

# School for all: solutions for school attendance



## Background

### Setting the scene of the school absence crisis

School attendance has been increasingly prioritised in the education sector, but still around 1 in 5 children (over 1.6 million) are persistently absent, missing at least 10% of sessions.<sup>1</sup> These rates were rising even before the Covid-19 pandemic: in Autumn 2019 around 13% of pupils were persistently absent. The number of pupils with severe school absence has also increased starkly by 136.5% since 2019 – with an additional 82,000 children now affected.<sup>2</sup>

Persistent or severe school absence can have long-term impacts. Pupils with higher attendance are more likely to achieve the expected standard of reading, writing and maths, and receive higher grades in their GCSEs<sup>3,4</sup> while children not attending school are likely to lose peer connections, community, access to food, safety and trusted adults.

### A roundtable to build solutions

We brought together leaders from the education, health, community, and research sectors to discuss solutions around our mission to tackle persistent absence. We explored what schools can do to support pupils; how we can rebuild trust and belonging; and what systems need to be put in place to create an environment that works for every child.

We need to reform the education system and make it more inclusive, but this is only one piece of the puzzle. There are wider, systemic factors facing young people that impact their school attendance. Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition's 2024 report 'Not in School' found several complex reasons behind the attendance crisis.<sup>5</sup> They include:

- Rising mental health issues among children and a lack of access to specialist provision
- Rising numbers of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), long waits for diagnoses and higher demand for support not being met in mainstream settings
- Rising rates of childhood poverty and its negative effects on mental health.

These must be addressed by the Government and local decision-makers as part of the solution.

There is no one-size-fits-all fix, but through a supportive and compassion-first approach, with each child at the centre, we can provide the right support and turn the tide on persistent school absence.



Children & Young People's  
Mental Health Coalition

## Findings

### What is currently being done to address school absence?

There are several national and local initiatives intended to improve attendance, including:

- Department for Education Guidance "Working together to improve school attendance"<sup>6</sup>
- Use of fines and fixed penalty notices for non-attendance
- Attendance Action Alliance
- Attendance Mentors<sup>7</sup>
- Attendance Hubs.<sup>8</sup>

Locally, many initiatives have been developed to support school attendance, and we heard some positive results from Right to Succeed's Cradle to Career<sup>9</sup>, Greenhouse Sports Mentors<sup>10</sup> and AllChild<sup>11</sup> who work with schools, families and children to improve attendance.

These projects, interventions and services are all promising, by building trust and creating a sense of belonging. However, limited funding means they are not universally available. Schools also need time and capacity to work with third sector providers and embrace the benefits of these programmes. Despite the demonstrable benefits, this can feel like yet another strain on schools. And for many children, they will continue to act as a sticking plaster over the root causes of persistent absence.<sup>12</sup>

## Ways forward

### 1. Boosting school attendance by reforming school culture

To encourage pupils into school, we need to make it a place where they want to be. School is where children spend the most formative years of their life and it plays a huge role in their development. Schools are also effective vehicles for reaching and supporting children and young people where they are. That's why it is crucial that schools centre on inclusion and create a sense of belonging – according to the Education Endowment Foundation, making sure pupils feel seen, understood, and safe is a crucial starting point for supporting attendance.<sup>13</sup>

Participants highlighted some key examples from their schools that promote inclusion<sup>14</sup>:

- Children feel like they belong, are accepted and that their needs are met within the school community. This includes children who are neurodivergent or have mental health difficulties
- Schools have effective practices towards anti-bullying, behaviour and uniform. These policies are flexible and consider each child's circumstances individually
- The curriculum is rich and broad and includes access to enrichment and extra-curricular opportunities, to boost enjoyment of school and therefore attendance
- School governors, trustees, leaders and staff foster a culture of belonging
- Relationships between school staff, parent/carers and pupils are positive and constructive, informed by the child's needs.

There are examples of excellence across the country, but we know that this needs to be spread more consistently. External targets, guidance, and the influence of Ofsted can prevent schools from prioritising wellbeing and belonging, instead focusing on meeting the requirements of the single word judgement. 51% of school governors and trustees surveyed by the National Governance Association (July 2024) identify Ofsted as the single most significant factor shaping practice within their school or trust.<sup>15</sup> Government guidance and regulatory accountability should encourage and reward inclusion.<sup>16</sup>

We also heard that the pressures on schools to meet attendance targets can exacerbate the issue – where 'high stakes' around attendance cause increased anxiety and stress for staff, parents and pupils. There are also concerns that pressure to meet targets may lead to 'off-rolling' of pupils, or further moves towards a punitive approach of fines and penalties.<sup>17</sup> By shifting the tone around attendance towards support-first, we can encourage a more inclusive approach that works for young people.

## Recommendations

- School staff should be trained in mental health, neurodivergence and SEND, to lead the delivery of the whole-school approach.<sup>18</sup> This should be included within initial teacher training, CPD and through existing courses such as Senior Mental Health Leads.
- Academies can share positive practice relating to inclusion across their settings, however the Department for Education should introduce oversight and accountability to ensure best practice in line with government guidance.<sup>19</sup>
- Ofsted should place less emphasis on rigid targets, and judge schools on the positive impact they have on pupil wellbeing, development, and inclusion.
- The Department for Education should work with Ofsted and use their influence to promote positive school cultures through:
  - introducing guidance and a framework on inclusion in education
  - implementing the programmes from the Transforming Children's Mental Health green paper<sup>20</sup>
  - utilising NICE Guidance on Social, emotional and mental wellbeing in primary and secondary education<sup>21</sup>
- The Department for Education should allocate more funding towards programmes that bring enrichment, extra-curricular, and pastoral opportunities into school settings, in line with the Government's manifesto commitment on arts and creativity in school.

## 2. Early identification and working with families before absence becomes persistent

Some children are at risk of becoming more persistently absent and must be identified at an early stage. But school absence data is not detailed or regular enough to effectively identify trends relating to mental health. While the DfE's attendance guidance stipulates that schools should authorise mental health related absences, this is not being implemented properly, leading to increasing fines for families who are already struggling.<sup>22</sup>

Early identification should also include work by schools to identify the drivers of low attendance and collaborate with families to address them. Communication with families needs to be based on respect, compassion and trust. The voluntary sector, children's social care, health professionals, mental health services, and local authorities must also all come together to support children and families to improve attendance.

## Recommendations:

- The Department for Education should introduce a mental health absence code to allow schools to understand mental health barriers to attendance and support early intervention.
  - Where mental health is logged consistently in absence codes for pupils, schools should engage with families and refer the child to mental health support. This process should be set out in revised Department for Education guidance on attendance and involve collaboration with the Department for Health and Social Care.
- The Department for Education should support schools to follow a whole family approach to attendance, to help strengthen relationships and collaboration.
- The Department for Education should consult and work alongside local authorities, schools, and parents when implementing their attendance guidance, to ensure that support is provided at an early stage.
- Schools need jurisdiction over their own attendance policies, but the Department for Education should give schools the tools to work with families and children, to identify, respond to, and support pupils who are absent before it becomes persistent.
- The Department for Education should give organisations delivering programmes proven to improve attendance the funding and resource to expand into more schools across the country. These organisations should be evidence-based and subject to oversight and evaluation to ensure high-quality delivery and outcomes.
- The Cabinet Office should enable a cross-government strategy on attendance that brings together departments for education, health, culture and sport, justice and the Treasury.

## 3. Addressing and removing the drivers of persistent absence

Some of the key drivers of withdrawal from school include unmet mental health difficulties, SEND and neurodivergence. Parents polled by Public First felt like children with additional needs were not getting the right help, which was significantly impacting their attendance.<sup>23</sup> Accessing appropriate and effecting SEND support can be expensive and challenging to navigate for parents.<sup>24</sup> Even where SEND support is available, school can be challenging for many neurodivergent children and negatively affect their mental health.<sup>25</sup>

The services intended to support young people are feeling the strain. Educational Health and Care Plans are a large council expenditure yet demand for SEND support continues to rise, leading to a funding gap of £600 million.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore important that government guidance does not further burden councils without giving additional training, resource and budget.

There is also a lack of high-quality special schools and alternative provision. We need an expansion of schools which centre on inclusion and wellbeing, such as the Pears Family School by Anna Freud. This can support attendance and re-integration back into mainstream settings.<sup>27</sup>

Difficulty accessing children's mental health services means that children aren't being identified or supported early with their mental health. This further exacerbates mental health issues and therefore persistent absence.

School based counselling has the potential to address this issue: the University of Cambridge analysed data from 7,400 pupils supported by Place2Be with one-to-one counselling and found lower levels of persistent absence after attending counselling. Importantly, children with better mental health after counselling also had stronger engagement and enjoyment of school at follow up.<sup>28</sup>

### Recommendations

- The DfE should expand the provision of expert, evidence based in-school mental health services to every school across the country. These services should be delivered by a qualified child counsellor and support the delivery of a whole-school approach to mental health. Services should be embedded in school communities, with access to clinical supervision, evaluation and safeguarding support.
- The Department for Health and Social Care should increase funding and access to children and young people's mental health services to ensure timely support for mental health issues. This support should be available both in school and in the community, including through CAMHS, so that every child can receive support in the right place at the right time.
- The Government should invest in local authorities to enable them to provide high-quality SEND support

- Local services should collaborate and ensure that representatives from education are involved in decisions relating to children's mental health such as in integrated care boards.

## 4. Changing the system and tackling the risk factors that drive severe absence

To create long-term, sustainable change, we need to address the root causes of severe absence, such as poverty and deprivation. We also need investment and reform within the wider system:

### Recommendations

- A cross-government, long term strategy to tackle child poverty, including a new Child Poverty Act, backed with investment in welfare provision including reforming the child benefit system.
- System reform to promote a place-based approach where schools, health, social care, children and youth services and councils work together collaboratively.
- Investment in service providers and community-led programmes targeted at groups most at risk of severe school absence, including marginalised communities.
- Investment in preventative, early support services for children and families including mental health provision in schools and hubs to see long-term benefits: every £1 spent on Place2Be's counselling in primary schools generates £8 in benefit to society.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Improving school attendance requires a holistic approach that encompasses school culture, understanding the drivers of absence within each child's circumstances, and providing support early.

We also need a Government that is committed to driving forward systemic reform, with a long-term strategy on persistent absence backed up with ambition and investment.

By implementing these recommendations, we can create a more inclusive and supportive education system that ensures every child has the opportunity to succeed. Alongside this, we can give local services the investment needed to tackle the risk factors behind persistent absence and provide the right support at the right time.

This roundtable showed that collaboration is key to achieving our shared mission of tackling persistent absence. Working together with schools, health, local authorities, the voluntary sector, and the Government, we can address this complex issue and support every child to achieve their potential.

# Roundtable participants

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## Hosts

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## Further reading and references

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Catherine Roche, CEO, Place2Be:

“From our work supporting children’s mental health we know the impact that poor mental health has on pupil’s experience, engagement and attendance at school. Through prioritising wellbeing and inclusion, and tackling the drivers of school absence, we can ensure every child gets the education they deserve. This roundtable was an important step in working collaboratively to achieving this.”

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Andy Bell, Centre for Mental Health:

“School absence has risen in tandem with increasing rates of poverty and mental health problems among children and young people. We cannot hope to improve attendance without taking action to ensure children’s mental health and other needs are being met. By bringing together teachers, parents and mental health organisations, and listening to the voices of children and young people, we can create mentally healthier schools, building on examples of good practice around the country.”

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Charlotte Rainer, Coalition manager,  
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“If we are serious about improving school attendance, then we need to address the underlying causes of absence such as mental health problems, poverty, and long waits for support. No longer can we take a one-size fits all approach. The roundtable highlighted wide-ranging consensus on the action needed to create positive change, so that every child and young person can thrive in education.”

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Asima Ravat, Principal, Oasis Academy Foundry,

“At Oasis Community Learning we provide a systematic approach to Attendance. Our relational commitment ensures that our parents and pupils wellbeing is prioritised and barriers to attendance are addressed in partnership. We are incredibly proud to contribute towards the roundtable discussions by sharing high impact strategies that make a positive difference to school attendance.”

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Ellie Costello, Executive Director, Square Peg

“Square Peg exists to bring families’ experiences of barriers to school attendance to the heart of any discussion around, about or for these children and young people and their parent carers. We work across the sector to collaboratively develop solutions, and to address the intersections of declining wellbeing, welfare support and increasing mental ill health in our schools and surrounding communities.

“We are thrilled to support Place2Be’s roundtable and delighted to join our lobbying partners in this area, the Children & Young People’s Mental Health Coalition and the Centre for Mental Health. We look forward to further joint working together going forwards.”