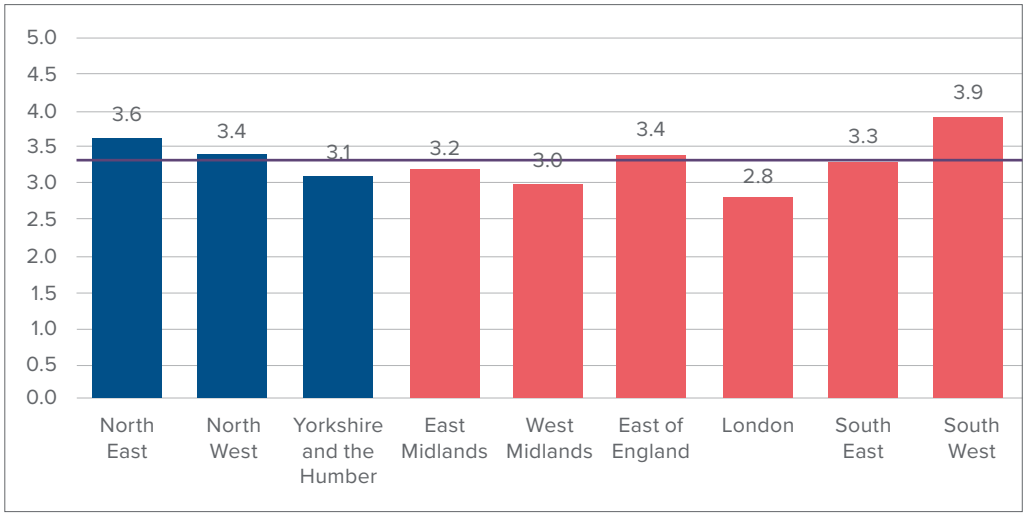


Figure 5: Percentage of school pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs by region of England in 2022-23.

Note: The solid line is the English average. The northern regions are shaded in blue and the remaining regions in England are shaded pink.

Other factors that contribute to school absence

Family and parent-level factors

Factors at the family level (e.g., parental employment, family structure, and parental health) impact school attendance. For instance, in 2022-23, 39% of pupils identified as young carers were persistently absent from school; children with short-term social worker involvement experienced higher rates of absence/persistent absence, exclusion, and being classified as CME [20]. Many families on low incomes face challenges due to the cost-of-living crisis which complicates providing essentials like food and transport to school [1]. Schools and teachers have increasingly stepped in to support families by providing basic equipment, uniforms, and breakfast clubs [13].

Parents' views on school and school attendance are also influential. Beyond the pressure of the cost-of-living crisis, many parents are concerned about excessive school attendance monitoring which can strain relationships between parents and schools [1]. Fines and prosecutions for school absence often worsen financial difficulties and place additional strain on parent-child relationships when young people are unable to attend [1,19]. The Child Poverty Action Group highlights this in their submission to the House of Commons Education Committee.

Peer and school-level factors

Peer group factors can play an important part in supporting or undermining pupils' engagement with school. Positive "in-school" peer networks and friendships can facilitate a sense of school belonging and engagement with learning [21]. Conversely, severely absent young people reported being 15% less confident at making friends compared to pupils with full attendance [21]. Such findings suggest school absence can exacerbate disconnection from peers. Additionally, young people participating in gangs, drug use, and anti-social behaviour are more likely to engage in truancy and become involved with the criminal justice system [9].

Schools also play a crucial role in safeguarding and promoting welfare as part of a wider shared responsibility [22]. Missing education can signal serious safeguarding issues such as neglect, abuse, or criminal exploitation. Similarly, feeling safe at school is important. In a (2023) survey, 20% of 13- to 17-year-olds reported they had skipped school due to feeling unsafe, with higher rates among children on free school meals (37%) and those supported by a social worker (46%), or a youth offending team (67%).

> "Fining does not address the barriers that families face... when families already face multiple hardships, **fining is not an appropriate or compassionate response."**
>
> – Child Poverty Action Group

Consequences of persistent school absence

In 2018-19, only 36% of persistently absent pupils achieved the expected grades in English and Maths GCSEs compared to 78% of pupils who were rarely absent [23]. Moreover, 12% of pupils permanently excluded in primary school scored grade 4 in English compared to 75% of non-excluded pupils [24]. Spatial analyses of absence rates and education attainment across the UK between 2006 and 2019 are presented in Figure 6. A negative correlation between overall absence rates and educational attainment was found, particularly in the North East, Yorkshire and The Humber, and the South West. In addition to lower educational attainment among regularly absent pupils, research has shown associations with extra-familial harms (such as child criminal or sexual exploitation) and the risk of becoming Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). Persistently absent children have nearly four times increased risk of becoming NEET, and over six times increased risk of becoming persistently NEET (four months or more) [25].

Exclusion from mainstream school often increases exposure to violence and triggers or accelerates a child's trajectory into criminal exploitation and serious harm in non-school contexts [26]. A study which tracked pupils from age 11 years to their mid-twenties found that pupils who had been suspended had lower GCSE grades and were more likely to be NEET and receiving health-related benefits [27]. With increasing numbers of young people experiencing disengagement from, or being unable to access their right to education, it is essential that we intervene early to ensure that all young people feel safe, engaged with the education system, and achieve their potential.

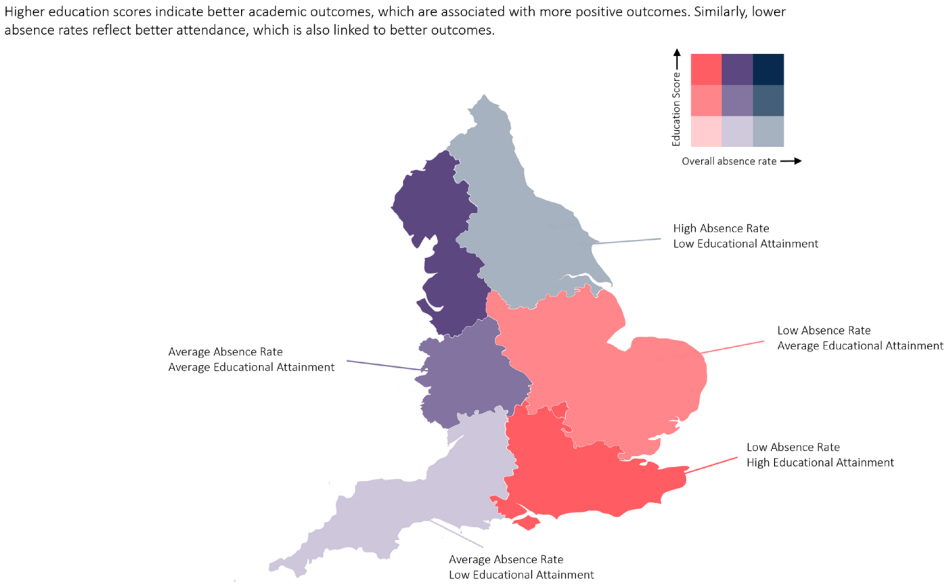


Figure 6: Spatial relationship between absence rate and education attainment by region

Inequalities, school absence, and a theoretical framework

Factors leading to and maintaining school absence are complex and multifactorial and often reflect the effects of multiple inequalities. For instance, attendance was only 77% for girls in Key Stage 4 who have special educational needs and were eligible for pupil premium (additional school level funding to support disadvantaged pupils) in 2024 [21]. In their latest annual report, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel found that 29% of the 133 school-aged children who were the focus of a safeguarding rapid review and enrolled in a mainstream school had regular absences or low attendance, emphasising the wider risks of not being in school. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded existing inequalities and is continuing to have the greatest and most long-lasting impacts on the most vulnerable CYP [5,16].

Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model is often used as a way of conceptualising the lives of CYP and is particularly useful when considering the range of interacting factors affecting young people (see Figure 7) [28, 29]. The model focuses on microsystem factors that are most proximal to young people (peers, family, school), slightly more distant mesosystem factors (community, parent's workplace, extended family), and at the widest levels exosystem (community services) and macrosystem (laws, socio-political factors). The chronosystem element of the model also highlights the importance of changes and continuities over time that affect development, including historical events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The model helps us to understand how a broad range of potential risk and protective factors at different levels can impact the severity of each young person's school absence and how this pattern might change over time. The model helps the identification of needs at different levels and helps a consideration of how these interact so we can respond in more coordinated and effective ways to support CYP experiencing attendance difficulties and their families [30]. The Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model highlights how wider social determinants affect outcomes for CYP and maps to the World Health Organisation's conceptual framework capturing the social determinants of health.

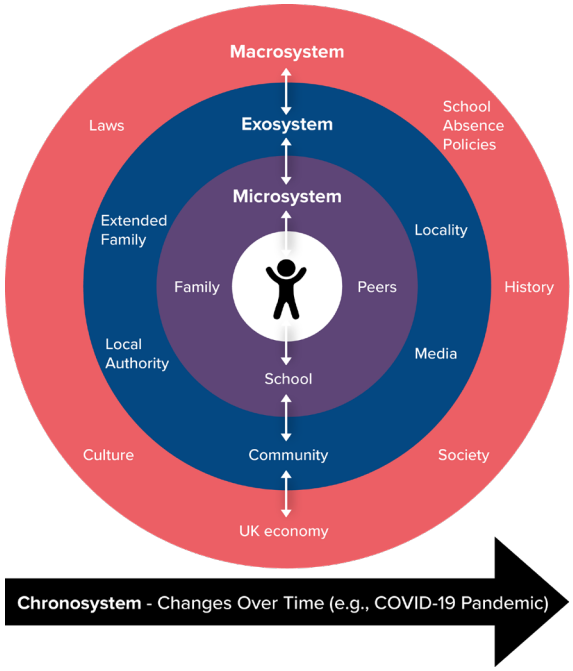


Figure 7: Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model (see text for details).

The need for new post-pandemic strategies

Headteachers report that strategies used prior to COVID-19 are no longer as effective and there is limited UK evidence to draw upon to ensure better understanding of attendance needs and strategies for supporting CYP in the UK [21,31]. Given the complex nature of attendance difficulties, schools need a range of contextually relevant and integrated approaches at different levels [32].

> "My anxiety got really bad and I couldn't go in after lockdown [...] I couldn't get into school because every time I would get panicky."
>
> – Alternative provision pupil

Putting our children first

Given the complexity of attendance difficulties, no single approach is likely to be the solution. However, it is crucial that CYP's perspectives are central to planning individual support and informing whole school approaches [21,33]. Regular attendance enables schools to play a key role in safeguarding children and children have said that they need adults to protect them from abuse by being vigilant, understanding, respectful, and providing stability, support, and advocacy. Pupils see understanding attendance difficulties as important, though they may hide their needs due to fears of negative perceptions and responses from others [34,35,36]. Some CYP feel passive in their non-attendance, while others feel held responsible and helpless to change it [37,38,39]. Despite this, many hold high academic aspirations and are very concerned about the longer term social and academic impacts of their non-attendance [34,39,40,41,42].

Many young people emphasised that their difficulties developed gradually; they suggested that earlier support might have helped them maintain their attendance. They described how their experiences accumulated over time, each difficulty compounding the next [33]. Similar patterns have been observed in research on pupils' experiences of exclusion in the North West [37]. Young people excluded from mainstream schools felt that teachers saw them as responsible for their difficulties, leading to their removal from mainstream education. This led to feelings of rejection, powerlessness in the process of finding a new school, and disconnection from education. Inconsistent use of exclusion and a lack of awareness of pupils' individual needs contribute to these difficulties [43].

These examples emphasise the complex and unique interaction of risk factors for each young person, underscoring the need for individualised support when difficulties arise. They also provide valuable insights into preventative measures educational settings can take to promote regular attendance, including facilitating a sense of belonging and safety for all students and ensuring effective, inclusive provision.

Adopting place-based approaches with education at the heart of public service delivery

Interventions to support CYP at risk of school absence tend to be multi-tiered and often include school- and student- centred elements [44]. Multi-tiered approaches focus on (1) universal/ preventative approaches for all pupils, (2) targeted approaches for at risk pupils, and (3) individualised and intensive interventions for those with the highest level of need. A wide range of interventions exist and those should be tailored to the needs of the young person and their family.

Universal approaches

At the universal level, engagement in education is a strong protective factor in safeguarding children. Trained professionals have an important role in recognising the signs and indicators of abuse and neglect, initiating early interventions and support, and preventing or reducing the harm from exposure to serious violence and disrupting a trajectory into the criminal justice system [45,46]. Schools, teachers, and other professionals working with CYP are vital as they have the highest number of connections to systems of support (e.g., individual professionals, statutory and non-statutory organisations) and can support early intervention.

A factor that helps prevent school absence, as identified by CYP, is a strong sense of school belonging. This underscores the importance of creating school cultures where all young people feel safe, valued, and part of the school community. Researchers have found that many approaches to attendance are characterised by a focus on building relationships to support well-being and engagement [32]. Organisations working with young people have also called for more inclusive school environments and the DfE's summary table of responsibilities for school attendance states [21,47,48]:

"Good attendance begins with school being somewhere pupils want to be and therefore the foundation of securing good attendance is that school is a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils are keen and ready to learn".

Relational approaches are increasingly popular in schools. There is some debate about what constitutes a relational approach, but the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) provide the following definition [49]:

"Approaches that emphasise connection, belonging, and the teaching of effective conflict resolution skills. These approaches assume that behaviour is a means of communication and that behaviour that challenges can be a sign of unmet emotional needs. Relational approaches approach behaviour with curiosity rather than judgement. They are grounded in psychological theory and support children to build their self-regulation skills. They take account of context and the child or young person's lived experiences".

NICE also note that adopting a whole school, relational approach is more effective than "purely punitive behaviour management systems". Professional development for all staff is an important element in creating a whole school culture [32]. Coaching for staff in techniques for building relationships with pupils can help to avoid negative staff perceptions developing [50]. Investing time and resources into improving relationships in schools is shown to lead to positive outcomes around inclusion, engagement, attainment, and achievement in the short term and community safety and cohesion in the longer term [51].

Alongside developing positive relationships with pupils, effective communication with parents/ carers is another key feature of interventions to support attendance [31, 32]. There needs to be a consistent school-wide approach with all staff trained and confident in communicating the school attendance approach and ensuring supportive home-school communication [52]. Impact Ed, give the example of a school concerned about low parental engagement, particularly since many parents did not speak English as their first language [21]. They note this effective response:

"The school therefore recruited its community-support worker, who speaks several Eastern European languages, as well as a Polish teaching assistant, to help with translation."

Approaches that are responsive to the needs of local communities are a key part of effective preventative attendance work. DfE have recommended the use of formal attendance contracts to ensure joined up support for families and young people [53]. These are not legally binding or compulsory but are intended to support home-school partnerships. However, not meeting the requirements of an attendance contract could lead to legal action such as an Education Supervision Order (court orders directing parents to ensure children receive a suitable full-time education) or fines and prosecution. From August 2024, fines have been increased and a national framework has been introduced, instructing schools to consider a fine when a child has more than ten unauthorised absences.

The curriculum is another area that can help all pupils attend school. International researchers argue that readiness for adulthood requires creative educational changes such as reconfiguring curricula in secondary schools to promote pupil engagement [54]. Engagement involves cognitive, behavioural, and emotional dimensions and approaches such as problem-based learning offer the opportunity for collaboration and development of thinking [55]. The Area Based Curriculum project run by the Royal Society of Arts in 2010-12 in Peterborough is an example of engaging learning experiences for primary and secondary school pupils, drawing on the Peterborough locality and partnerships. Teachers reported significant enjoyment and engagement for pupils who appreciated learning outside the classroom and meeting new people. The pupils reported knowing more about and valuing the local area, leading to stronger feelings of belonging and identity.

International research into universal approaches also supports involving young people in extracurricular activities [9]. This might include young people participating in or leading enrichment and volunteering activities or advising the school on strategies for improving school belonging. Although there has been a decline in funding for enrichment activities over the last decade, free school meals, breakfast clubs, and holiday activities have been advocated as ways of tackling poverty and legislation will ensure free breakfast clubs are provided in every primary school [19,56]. Enrichment activities, such as after school clubs are also important in promoting individual self-worth, social connections, engagement, and identity [21]. They are linked to an increased sense of school belonging and increased attendance and have been particularly beneficial for disadvantaged pupils [57].

"Because you are volunteering and choosing to participate in that provision, your **personal engagement as a young person is far higher."**

– Leigh Middleton, CEO of the National Youth Agency

Other approaches which research has found to be effective when supported by national policy include careers guidance, counselling, and vocational education [58]. However, researchers caution that such approaches need to be informed by understanding of local context and needs.

Targeted approaches

As part of a proactive approach to attendance, schools are encouraged to use early screening to identify at risk pupils before attendance difficulties emerge, and daily attendance monitoring helps target the work of attendance teams. Research suggests that patterns of school absence are not always universal, even within the same district or locality.

Using the Connected Bradford population linked research database, large discrepancies were found across the Bradford District [59]. For example, one Bradford locality showed an unauthorised absence rate over 22 times greater than the locality with the lowest rate. In some areas, 80% of the total unauthorised absences were attributable to about 12% of pupils. Detailed data such as these can help to identify specific issues and target intervention. Monitoring is also a core part of the guidance from the Department for Education, and 80% of schools have taken part in the DfE's Pupil Attendance Dashboard pilot [19,53]. However, there is still further work to do nationally to ensure that data tracking systems are fit for purpose, not perceived as punitive by parents, or too onerous that they interfere with providing sufficient timely intervention [9]. Developing systems with parents and local communities may help to overcome such barriers around attendance monitoring. A key gap in the data relating to children not in school will be addressed through future legislation requiring local authorities to maintain Children Not in School registers and provide support for home-educating parents [56]. For pupils where there are emerging attendance difficulties, there is some evidence to support the use of mentoring [31,32]. Mentors typically meet with young people one-to-one for an hour a week and sessions might focus on academic work or attitudes towards school. Mentors need to build positive relationships with pupils and provide emotional support. Regular supervision and senior manager support are important for enabling mentors to work with complex situations [52]. Barnardo's are currently delivering the DfE funded attendance mentors programme, which is working with persistently and severely absent children and their families, if there are wider issues. However, the House of Commons Education Committee has recommended that this goes further and includes whole-family support [19].

Another example of targeted support is the Student Support Champions (SSCs), a support programme in Newcastle focusing on youth violence prevention [60]. Young people believed to be at risk of, or involved in, violent crime are involved in one-to-one or small group activities with a trusted adult who is external to the school. The trusted adult builds a relationship with the young person, provides opportunities for them to share their concerns, and improves safeguarding systems around the young person. An evaluation found a reduction in suspensions and exclusions, and improved school attendance.

Individualised and intensive interventions

Collaboration with parents is particularly important when CYP are persistently or severely absent, or at risk of exclusion. School staff need to build relationships with families and develop a shared understanding of CYP's needs to develop realistic individualised plans [44,61,62]. Researchers have found face to face meetings and solution-focused conversations to be effective with families [63]. Targeted work with families might include joint assessment with the family and young person using a tool such as the ATTEND Framework, followed by individualised planning and regular review. The UK's SEND Code of Practice details that specialist professionals should become involved if difficulties worsen or do not respond to earlier intervention [64]. This support is more likely to be cost-effective and efficient where the multiple systems are combined and well-integrated in their support and where approaches are adapted to individual contexts [44,65].

Schools must consider more specialised within-school or external options for those pupils with severe difficulties attending school or engaging with education. School options include part-time timetables to support a phased return for pupils or "flexi schooling" where children attend part time and are home educated for the remainder of time. The National Youth Agency has made the case for approaches which bridge formal and informal learning to improve student wellbeing and attendance [66].

Since COVID-19, remote learning has increased, particularly for pupils with medical, mental health, or SEND needs. Remote education usually has the aim of maintaining inclusion, whilst working towards school reintegration [19,67]. Telepresence technology for supporting pupil engagement is a promising area and refers to software or devices that enable pupils to access their education environment remotely such as in their own home or a different room within school. Telepresence focuses on promoting the user's ability to feel "physically present" within the environment they are accessing [68]. This is often achieved via telepresence devices such as the AV1 robot. Following a pilot project from the DfE, over 45 Local Authorities utilise the AV1 device to support education engagement and attendance [67]. Such devices show promise in helping to meet emotional and social needs, by providing CYP with an opportunity to remain part of their school community, promoting social relationships and a sense of belonging [69]. Providing support for underlying emotional needs can, in turn, lead to improved attendance and re-engagement. Research highlights devices such as the AV1 are utilised within graded exposure approaches, whereby the telepresence robot is slowly removed over time as the student builds relationships and increases their physical attendance [67].

Alternative Provision (AP) is an option external to the school, for pupils who are unable to attend mainstream. This could be due to exclusion and/or having SEND. There is wide variation in AP and there are concerns about the safety of CYP in unregistered APs and the potential for reduced access to the curriculum [19,70]. However, APs offer a more flexible approach to supporting CYP.

> **"We've had great results.** [...] a lad was pretty much being exploited by other children. [...] his Mum asked 'Is this normal?'. He didn't report it to the police, the child reported it to the SSC and they informed me. We spoke to the parents when he was at school, and **we put a safeguarding plan in place."**
>
> - Focus group participant

"[Alternative Provision] helped me get into a **better place mentally while still learning** and next year I'll be ok starting at a 6th form college (sic)"

– Young person attending online Alternative Provision

The AP sector is difficult to evaluate due to variability in types of AP and their functions [71]. The DfE recommends that AP should only be used as a time limited intervention.

Due to the variability of inclusive school provision and access to AP and other bespoke provision, some parents decide to home educate their children due to their child's level of emotional distress when attending school. However, parents may feel that this is "forced due to lack of flexible schools" and this option may not be possible for all parents [72]. Parents who have successfully home educated highlight that the flexibility of going at the child's pace and being led by the child's interests is key to addressing their child's mental health needs [72]. Given the increase in parents withdrawing their children to home educate and variability of options for families this is an area of provision which urgently needs further research to ensure LAs can provide effective support to parents [2].

Adapting multi-tiered systems of support

Schools need to develop their vision for attendance, incorporating multi-tiered systems, informed by evidence-based practice, and ensuring responsiveness to school and community needs [9]. A vision developed with the wider school community ensures that it reflects diverse views, builds a shared culture, and facilitates a commitment to success [73]. Using data can enable schools to respond swiftly to new challenges in collaboration with their wider stakeholders. Each school will have its own facilitators and barriers to addressing attendance, making it important to set measurable goals and regularly review, adjust, and evaluate the attendance support plan [73].

"When they kick you out of school, they just leave you for ages [...] and then, **they just expect you to get back into that routine** [...] and it's not that easy"

– Young person attending Alternative Provision

Collaboration across public services is vital for tackling the complex challenges of school attendance

This section highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships, local authority roles, and community involvement in supporting students. By sharing best practices and successful examples, it emphasises the need for coordinated efforts to create adaptable systems.

Partnering to address attendance challenges is crucial. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are needed to effectively combine resources and expertise to support school attendance, in a way that is adaptable to each school and pupil's unique circumstances [54]. Given the complex nature of attendance difficulties, researchers have found that working across schools and agencies to share best practice and integrate data can facilitate more responsive and effective systems [9]. The DfE ''expects the best placed service to lead a 'support first' approach with schools working together with local authorities and wider partners, including the voluntary and community sector where needed". Currently, with stretched services multi-agency collaboration can be a challenge, but building communities of practice around attendance can support more lasting change [73].

Attendance hubs are a mechanism for schools to support each other by sharing effective practice and resources [19]. Following some positive case examples, the programme has been rolled out to more schools, but concerns have been expressed that more fundamental shifts are needed to address underlying issues such as poverty.

Local Authority partnerships are also welcome. DfE guidance sets out the statutory role of Local Authorities in supporting regular school attendance, including an expectation that they will "have a strategic approach to improving attendance". Recent evidence illustrated how a strategic and consistent approach across one North West Local Authority allowed misconceptions about attendance difficulties to be identified and challenged, promoting earlier identification and intervention for attendance difficulties [61]. Through organisational culture shifts and evidence-informed practice, this Local Authority has continued to be among those with the highest attendance rates in England.

Many UK Local Authorities, most notably beginning in West Sussex, have collaborated with their Educational Psychology Services to produced evidence-informed school avoidance guidance and training to support its implementation [74]. Much of this guidance recognises that irregular school attendance is often a symptom of an underlying difficulty and therefore support pathways are designed to identify the factors driving the attendance difficulties and effectively target individualised support. More recently, other LAs have recognised the potential for relationally focused approaches in building a sense of belonging and safety for all pupils experiencing barriers to engagement with education, rather than primarily focusing on pupils experiencing school avoidance. Recent examples of this type of support being led by LAs in the UK include Devon County Council's highly regarded "Guidance for developing relational practice and policy". This focuses on the importance of "developing relationships", "repairing and restoring", and "responding and calming".

Some LAs have also been able to support schools by taking a lead in coordinating remote education opportunities for CYP with physical or mental health needs. For instance, some LAs have purchased AV1 robots and loan these out for use in schools [11]. LAs can also take a lead in facilitating professional networks to promote attendance and student wellbeing which promotes sustainability and sharing good practice [73].

Community involvement is another key strand in ensuring more joined up and meaningful support for CYP. Such partnerships can help schools tackle wider issues such as healthcare,

transport, and lost learning [75]. Schools need to develop partnerships based on the most common causes of absence for their pupils and continue to develop and maintain these partnerships to ensure effectiveness for students and families over time. This might include schools working with local community groups and arts organisations to provide extracurricular activities for young people or working with local charities to ensure families of children with SEND can access support.

"Having that liaison between school and community can be really, really effective [...] We have also seen provision where there are detached youth workers [...]. These are trained youth workers who are on our streets, walking around our parks, talking to young people, engaging them, finding out what is going on in their lives and **working out how to support them."**

– Leigh Middleton, CEO of the National Youth Agency

Establishing universities as the "Research and Development" departments for local public services

We also argue for establishing universities as the ''Research and Development'' departments for local public services. Universities have an important role to play in supporting the development of meaningful attendance research in collaboration with regional stakeholders. This includes understanding the needs of communities and working with schools and local authorities to develop and evaluate interventions tailored to local need.

The University of Manchester, through its Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DECP) research commissioning process, has developed an attendance strand of research. Research projects are commissioned by stakeholders, including Greater Manchester Combined Authority, LAs, schools and Educational Psychology services and are undertaken by trainee educational psychologists. Projects have focused on local priorities including developing and evaluating LA guidance documents and their implementation in schools, understanding the needs and perspectives of key stakeholders such as parents and young people with persistent attendance needs, evaluating support for CYP at risk of missing education during the transition to high school, participatory research with autistic CYP to better understand what effective support might look like, and understanding how innovative new technologies such as AV1s can be used in schools. Research produced by the DECP attendance group is recognised internationally and has had local impact.

Stakeholders participating in a group developing LA guidance commented that it had started the development of a consistent LA wide collaborative approach that, "takes away it being the parents' fault and is about being more collective" [76].

"We need a human-to-human approach, and the schools taking that time and having someone to try and understand families and see what issues they have."

– Parent

Innovative approaches trialled in the real world

This section of the report highlights how the education sector has risen to the challenges of non-attendance and collaboratively developed joined up strategies which are responsive to local need, even in the context of limited resources and growing demand.

These inspirational programmes demonstrate the transformational benefits that could be achieved if the new government committed to improving school attendance of CYP growing up in the UK. They are offered here not as blueprints for copying, but to inspire new thinking and practice to tackle the school attendance crisis.

Our hope is that these inspire other areas to be equally creative and innovative in addressing the school attendance crisis. Moreover, we hope that the new government's Opportunity Mission will allow better sharing of learning across the UK as everyone works together to build a country that works for all children and young people.

1

Barriers to Education

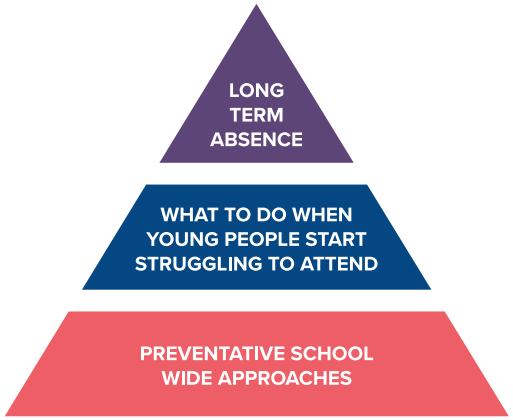


Figure 8: The WARMTH framework

Spectrum Gaming is a UK-based autistic-led charity that works to support autistic young people and their families. Working alongside a regional Educational Psychologist interest group, the team at Spectrum recognised that the current school attendance (or EBSA) guidance did not appear to be meeting the needs of those experiencing severe and/or entrenched school attendance difficulties and that this was affecting primarily neurodivergent young people. They also felt that a more proactive approach was required, recommending proactive ways to better meet young people's needs prior to attendance becoming a problem.

As a result, the Barriers to Education project was established, aiming to collaboratively build an evidence-based toolkit to support families, schools, and services, in practical and aspirational ways that include both preventative and reactive approaches. It is hoped that this toolkit will then be used to inform Local Authority working across Greater Manchester and beyond to update existing guidance around school attendance difficulties, and to inform ordinarily available inclusive practice and more broadly to promote inclusive education for all.

An initial project steering group was made up of a range of multi-agency professionals and experts through lived experience, including staff from Spectrum Gaming with backgrounds in social care, health and clinical psychology, plus local Educational Psychologists, and academics from the University of Manchester. As the project has expanded, collaboration has also extended to include working groups comprised of representatives from local parent communities, young people's groups, and a panel of national experts. Links have been established with the National Association of Educational Psychologists (NAPEP) and the Children's Commissioner-led Greater Manchester Local Attendance Action Alliance to expand the project's reach. Further feedback has been sought via a series of live-streamed webinars and online questionnaires, to ensure the new guidance is representative of the lived experiences of children, families, and professionals.

Four Key Acknowledgements underpin the Barriers to Education case for change:

1. Young people are internally driven to do well.
2. We need the right approach for ALL young people.
3. The right support, in the right place, at the right time.
4. Recognising the purpose of education.

Through their coproduction process, the group have developed the **WARMTH Framework**, which identifies six key foundations to reduce barriers to education:

Wellbeing first: Focusing on wellbeing, not attendance, is the best way to both improve school attendance and enable learning.

Affirming practice: Everyone is different, and this difference is part of natural human variation. This means it is important to move towards using an approach that accepts and accommodates for all differences, whether young people have a diagnosis or not.

Relational approach: Adopting a relational approach doesn't mean having no rules or expectations. It is making the recognition that behaviourist practice (looking at behaviour and not the underlying reasons behind it) is not the best way to create an environment where young people feel safe, can learn and have "good behaviour" - and that there are ways of supporting young people that work better for everyone.

Mutual support and partnership: There is often a lot of tension between schools, families, and other services when things feel very "stuck". This part of the framework is about how we can work together, with the knowledge that we are all working together to try and achieve the same thing: the best possible outcomes for CYP.

Timely response: It is important to give CYP and their family members information, knowledge, support, and tools before any struggles are experienced. Professionals must take family concerns seriously and act quickly. The quicker support is offered when concerns are identified, the less likely CYP will reach crisis and/or experience long term attendance difficulties.

Holistic support: Attendance has always been a symptom rather than a cause, a manifestation of complex issues across the education system and beyond. How can we take a whole family/service/wider approach?

Based on previous multi-tiered systems of support models and in line with familiar SEND graduated approaches, the group are using the WARMTH Framework to develop a tiered model of support (see Figure 8). The resulting guidance covers preventative whole school approaches alongside what to do when children and young people struggle to attend school or have been unable to attend school for some time.

To make the new guidance accessible to all, the group are developing a comprehensive website for the content which will be launched by January 2025. The website will contain detailed sections on each area of the framework, with guidance and support for professionals, families, and young people. The website will also include a series of good practice case studies for reference. It is hoped that through this novel approach to school attendance, we can all do more of what works, more effectively meeting the needs of all CYP and reducing the barriers to education for all.

2

The EWO Project

“It was helpful to share the issues within a 'stuck' family and collaborate to conclude with increased understanding and an action plan.”

The EWO Project is a collaboration between Suffolk Psychology and Therapeutic Services (P&TS) and Suffolk’s statutory attendance service, with a focus on supporting CYP with barriers to education and attendance. These barriers to attendance are understood to be complex and highly individual, and, in some cases, related to unmet special educational needs. The project aims to promote effective multi-agency working between the two services when supporting CYP and their families experiencing attendance difficulties.

Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) are guided by the statutory guidance around school attendance which advocates for a “support first” approach. This requires local authorities to work in partnership with schools and families to identify underlying issues and develop supportive action plans to tackle attendance barriers. EWOs need greater training and awareness in this area, especially when providing support to families and parents that often feel “blamed” and “abandoned” by the system.

The “SPIRAL” principles

The EWO project is informed by the “SPIRAL Framework”; a set of principles for professional practice that can inform support for non-attendance. These principles are:

1. Supporting parents and carers
2. Promoting CYP’s sense of belonging and safety
3. Including and informing parents
4. Raising awareness of non-attendance
5. Accessing external professionals
6. Lessons learnt from COVID-19

SPIRAL principles were shared with EWOs to support their thinking and understanding of attendance difficulties, including improving their awareness of the parent and family experience of non-attendance. During the project, it was hoped that this would also increase EWO’s knowledge of local attendance initiatives (e.g., creation of new “EBSA resources”), SEND support, and how to access various services that may be available to the families and schools they are working with. The ultimate aim of the project is to benefit CYP experiencing difficulties with school attendance and their educational journey.

The project

The EWO Project has been delivered across two phases. In phase one, the attendance team acknowledged the increasing complexity within their incoming referrals, and commissioned training from Suffolk P&TS to support their understanding and practice in this area. Suffolk P&TS is a local authority service made up of Educational Psychologists and Inclusion Facilitators - a team of practitioners using person centred working to bring about positive change. Training was delivered by an Educational Psychologist and a Senior Inclusion Facilitator with professional interests in the area. This package focused on contemporary theory and research on attendance difficulties, and approaches designed to support EWOs in utilising this knowledge alongside local resources to promote effective and supportive action plans.

Through phase two of the project, the attendance service then commissioned further support from Suffolk P&TS, with a focus on embedding this training. Since January 2024, drop-in consultations have subsequently been offered to EWOs, attended by both the Educational Psychologist and Inclusion Facilitator who delivered the training to unpick complex or “stuck” situations in a collaborative way. The SPIRAL principles have been adopted as a model within these consultations, as well as being guided by local solution-focused and strengths-based practice. The aim of these consultations is to provide a reflective space for EWOs to explore their thinking on such cases, as well as to identify next steps with the support of an Educational Psychologist and Inclusion Facilitator with experience and interest in this area. These are initially being delivered monthly as part of a pilot with a hope that this support may continue and evolve over time as EWOs grow in confidence.

The EWO Project is ongoing as we move into the new academic year, with plans to fully evaluate and understand its impact in the coming months. Informal feedback from EWOs who have accessed the consultations has been positive, highlighting the supportive nature of the consultations, the benefits of multi-agency working and the utility of the SPIRAL framework in their practice. By extending the knowledge and confidence of EWOs in this way, it is hoped that they are better equipped to support families experiencing difficulties, as well as to work alongside schools in implementing advice, guidance, and actions plans relating to non-attendance. To date, 15 EWOs across the council have accessed individual consultations, with plans to work with the remainder of the team into the Autumn Term. Anecdotally, the increased confidence of EWOs has been noted, with increased understanding of SEND and local SEND support pathways, working with parents and accessing local resources and services. The EWO Project ultimately hopes to support all CYP within Suffolk experiencing attendance difficulties, through a collaborative and multi-agency approach.

3

Bradford SAFE Taskforce

"Being able to talk to other professionals whose skills set and experience can contribute to positive outcomes for the pupil."

As part of the DfE's £30 million SAFE Taskforce initiative, Bradford was identified as one of ten areas in the country where youth violence is a significant concern. In 2022, the DfE allocated £3.3 million to Bradford to unite local schools in reducing children's vulnerability to serious violence. This funding led to the creation of the Bradford SAFE Taskforce, spearheaded by Exceed Academies Trust. Through this innovative initiative, a variety of carefully designed, evidence-based interventions were introduced across 18 schools in the city, all aligned with the Youth Endowment Fund's latest guidance and evidence. The primary focus of these interventions is to improve children's attendance, behaviour, and engagement with their education.

The additional resources provided by the Bradford SAFE Taskforce are crucial, as the city faces increasing suspensions, permanent exclusions, and below-average attendance. To disrupt this cycle, schools recognise the importance of external support and programme providers. Through consultations with young people and communities, a lack of positive role models was identified as a significant gap in local services. To address this need, the SAFE Taskforce programme has implemented a gender-specific mentoring scheme, where girls at risk of violence or coercive relationships are paired with women from the local community for one-to-one mentoring support. Research shows that structured mentoring programs, which foster trusting relationships, boost self-esteem, and provide emotional support, can significantly impact, reducing violence by 21% and all offending by 14%.

Additionally, the programme is delivering an attendance focussed intervention which directly supports children with poor attendance, with the aim of re-engaging them back into education. The intervention takes a whole child approach, including support for the both the child and their family and includes interventions assisting with transport, and liaising with both school and careers to bridge the gap between home and school.

Other initiatives, such as a character education programme aimed at developing children's social and emotional skills, have also been introduced.

Unexpected benefits have also emerged from these programmes. Although the SAFE Taskforce programme's evaluation is ongoing, the significant improvement in individual pupils' attendance is an encouraging sign for the Bradford team. Recent data have highlighted the impact of the Bradford SAFE Taskforce projects:

- An average of 43% of the SAFE cohort recorded improved half-termly attendance at school.
- An average of 44.5% of the SAFE cohort recorded improved termly attendance.
- The suspension rate for SAFE Taskforce schools for the 2023-24 academic year was 64.1% compared to 80.4% for the academic year 2022-23.
- Suspension for physical assault against a pupil has seen a reduction in the number of days lost to suspension in 2023 when compared to 2022.
- Suspension for physical assault against a pupil has also seen a significant reduction in the proportion of days lost; in 2021 this made up approximately 20% of all days lost but makes up only 10% in 2023 to date.

Breaking down barriers

The Bradford SAFE Taskforce aims to leverage schools' leadership, facilities, and local networks to deliver timely and effective support to children vulnerable to violence. A key advantage of this approach is that **it brings services directly to the places where children spend their daily lives.** Schools' close relationships with families also allow for support to be extended to siblings, parents, and carers when necessary.

This approach also addresses logistical challenges. In Bradford, variable costs and availability of public transportation and car ownership can limit children's and families' access to positive activities and support.

So far, school-based programmes funded by the Bradford SAFE Taskforce have reached over 1,300 children across 18 schools. The hope is that the lessons learned from this model's development, implementation, and evaluation will serve as a blueprint for other agencies, organisations and schools looking to adopt evidence-based interventions to prevent children's involvement in serious violence.

4

North Birkenhead Cradle to Career Attendance Pilot

North Birkenhead is a community based in Wirral, within the wider Liverpool City Region. It is a self-identified community of around 9000 people (3000 CYP), consisting of five Lower Super Output Areas, all of which are in the top 10% for deprivation in the country. The challenges facing CYP in North Birkenhead are many, including high rates of referral to social care, intergenerational cycles of low expectations, unaddressed mental health needs, inconsistent identification of need and appropriate support for SEND, low literacy levels, and rising levels of youth crime and anti-social behaviour. These challenges, coupled with the selective school system in place in Wirral, mean that the schools within the area inherit cohorts of CYP with complex and varied needs, who often start school with significant developmental delays and academic attainment far behind the national average.

Key problems

In September 2021, the team identified three key problems:

- Local attendance rates showed higher-than-ever absence rates in secondary schools following COVID-19;
- The multidisciplinary team (MDT) reported a number of CYP in their caseloads who were non-attenders or school refusers and expressed concern that there was a breakdown in communication between their team, schools and families to address this;
- Schools reported an increase in low-level mental health and anxiety concerns on returning to school which reflected national trends.

Designing a response

Building on existing research and evidence, the team identified a series of responses that sought address these key problems. The team identified that a localised panel approach would be key. The aim was to address complex cases and barriers individually by:

- Improving cross-sector communication around attendance barriers in specific cases
- Improving the holistic intervention support available to CYP and families
- Understanding what the common root causes of non-attendance are and identifying further support or solutions that could be put in place in the medium-long term

Other panels and boards exist around attendance in Wirral but these are Wirral-wide and so often have high-need referral processes and eligibility criteria. Initially, the MDT proposed a localised version of Wirral's Vulnerable Children's Panel. However, schools felt the referral process, eligibility criteria, and format of the panel were too stringent and didn't address the gap in support.

After a review and a redesign of the process, the Cradle to Career team softened this panel approach to be more small-scale and flexible around schools and families, including:

- Creating individual panels around school, which met in that school and discussed pupils they identified for support
- Removing referral paperwork and eligibility criteria and allowing schools to nominate the pupils they wanted to discuss
- Funding small-scale interventions and solutions identified by the panel

This pilot format was offered out to one secondary school initially, and after two months, was extended to two further primary schools.

> **"My son had stopped going to school due to anxiety** and The Hive team came to the house and worked with the school to get him on the Inspiring Futures project. **His confidence grew over the weeks** and he eventually went back to the hub in school and is making good progress. **As a family we appreciated the support that this project gave us."**
>
> – Parent

Delivery and implementation

The programme was delivered through two key initiatives:

Input	Delivery Partner	Beneficiaries to date
Collective Working (Feb 2022 - present (Sep 2024)): Attendance panel meetings for 3 schools in the Cradle to Career programme	Multidisciplinary panel - MDT, youth provision and school	73 students
Funded Interventions - *Inspiring Futures* (May 2022 - present (Sep 2024)): 6-9 week group intervention to improve school engagement and self-confidence for at risk students	Local youth centre	23 students (4 cohorts over 2 academic years)

"I was at The Hive for 8 weeks with my school as I found it difficult to return after some issues. The project was fun and enjoyable and we learnt lots of new things. **It gave me the confidence to return to school** and now I am back part-time and enjoying school again."

– Young person

Impact

Improved attendance rates

- Of the 23 students to complete the Inspiring Futures programme, 19 improved attendance post-intervention
- The average percentage point improvement in attendance for those young people was 16%, with three pupils improving by as much as 45% or more

Improved support available to CYP and families

- For pupils engaged in interventions, there has been a positive impact on both (i) understanding their individual barriers to attendance, and (ii) their engagement and relationships
- Improvement in access to support for two parents through the Family Connectors - including access to Autism Together and into further training
- The Family Connector role has potential as an independent, supportive relationship holder for parents who schools and social services struggle to engage

Improved cross-sector communication around attendance barriers

- For pupils who received interventions to understand their individual barriers, the Hive Youth Zone - a state-of-the-art space dedicated to offering Wirral's young people opportunities and experiences they can't find anywhere else - were able to bring pupils' perspective into discussions, challenging professional assumptions of barriers in place
- Social work and family support has reported a significant improvement in partnership working with a secondary school as a result of meeting regularly, which has led to better working around vulnerable families
- Meetings are held regularly in schools which has created a consistency of communication and reduced referrals to social care from schools.

Understanding what the common root causes of non-attendance are and identifying further support that could be put in place in the medium- to long-term

Through the panel work, we have identified some common underlying barriers to attendance:

- Primary: parent barriers to attending school include poor physical or mental health, capacity to bring pupils to school on time due to work or parenting commitments, poor relationships, or disengagement with school
- Primary: pupil health barriers to attending school including asthma, recurrent health problems
- Secondary: student disengagement with school as a result of anxiety and mental wellbeing issues

5

Understanding how to support CYP with severe attendance difficulties

"We're measuring things like leaving the house for the first time in a prolonged period, or perhaps re-engaging with family routines... **re-engaging with a hobby or something that they used to enjoy."**

Working in collaboration with the University of Manchester's Doctorate in Child and Educational Psychology, a group of psychologists have commissioned a three-part research project aimed at gaining a better understanding of effective support for CYP whose engagement in education is limited, and whose quality of life is significantly impacted. While there is much activity in LAs to support effective "early intervention and prevention" of EBSA, there is far less of an understanding or strategy as to how to effectively support CYP with severe attendance difficulties.

The first phase of research has focused on the views of psychologists who are working in alternative ways to support CYP with severe attendance difficulties. This includes an educational psychologist involved in the development of a LA-wide intervention service commissioned by the Scottish DfE alongside the charity Quarriers, an educational psychologist working with the charity the Together Trust in the delivery and development of therapeutically informed "Education Other Than in Schools" packages, as well as independent psychologists involved in therapeutic work with children and parents. Each interviewee has described this work as having greater impact than the conventional systems of support offered by LAs. This "good practice" has taken place in communities and homes, and in some cases has involved working in small multidisciplinary teams.

An analysis of themes from interviews highlighted that those working in this area are following the principles within trauma-informed practice, are avoiding re-traumatisation, and removing pressures to go to school. They are seeking to empower CYP by shifting the view that the problem lies within the child, and instead are considering the impact of the systems around the child. Most prominently, in order to make progress, interviewees placed a high emphasis on wellbeing and prioritised this more so than improving attendance/re-introducing the CYP to the school system. To engage CYP, interviewees described adopting an individualised "child-led" approach and removing the "adult agenda"; something which requires patience, flexibility and creativity to meet need. Interviewees spoke about adapting their communication to match CYP's preferred way of communicating and learning, and using alternative methods such as WhatsApp, Discord, and robots to build connections.

CYP's interests were also followed to support engagement. Building and maintaining relationships was identified as crucial to this process. A word that was mentioned by interviewees was "permission" and this transpired to be in various forms. Interviewees spoke about giving parents the permission to have hope and giving parents' permission to take the pressure away from "getting the child into the school building". They also discussed giving other professionals working with CYP permission to think differently about outcomes and how to deliver work. It was noteworthy, the methods by which interviewees measured "success" may be different than the measures of success often associated with attendance interventions. Interviewees saw success as relating to indicators of gradually improved wellbeing (e.g., the CYP coming out of their bedroom, leaving the house, or engaging in an informal curriculum learning through play based or community activity). For some, their work has involved collaborating with other professionals such as CAMHS workers, autism specialists, family workers, or tutors. Some interviewees worked directly with the family, and others in multidisciplinary teams and the on-roll school. Interviewees shared that it was crucial, when working collaboratively, that each person involved took some responsibility.

At a systems-wide level, interviewees discussed increasing the visibility of this group and the need to change narratives that often surround these CYP and their families. Interviewees highlighted the need to work with schools, LAs, and academics to remove barriers and to bring about systemic change and a "rethink of priorities" when working with this vulnerable group.

Collectively, these initial findings highlight the contributions psychologists can make in supporting this group when able to work in different, highly person-centred and relational ways, and the implied need for appropriate local authority systems, structures and resourcing to support this group. The second phase of this research plans to delve deeper into the LAs commissioning alternative interventions/offers and understand how the services are perceived by key stakeholders.

6

Wirral EBSA Strategy

"It has been great to finally have a bank of solutions! **These methods have been successful in improving attendance.** The process of listening to the student, validating their difficulties, and working together has really been effective."

– Secondary school staff member

Over the past academic year, Wirral Council has designed and implemented a new EBSA Strategy to support CYP, their families, and local authority professionals in tackling EBSA. In collaboration with Wirral's parent forum, Parent Carer Participation Wirral, informed by current psychological research, and a scoping exercise of the views of CYP, parents / carers, schools and children's services staff, the strategy has four key strands to maximise its impact:

- Local Authority wide awareness raising and developing a strategic approach
- Early intervention and prevention
- Support for parents and carers
- Multi-agency response for long-standing EBSA

The strategy is overseen by a new working group comprised of representatives from Parent Carer Participation Wirral, and the education, health, and social care sectors. The formation of this working group has both maximised the reach of the strategy and capitalised on the expertise of representatives within different fields, and further helped to promote local authority wide awareness-raising about EBSA and the need for strategic, systemic approaches. The coordination of Wirral EBSA Strategy has been led by Wirral Educational Psychology Team, helping to ensure that all aspects of the strategy are informed by research and principles to benefit Wirral's CYP.

In its first year of operation, the Wirral EBSA Strategy has delivered EBSA training to over 321 professionals, from 103 schools, 32 local authority teams, Wirral Home and Continuing Education Service, Wirral Mental Health Support Teams, and Wirral CYP Mental Health Service. A universal offer of training across the authority has helped to increase the confidence of individuals when supporting EBSA and has provided psychologically informed resources to enable early intervention and prevention as well as individual support and intervention.

In addition, the training has served as a means of communicating the findings of the scoping exercise and promoting the inclusive values which underpin the EBSA work. This has included emphasising the importance of a systemic, supportive approach for EBSA, and striving to remove a potential "blame culture" which families have spoken of. Training attendees shared that the training both increased their knowledge of EBSA theory and how to support CYP and their families who are living with EBSA, through the practical strategies provided. In addition, 99.5% of training attendees would recommend the training to other professionals.

Next steps include the co-development of parent/carer EBSA workshops in collaboration with Parent Carer Participation Wirral, and the creation of freely accessible online webinars and resources. Next academic year, the strategy will host monthly network meetings for school staff, not only providing an opportunity to further embed the principles of the EBSA training and share good practice, but also an opportunity to work collaboratively with a range of different services, including Educational Psychology, Inclusion Team, Attendance Team, and CYP's Mental Health services.

In addition to the universal training package discussed above, Wirral EBSA Strategy are advancing with their use of the AV1 device, a telepresence robot that enables CYP to access their education remotely. The robot sits in the young person's seat in class, and they access a live stream of the lesson via an electronic tablet in a safe space (e.g., at home or an intervention room within school). Wirral's intention is to use the AV1 device as a short-term intervention, allowing CYP to gradually re-integrate back into school or re-engage with learning. A planned rollout to Wirral schools is scheduled for the Autumn Term. A pilot project with seven Wirral schools who trialled the AV1 in Summer Term 2024 has highlighted the promising applications of the device, with initial data for June 2024 indicating on average:

- A 21% increase in attendance.
- A 42% increase in the number of hours that pupils engage with learning.
- A 40% increase in the number of hours that pupils engage with social opportunities.

This initial pilot provides evidence of both the potential positive impact of the AV1, but also the requirement for practitioners to consider a range of approaches when supporting EBSA, including technology. Reinforcing research that highlights the requirement for highly individualised and bespoke approaches to addressing EBSA.

Throughout, the application of key educational psychology principles has been pivotal in the success of the EBSA Strategy - providing professionals with the confidence to support CYP and their families through whole-school and early intervention approaches, as well as bespoke interventions and support strategies. The next 12 months will focus on further embedding the EBSA Strategy across the authority, with an aim for the strategy's principles and approaches to merge into the day-to-day operations of services and education settings throughout the region.

7

Act Locally: School absence and dental health

"Act Locally" partnerships are based in deprived areas of Bradford. They bring together key local policy makers from health, education, the voluntary sector, and universities to improve the life chances for CYP within these communities. At a Keighley Act Locally meeting, headteachers brought up the challenges of dental access and its impact on school attendance.

Tooth decay is more common in deprived areas and is the most common reason for five-to-nine-year-olds to be admitted to hospital. Current school software does not capture days lost from school for dental reasons. In response to this, the Act Locally team worked with schools to develop a simple recording log and agreed to collect this data over the 2024 Summer term. Data were collected from seven schools (six primary and one secondary) within the Keighley area.

Initial analysis found between 4.8% to 13.2% of children were absent from school for dental reasons. Children attending secondary school were often absent for a half day, whereas those in primary school would often be absent for the whole day. Reasons for absence included toothache and disrupted sleep, infection, emergency dental care, post-operative recovery from dental surgery, and attendance for a dental appointment.
A co-designed workshop was convened with schools, local dental practices, NHS commissioners, parents, and voluntary sector organisations. Schools and dental practices worked together and explored potential solutions. These were captured, summarised, and presented to dental commissioners, who are now working with the dental practices to implement these plans and improve access to NHS dental services for children with high dental needs.

As a result of this work, it was suggested that school attendance software should record absences for dental reasons in a subcategory to allow monitoring. In addition, local dental commissioning teams should support initiatives between schools and dental practices to allow CYP who are persistently absent from school for dental reasons to access a dentist.

NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Yorkshire and Humber

The NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) Yorkshire and Humber is an important programme of applied research, hosted within Bradford Institute for Health Research, and delivered through a partnership of organisations, including NHS organisations, local authorities, universities, third sector organisations, and industry. The themes of healthy childhood, mental health and multimorbidity, older people and urgent care are the priorities that have been identified by NHS partners and the public and ensure the region benefits from cutting-edge innovation. The ARC undertakes research to better understand the causes and consequences of living with both mental and physical health problems; and by working with people with lived experience, and NHS, social care, and third sector partners to develop and test new approaches and put research findings into practice. The ARC ensure NHS and social services can improve effectiveness and impact to benefit our patients and their families – and this includes a major focus on oral health in children.

8

Attendance Matters - Tees Valley Education

Tees Valley Education (TVEd) is a multi-academy Trust (MAT) in the North of England serving communities in Middlesbrough, Redcar, and Cleveland. The Tees Valley has significant levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and attendance is a key priority for TVEd and all colleagues.

TVEd understands that when a young person is healthy in mind and body, they are better equipped to engage with learning, and to cope with other external challenges they may be confronted with as they grow. When CYP are more resilient, they stand a far greater chance of becoming well-rounded individuals, more able to overcome some of the setbacks they will undoubtedly encounter as part of everyday life.

For some CYP, particularly those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), more intensive support is needed to help develop those life-long skills. TVEd staff strive daily to work in partnership with pupils and parents collaboratively to remove any barriers to attendance by building strong and trusting relationships and working together to put the right support in place. TVEd believe it is essential for pupils to get the most out of their school experience, including their attainment, wellbeing, and wider life chances.

Each TVEd academy has a pastoral and welfare team, who, under the direction of the Senior Leadership Team in each academy, prioritise children who require help from our own specialist staff, and also the many professional organisations we work with.

Create schools where children want to attend

- Create positive learning environments through clarity of expectations, consistency, rules, rewards and consequences, empowering staff and pupils to meet academy expectations.
- Implement an attendance graduated response that provides a clear, small step framework to support good attendance of all pupils.
- Support children and families through difficult periods with personalised intervention.
- Support vulnerable children to access education without disadvantage by removing barriers.
- Employ a trust counsellor and follow the principles of trauma informed practice to work with pupils on issues including emotions, loss or attachment.
- Provide opportunity for, and respond to, a regular and comprehensive arena for pupil voice and feedback.

TVEd maintain an effective and diligent safeguarding culture. All pupils in every academy are encouraged to speak to adults if they are worried or scared, and all staff are trained to identify and report concerns early. This proactive approach helps address issues that may affect attendance and punctuality.

Support and champion positive attendance with CYP

To support good attendance for pupils, TVEd take a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. TVEd's attendance graduated response framework offers a clear, step-by-step framework to encourage good attendance among all pupils. This structured approach ensures that attendance is closely monitored and addressed promptly. TVEd provide personalised intervention to support CYP and families during difficult periods. By tailoring our support to individual needs, we help them to navigate challenges that may impact attendance. For vulnerable children, TVEd strive to remove barriers to education, ensuring CYP can access learning opportunities without disadvantage. This includes providing targeted support and resources to address specific needs. We ensure other policies compliment and support the Attendance Policy, rather than conflict with it. One example is the Trust Uniform Policy; we know that children from low-income families struggle to afford "designer" branded clothing and footwear, and this can also cause parents to fall into debt. TVEd policy actively discourages branded items being worn. This also helps children feel confident in wanting to attend school as they don't feel "different" than their peers. In addition, TVEd prioritises pupil voice and feedback. Offering regular opportunities for pupils to express their views and responding to their feedback ensures that CYP's needs and concerns are addressed, fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment.

How do TVed support and champion positive attendance with families and our communities?

- Form vital links between home, school, and other services, creating a strong network of support for families. This collaboration ensures that parents and carers have access to the resources and assistance they need.
- Support families and carers through an attendance graduated response framework, ensuring their child receives their entitlement to a full-time education.
- Provide a wider range of pastoral and welfare support to parents and carers to overcome barriers to attendance such as uniform, transport, and completing forms to access wider support.
- Signpost parents and carers to the relevant section of the NHS Healthier Together app/website to provide the latest up to date information on childhood illness and conditions. This resource offers the latest information on childhood illnesses and conditions, helping them make informed decisions about their child's health.
- Provide opportunity for, and respond to, a regular and comprehensive arena for parent, carer, staff, and wider community voice and feedback.
- Prioritise regular and comprehensive opportunities for parent, carer, staff, and community voice and feedback. By actively seeking and responding to input, TVEd ensures that strategies and support systems are effective and meet the needs of the entire school community.

9

The R place pilot

As part of a wider Alternative Provision in Liverpool, 'R place' is a pilot project for students aged 13-16 with social, emotional, and mental health needs. The wider AP offers AP for 120 students who have been excluded, or are at risk of exclusion, from mainstream high schools. Places are commissioned by local schools and local authorities for students who are finding it difficult to meet the expectations of mainstream education. Post COVID-19, there has been an increasing number of admissions for students with EBSNA. All present as anxious, with some diagnosed with autism, or on a neurodevelopmental assessment pathway. Many had virtual non-attendance at their mainstream school. At the wider AP, because of the complex social, emotional, and mental health needs of the other students, the environment can sometimes be unpredictable and noisy which can be an additional challenging factor for these vulnerable students.

R place was set up in 2023 as a pilot project to bridge the gap between long term non-attendance and education. It is a pilot project which has been developed around nurture group principles (see The Six Principles of Nurture - nurtureuk). Of the 120 students attending the wider AP, a small number (approximately 10-15 at any one time), access the provision at R place, within which an environment is created to enable students with long term attendance issues to feel safe and supported in their journey back into education.

In its first year, there were enormous breakthroughs for a number of students. Amongst the cohort, attendance rates rose from 37.5% in September 2023 to 61.1% in July 2024. The historical average for the quota (before starting at R place) was 16.5%.

The curriculum at R place has been customised and tailored to meet the needs of the class. For example, in English, students are following the NCFE functional skills level 2 specification which is intertwined and carefully linked to the Eduqas GCSE English Language specification. This provides pupils with the best possible opportunities for success leading to further education whilst accounting for high levels of anxiety and historical attendance.

Rosie* is an example of a student who has thrived, to the point where she has now successfully integrated into the main part of the wider AP. R place has acted as a small, close-knit community of students and staff, and a place where Rosie could access an environment designed to reduce her anxieties, as well as support services to help her deal with issues and experiences in and out of school. R place has proven a safe, secure, and stable setting where expectations remained consistent, enabling her to navigate the challenges of her home life, whilst achieving in school. Consistent communication between key members of staff has been an integral part of this process. This has enabled the sharing of best practice and working with teachers and external agencies, such as the school taskforce which has taken her on offsite visits and enrichment trips, meetings with social workers, and interventions and workshops with youth offending service staff. Over time, this package of support has helped to build her confidence and allowed her to take the risk of trusting staff to tailor her transition, ensuring a smooth and proactive integration into the main school.

Here is a testimony from one of the students.

"R place has benefitted me because when I felt alone [staff] supported me... [The teacher] made me realise it's okay to struggle on things and not get them right because if you learn and learn it over and over again you will understand it more. When I first joined the R place, I didn't want to be here at all, and that's because I felt at all, and that's because I felt at home at another college, but then I realised that R place was supporting me in more ways than my other college could ever.

I can get my education more here, and also get support, as I make my way through to my next journey, and I'm glad I'm going through it with the wider AP. And I'm so grateful for all the support I have."

(*Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the students).

Appleton
Academy

End word

Louise Stogdale
Headteacher at Pennyman Primary Academy (Tees Valley Education)

When I stepped into the role of Headteacher at Pennyman Primary Academy in Middlesbrough, it was just one day before the pandemic hit. This experience quickly taught me that building a whole-school ethos for children goes far beyond teaching and the curriculum. At Tees Valley Education, we prioritise teaching and learning, investing heavily in developing teachers at all levels because every child deserves the very best education. However, we understand that schools cannot simply teach pupils out of disadvantage. Ensuring that a child enjoys school is critical to improving attendance, but this requires more than focusing on the classroom alone. Attendance is a complex, multi-faceted issue influenced by a variety of external factors, and addressing it requires a holistic approach.

This report helps to demonstrate that the barriers to school attendance are often unique to each child and their family and ensuring good attendance extends far beyond the traditional methods of simply issuing fines to parents. We must take a broader view, recognising the challenges children and their families face, including poverty, mental health issues, and the after-effects of the pandemic. The current crisis in school attendance, widely discussed in the media and among educators, has serious consequences for both education and the wider community. School attendance was once a fundamental expectation, a social contract between families and schools, but this has shifted, particularly after the pandemic. Factors such as changing attitudes towards wellbeing, rising mental health concerns, and the cost-of-living crisis have widened the gap in expectations between families and schools. Pupils from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately affected by these issues, which must be addressed if we are to rebuild trust and improve attendance. It is crucial to remember that attendance problems are often a symptom of broader issues rather than the root cause.

Effective attendance policies and processes must be integrated into a comprehensive strategy that tackles the deep-rooted challenges faced by pupils from low-income families. This strategy must be informed by an understanding of the specific obstacles these pupils and their families encounter, both at school and home. Viewing attendance in isolation is not enough; it must be considered in the wider context of the socioeconomic issues that impact pupils' lives and educational experiences.

At Tees Valley Education, we are committed to tackling educational inequality and have developed a social justice and equity in education charter. We are developing place-based approaches to understanding and addressing topics such as attendance with help and support from a range of thinkers and organisations, including the Child of the North. Our strategies focus on addressing the holistic needs of pupils from low-income backgrounds, going beyond academic barriers to consider wellbeing, mental health, and family support. We believe that meaningful engagement with pupils and their families is essential in creating a school environment where all children can thrive. The work we do reinforces to staff, children and families the power of community-driven, evidence-led strategies in reducing inequalities and improving attendance.

However, we cannot do this in a silo. Tackling attendance issues for pupils from low-income backgrounds requires a broad, multi-faceted approach. Schools and the sector as a whole need support in moving beyond simple attendance policies, developing a deep understanding of the challenges faced by these pupils and equipping staff with the knowledge and tools necessary to support them. Policy and training for schools needs to support the implementation of evidence-based practices and fostering strong relationships with families and the wider community. Only collectively and with sufficient funding and resource the education sector can make significant strides in reducing the barriers to attendance and improving educational outcomes for all pupils.

"My child now enjoys going to school, but it hasn't always been that way. The teachers and leaders at Pennyman Primary really care, and no issue feels too big for them to handle. When my child struggles or attendance becomes a problem, the staff are always there to talk with both us and our child. They work with us to figure out what's going on, and it feels like we're solving the problem together. I understand that the government fines parents for attendance, but at Pennyman, the staff put the children's needs first before sending out fines or letters. I do think more support and funding for schools would help them offer even more to families like ours."

– Parent of a child with SEND

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Child of the North

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