

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), HC 970

Tuesday 7 March 2023

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Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Nick Fletcher; Andrew Lewer.

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Witnesses

[I:](#) Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England; Councillor Lucy Nethsingha, Deputy Chair of the Local Government Association's Children and Young People's Board, and Councillor for Cambridgeshire County Council; Rob Williams, Senior Policy Adviser, National Association of Head Teachers; Alice Wilcock, Head of Education, Centre for Social Justice.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dame Rachel de Souza, Councillor Lucy Nethsingha, Rob Williams and Alice Wilcock.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session, which is our first oral evidence session in our inquiry on persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils. Today we will be hearing evidence from Dame Rachel de Souza, the Children's Commissioner for England, Rob Williams, senior policy adviser at the National Association of Head Teachers, Alice Wilcock, head of education at the Centre for Social Justice, and Councillor Lucy Nethsingha, deputy chair of the Local Government Association's Children and Young People's Board and councillor for Cambridgeshire County Council. You are all very welcome.

I will start the session by asking you to briefly outline what persistent absence and severe absence respectively are and how prevalent these types of absences are across England. If you have the information, how does that compare to other parts of the United Kingdom?

Dame Rachel de Souza: It is great to be here, and I am really pleased that the Committee is looking at this issue and the issue of attendance. My call today is that we should be looking at this at the highest level of Government from Prime Minister down. It is one of the issues of our age post covid. As Children's Commissioner, it is my job to make sure that children's rights are respected, their views and interests are heard across Government, and solving persistent absence will take leadership at the highest level.

Article 28 of the UN convention on the rights of the child sets out that every child has a right to education. I am seriously worried about the level of persistent absence. As Robin Walker asked, persistent absence is when a child is missing 10% of their time and severe absence is when they are missing 50% or more of their time, so keeping that in our minds. Then of course there are the children we are worried about who are not on any roll.

I have some new data for you today, just to give you a sense of how serious that issue is now. While covid has had an impact on attendance since the reopening of schools, in the autumn term of spring 2021-22, I have analysed the data, which is public data now, and calculate that 818,000 children of the 1.6 million children—that is around half—who were persistently absent were not absent due to illness. I think that is very serious and I wanted to raise that today. What I learned from my attendance audit was that children are desperate to learn, that every day thousands of children find themselves without the support they need to get into education, engage in education and attend school. I want to raise how complex and interconnected these issues are.

I made a commitment to this Committee that I would go and find the missing children who were persistently absent and severely absent, and I



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have done that. I have spoken to hundreds of them. I have published my report on that and the three big reasons—and I am sure we will come back to them—that children are persistently absent, severely absent or not back at all are that their specialist educational needs are not being met or feeling that they are met better at home, anxiety and mental health issues that have arisen post covid, and that is not new to hear, and also those who have just not come back.

These are complex issues. I know that colleagues in schools and LAs are doing their best, but I think that there is much more we can do and I hope we will be exploring that today.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much. That was a very strong introduction. I will turn to Rob for the picture from schools and heads.

Rob Williams: We welcome the focus on persistent absence too. Children and young people who are persistently absent from school are a real concern for school leaders, teachers and support staff, not just because of the impact on their education and wider achievement but also because it is more difficult for schools to fulfil their safeguarding duties if children are not in school. We saw that particularly in the lockdown periods in the pandemic.

Since the pandemic, persistent absence has become an even more significant concern. It is sometimes difficult to unpick the underlying reasons and also difficult to see how ingrained these factors are now and how easily they can be removed so that children can carry on attending school. The perception among school leaders is that there is a growing realisation that resolving the growth in persistent absence, especially for those pupils who are already disadvantaged in other ways, is likely to require a significant investment of time, funding and resource and use of the possible evidence we have over a significant timescale. The initial response from members was that it was a blip post-pandemic, but there is a sense now that it has stuck, and it will take some time for us to move forward in this.

The latest attendance data for this term—I think the last data for 2023 was on 23 February—shows that in this school year so far persistent absenteeism in primary, special and secondary schools remains high in comparison to previous years. By school type, the persistent absence rate across the year to date was 19.5% in state-funded primary schools, 27.8% in state-funded secondary schools and 40.3% in state-funded special schools. The current 23.4% represents a fall from the autumn term, which was 25.1%, but that was picked up in a combination of illnesses at the end of autumn term that had a significant effect. In fact, in autumn 2022, 13.3% of pupils were persistently absent solely due to illness. If you compare that to 2019 it was only 5% and you can see the difference in that period.

In our written evidence, we looked at pupil characteristics particularly and split them to look at the various discrete groups, but it is important



to understand that often there is not a single criterion in an individual child, there is a mixture, and how those interrelate is critical. It appears to be clear that the reasons for pupils' persistent absence can be hugely varied and can range from external pressures on the family as a whole to specific individual things that pupils are facing. Managing absence and the factors that influence it is a complex and cross-sector challenge that schools cannot resolve by themselves.

Often the issues that we look at are beyond the reach of schools to address by themselves. It has to be a combination of approaches across the sectors. Understanding that intersectionality of factors and the characteristics of pupils most at risk of persistent absence is crucial in effectively reducing its impact. Sufficient resources are required within schools to ensure staff and provision can be deployed early enough to provide support and to address the issues that risk further non-attendance, but also funding and resource is required at local authority level and in wider support services if we are able to meaningfully work together to address the issues that face pupils and their families.

The evidence tells us that persistent absence is more prevalent in children and young people who are in receipt of free school meals, for example. It is more prevalent in specific ethnic groups and for pupils with SEND, but particularly those pupils who have unidentified SEND or unmet SEND. That seems to be a particular group where it is challenging. It is most important to have timely access to appropriate support services for pupils and families and this can include local authority attendance teams, CAMHS and other services such as that. I could go on and on, but I will stop.

Q3 Chair: That is a very helpful introduction, and I think it brings out the cross-sectoral nature of the challenge. With that in mind, I will come to Lucy to speak on behalf of the local authorities.

Councillor Nethsingha: Thank you. I will echo an awful lot of what my colleagues have said, welcoming the focus on this from the Committee. I think it is a really important issue. I won't repeat everything they have said because you have heard a lot from them, so I will be briefer.

One of the big concerns is that there is a huge question about why these children are not in school that I think we need to look into really carefully. There are very clear concerns about children who are not in school and the impact that that has on their outcomes and future life chances and the dangers for children who are not in school of getting involved in criminality and exploitation.

Chair: We had a session last week on county lines, which very much demonstrated some of the problems and risks there.

Councillor Nethsingha: Persistent absenteeism is a huge red flag for concerns across a whole range of issues. I think that the other really important point that has just been raised is the connection between



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families that are under pressure and persistent absenteeism and the very high rate of absenteeism among children from families on free school meals. I think we are all very aware of the huge impact of the cost of living crisis on some of the families most under pressure, and that is unlikely to be helping with this issue. I will stop there because I think you have an awful lot of other questions.

Q4 **Chair:** Absolutely, we have a lot to get through, but I want to hear from Alice because I know that you have looked at some of these issues in depth and proposed a number of solutions, including some that have been embraced by this Committee previously. There is the essay question of the level of persistent absence, which we have already heard the concerns about, but also are there any comparisons that you can give us?

Alice Wilcock: Yes, absolutely. I want to echo the thanks to the Committee for focusing on this issue and draw attention to the secondary category of absence, which is severe absence. Severe absence is a subcategory of persistent absence and that is when a child is not in school for 50% or more of possible sessions, so they are missing half of their time in school. It is an issue that the Centre for Social Justice has been looking at for the last two years. It is an important category of children that we should look at because they often struggle to access school-based interventions.

From our figures, we know that children who are severely absent have been increasing over time. Our latest figures suggest that 118,000 children were severely absent. That is a massive increase, and I think it is harrowing to look at the pattern of severe absence over time. As a comparison, if you look at severe absence figures, the Government's focus was not on this in 2013, but from 2013 onwards we have seen a steady increase in the number of children who are severely absent. It was about 20,000 in secondary schools in 2013, and it crept up to about 40,000 pre pandemic and now it is about 70,000 children. There are children who are totally disengaging from school, and it is difficult to get them across the threshold. They are some of our most vulnerable and are a subcategory of persistently absent children.

The CSJ has done an analysis of these children and where they are. As of autumn 2020, over 1,000 schools had an entire class-worth of children who are severely absent, so it is pervasive across our school system. If we do a bit of a breakdown on this, you are much more likely to have a class-worth of severely absent children if you are in a disadvantaged area—10 times more. One in 10 of the children who were severely absent in autumn 2020 had a diagnosed mental health condition. You are also more likely to be severely absent if you are eligible for free school meals or if you are in receipt of SEND support or have any HCP. They share the same vulnerabilities of children who are persistently absent—that is no surprise because they are persistently absent—but they perhaps have some other acute vulnerabilities. I encourage the Committee to look at this category specifically too.



Q5 Chair: Thank you. You have mostly answered my second question, which was to ask about the factors that are driving absence. I will go straight on.

Obviously this has been a priority for Government for some time. I am interested in the panel's assessment of how effective the policies to date have been. Given the picture you just painted, particularly of the almost doubling repeatedly of severe absence, what further policy levers do you think are available? As a supplementary on that, Dame Rachel will know that during my time in the Department I was very involved with the Attendance Action Alliance that was meeting regularly. I think it was helping some of the cross-sectoral co-ordination to take place. I am interested in any update on that and the extent to which you feel that this is being prioritised, given all the changes in personnel that we have had since that period.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I am a member of the Attendance Action Alliance and that does continue. The alliance had a major focus on back to school in September. I urged them to do that because we know that every child who is absent once a year makes that decision, "Do I go back or not?" That is the moment at the start of term in September.

Some of the other things that have come out of it that are positive are schools reporting their data directly to the pilot and of course reporting their data directly to the DFE. More than 75% of schools now have completely freely chosen to give their daily data. One of my big concerns when I started on attendance was the fact that we never saw the attendance data until a year later because it had to go through all manner of census processes. We now have live data that I look at every week and I can see exactly what is happening. I urge the Minister to ensure that we encourage 100% of schools to share that data. It would make it even better if everybody realised just how many schools were doing it. I think that has been a big win.

The other big win is the models of best practice that the AAA and the DFE have shared of where in some of our most disadvantaged areas we have schools and families of schools, multi-academy trusts, doing amazing things. I want to point out Northern Education Trust and Rob Tarn as a great example. Right through covid, in the toughest parts of the north-east, it held its attendance levels at 95% and did so in three ways. I will say them quickly but you might want to explore them later: first, using all the systems absolutely consistently; secondly, making school a great place to go so that children actually want to go there; thirdly, the relationship with parents, using their attendance officers to get out and talk to parents and children, find out what the barrier is and doing whatever it takes to get children into school. That has to be the personalised approach we are talking about, find out what it is and get them in. Their work and the work of many others has been shown.

The attendance alliance is also useful in that it has brought together senior leaders from the police, NHS, all public sector backgrounds to try



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to have quite nascent discussions about how we can solve this. I am surprised these discussions were not further along, but they are happening and that is all well and good.

What do I think should be done? The DFE must not take its foot off the gas. It publishes the PA data without telling you the fact that I have just told you that 818,000 of the 1.6 million were not off because they were sick. I want the DFE to be as voracious about that data as I am, because this is children's life chances, and I will continue to push that. That is one thing.

I am also very keen that we look at better ways particularly with the comments from CSJ about severe absence and the children who are missing completely. I have investigated and called for data from every single local authority area about how many children they have in their area and how many are absent. The data I got back was not as reliable as it should be. One large city told me that it had only four children missing education—I have seen more children in that city; it is in our top five largest cities—whereas a London borough was able to tell me that there were 770 children missing and exactly why. It can be done, there is great practice, but we need our public sector to work together more closely, schools, LAs, but also helping others to make sure we identify these children.

One way we could do that is by bringing in a unique identifier so that we use the same identifier in health, police, schools, LAs and know that we are talking about the same children. The NHS number is an obvious one. I urge that because I went to Bedfordshire police recently and they showed me a list of children who they had come across through their policing work who were on nobody's roll, so we need to do something about join-up there. That could start to lay the foundation so the LAs can be absolutely clear about how many children they have and also then our data collection, so schools, LAs, DFE, is streamlined and we know where children are and we can deal with them properly. That is children on rolls and off rolls. I am sorry, I merged them there.

Chair: I can see Lucy looking very thoughtful about some of those comments.

Councillor Nethsingha: I don't fundamentally disagree with a lot of what Rachel has just said but we spend an awful lot of time collecting an awful lot of data on our children. We also need to be a little bit thoughtful about what else is missing from the system and who those children are and why they are not there. I think that there has been quite a lot of agreement on the panel so far that the key reasons for children not being in school are to do with mental health and anxiety, disadvantage and special educational needs and disabilities.

We are talking about vulnerable children and vulnerable families. Collecting more data on them will not necessarily be the thing that allows them to spend more time in school or allows school to be more



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supportive of them. I am not saying it is not a good thing, I am just saying it will not be the thing that fixes the problem. If you look at the wider support systems for those families and children and the withdrawal of early help services, the pressure on pastoral care in school, we have lost 4,500 youth work jobs in recent years. The access to out of school education, clubs and out of school activities—there is good evidence on how important it is to have a trusted adult who is not a teacher or a family member in a child's life. Many of those things have reduced and disappeared in the last 10 years because of reductions in funding to local government. Voluntary services, art programmes, all sorts of different organisations that used to be there to support those children and their families are less present.

I am not saying that we should not collect the data. The LGA is very supportive of collecting data. For example, it is extremely supportive of the register of children who are not in school. I think we need to be wary about thinking that collecting data will be what helps this because what these families need is support.

Q6 Chair: I think there is a general acceptance that data in itself is not the answer, but it is a means to an end. It is a means to where to target support. Rachel, do you want to come back on that?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I was pretty horrified that our local authority areas could not tell me accurately how many children they had. I have engaged with ACDS and it is very supportive of trying to get this sorted out. I totally agree with you about putting services around the schools. I am a massive supporter of extended mental health support services, making sure great SEND provision is in place. The children that we have all identified who are suffering, who have parents with mental health issues and have anxiety and mental health issues themselves, have special educational needs that are not being met, need addressing but my worry is a safeguarding worry that if we don't even know where our children and who is in school, missing school—there is a fundamental responsibility for all of us to get that bit right as a foundation, but I totally agree we need all those other things as well.

Q7 Anna Firth: I totally agree with what you are saying about data. Spending public money must have a strong evidence base behind it. That evidence unlocks funding and that changes lives, so I totally agree with you on that.

I want to ask you about the second thing that Dame Rachel mentioned, making schools a great place to go. Do we have to have a cultural shift here away from schools just being a place of learning where people perhaps traditionally don't always want to go and making them places where children are engaged in other activities, hopefully at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day? This is following up the proposals that Iain Duncan Smith's has made at the Centre for Social Justice. I wonder if that is really where we need to put our focus.



Dame Rachel de Souza: I am a passionate advocate of extended schools, of breakfast clubs. One of the reasons I feel so passionately about it is when I went out and did my Big Ask survey and got over half a million responses from children, from every background and every local authority across this country, they came back to me and said school was incredibly important to them, they wanted to be there, they wanted to see their friends there and do sustainable activities. None of them asked to build more shopping malls. They wanted to do sport and drama, they wanted to be with their friends and school was seen as a safe place to do that, but also we have a proud tradition in this country.

At the turn of the 19th century, we always set up as pastoral as well as academic, and we were interested in the personal development and the self-development of our children. I think that sets us apart from many of our European fellow countries. We are not just about learning the academics even though I have devoted my life, as an academy principal and a MAT leader before I did this job, to proving that children in disadvantaged areas can achieve just as well as anyone else. I am not the person who will ever say that is not important, but the clubs, the relationships, the life around school—and during covid again what young people and parents told me, and when I did my family review this was really clear as well, the two things that parents and adults in this country trust are their schools and their GPs. Schools did a massive job. In my trust we were getting beds out during covid. So many of our school leaders were doing amazing things. I think I ran five food banks out of my secondaries. The schools became real centre points.

I want to see those services around the schools but also schools open from first thing. Many are providing breakfast clubs, doing amazing work there, putting sports on, and those longer days. It is good for mental health, and it is a cost effective use of buildings. I would rather it was not about capital money going into new youth service buildings but paying for youth workers to work in the buildings we have with the young people we have. We need to do some thinking about how to make that happen. So, in short, yes.

Chair: Do you want to follow up on that, Rob?

Rob Williams: Yes. My background is I did 24 years as a primary practitioner, I was a senior leader for 15 and a head for nine of those years at four different schools and three different local authorities across south Wales. You can probably tell by the twang in accent that I am still in Cardiff.

We had a breakfast club in my school, and we had about 25% free school meals and about 30% SEN in the school. It was a small school, but we did breakfast club before and we did numerous clubs afterwards but—and it is a “but”—we had the resource to deliver that. We had the capacity within staff, and I had additional funding that allowed me to do that. Breakfast club particularly was pretty much fully funded. To give you an



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indication of its success, we would have about 60% of my school in the breakfast club, so that meant we had children on site an hour before school started. The social positives and the things we gained out of that were massive. We were lucky because we had a huge school field that we could use so we did huge amounts of different sport and activities after school. We got engaged with play therapists after schools and all sorts.

We were able to do a wraparound, and I could see the importance and the impact of that on the children and the fact that we never had an attendance issue in the school. We had an attendance issue when illness went through the school. Our numbers were quite low, so percentage wise we needed only a small number of children off to skew the attendance. You have to be careful how that looks within a school and understand that.

Building on what has been said, schools are already doing a lot of good stuff in this sort of area, and I think they are not unwilling to do so. We have to be a little bit careful when they are coming in and replacing other services to some extent. We saw it when it was required in the pandemic. Our members were doing a lot of almost a social care aspect early on. A lot of it was safeguarding checks very early in the pandemic and it was necessary; schools understood and that is why they did it. It can't be a replacement if there is paucity of resource or capacity in other sectors and we have to be a little bit careful what we are asking from schools.

I don't know that any head teachers I have ever spoken to would be reluctant to do this, but they need to be given the tools to do it. That is really critical, and it includes all the support services and their ability to come into play. We have seen where capacity is lacking the threshold for intervention for the children who need it gets so high that it is too late. It is not an early enough intervention for those children and young people. I don't think there is a reluctance from the school sector to deliver these things but they have to be given the tools to do so, otherwise it is an impossibility at the moment.

Alice Wilcock: I definitely echo the need for greater enrichment activities and the importance of breakfast clubs. As part of our evidence gathering for the Education Committee, we spoke to charities, schools and local authorities. Some of the youth clubs and sports clubs we spoke to in particular said it was so valuable to have a peer-to-peer relationship with young people. Often schools may not know what is going on that is motivating their absence, especially if there is a bad relationship between teachers and children. If you have a youth club or a sports club where children have a sense of belonging—and that came through very strongly—a sense of achievement, somewhere that they can go and excel, sometimes they will use that as a space to confide and tell adults about issues going on at home and also to say what is going on at school, why they feel that the support is not there.



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We spoke to a lot of local authorities, and they said that disengagement from school was really high post-pandemic. There was increased academic pressure to catch up and the feeling that they lost learning and they didn't want to go into school because the activities that they enjoyed such as sport or music were being taken out of the school day to focus on just academic catch-up was fostering this disengagement. While there has been a lot of support put in place by the Government—the recovery premium, the National Tutoring Programme—schools have been incentivised to focus on academic catch-up but have been way less focused on wellbeing support.

We are advocating for an enrichment guarantee and that would not duplicate existing services but provide a space for sports clubs and youth clubs to co-exist within schools. That is part of a package of broader support. That is great for persistently absent children who are starting to not attend because this can be a hub to get them to re-engage in education or reintegrate into school. We should also look at severe absence and the later stages of non-attendance, because when we spoke to people offering sports clubs, they said often it is the children who might be starting to disengage. We should see this as a broader package of support.

We spoke about the capacity to deliver. I think it is important to think about the different drivers of absence. We spoke to a lot of local authorities and the common themes, which we have already touched upon, were anxiety and mental health issues, special educational needs support, the inability to access the support at the time that you need it. On mental health specifically, the long waiting lists mean that children are being pushed out of school. We think that schools need additional capacity to help triage children back into education but teachers themselves can't do it. When you speak to alternative providers, they have teachers who are knocking on doors day in, day out as part of the job, but mainstream schools struggle to do this. They might be able to call and ask what is going on, but they would struggle to do the door knocking—to go to a home. They might or might not have educational welfare officers, and the access to whole-family support is variable across the country.

When we did our inquiry, we heard of lots of different models of whole-family support, so charities that were playing a non-statutory role, a kind of voluntary role of befriending the families in many ways, getting to understand what the root causes were behind the absence and helping get them to the right support—CAMHS, a localised charitable intervention. We also heard of community hubs and family hubs that were doing tremendous work co-located on school sites, and they could play the role of not being like school but being a great forum to understand and unpick some of the underlying causes of absence. Rachel referred to the school in Bedfordshire, which is brilliant, which is using Home Office funding to provide an attendance intervention service.



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All this is brilliant and there are loads of different models of whole-family support, but what came through very strongly is that it is a postcode lottery. We need non-statutory support where schools can facilitate support and get parents to re-engage but often that doesn't exist.

Chair: Yes, filling those gaps is vital.

Q8 Nick Fletcher: This disadvantaged label keeps continually coming back. I am supposedly from a disadvantaged area, and I have still ended up here. What we seem to be trying to do all the time is fix a problem that I believe we are creating, because we are not supporting families right at the beginning. We keep on putting it on teachers, specialist services and charities. How many people on the panel have spoken to parents and said, "The responsibility lies with you. This is what you need to do. This is why your child can be the best in the class. This is how your child can achieve. This is how your child can move on. The responsibility sits with you as a parent"?

What we tend to do, or what it appears we seem to be doing, is put more and more on the state, and more and more on the teachers, breakfast clubs and things like that. We seem to be expanding this and expanding this and expanding this all the time. Surely, we should be trying to reduce it. It is like food banks, which we seem to be expanding and expanding and we should be trying to reduce these food banks.

There is a responsibility when you have a child, and we need to get that information into parents. How about meeting parents? Obviously, there is generation after generation of younger parents who have not had the experience—maybe nana and granddad are not around any more. Maybe the kind of education that went through 50 years ago when I was a baby is not there any more. The answer always seems to be the state needs to do more, the state needs to do more, the state needs to do more. We have some real professionals in front of us, and I would like you to answer that question before I go on to my others.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I am very happy to. I have just done an independent review of family for Kemi Badenoch, and I published it in two parts: one in summer and the most recent one on services just before Christmas. I want to reassure you because we went out and did nationally representative work with all kinds of families from all areas and basically asked them, "What does family mean to you?"

You will be pleased to know that the language that came back from adults from everywhere was that it was about love, support, the people you can trust and rely on. When we asked them where they wanted to go for support when things went wrong or when things were difficult, it was always family—back to family and then to close friends, to the people we call family, even the couple down the road that you think so highly of that you call them auntie and uncle. It was family first. In fact, they told us that when they had to receive services, whether statutory services like health visitors or if there was a need like a mental health problem or



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something like that, they wanted those services preferably to feel familiar or local and not be major medicalisation or whatever that you get into for ever.

I think that chimes with a lot of what you are saying about parents and families in general wanting agency and wanting to be responsible, and that came across very strongly. They also raised two things—and this was across the country, and it is in my report and the Prime Minister used the points in his speech on family, so it has gone quite far and wide—as most concerning for them. They were the cost of living at the moment and the cost of childcare. There was a real worry because what we proved was the protective effect of family. Whatever economic decile you are from—and I am from Scunthorpe, I am the daughter of a steelworker from a big working class family, we didn't have much money—it chimes with me the response that came back was if you can rely on your family, whatever economic decile, you are happier, your wellbeing is better.

We want to support that, but we must recognise the cost of living issues, some of the difficulties around the explosion in mental health issues. There are 25% more special educational needs now. Society is different and we need to find a way that brings together the very noble things that you are talking about and how to meet people's needs so they can have that agency. That is where early family help, local work to help support people to be independent, is so important.

Q9 Nick Fletcher: I am going to get back into this, but thank you for that and I am pleased to hear that that is happening.

The graph here shows that the persistent absence from 2010 was coming down, which is great. I would like to know what it was from 1970. I am sure there might be somewhere I can find that. I would like to see what it was when I was young. But it has started coming back up again. Can you explain a little bit more about it? I am assuming that the Conservative Government actually did something well from 2010 for it to come down. We get told we have been doing lots of things that are wrong, but it definitely seems that since 2010 we were doing okay with this, we were definitely on the right path, but it is coming back up.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I can speak to the facts. We saw a fall in the overall absence rate from 5.8% to 4.5% between 2010-11 and 2013-14. This was driven by a decrease in illness absence, from 3.4% to 2.6%, and a decrease in authorised holiday absence. I think that Ofsted and the Government were putting a lot of pressure on unauthorised holidays. Pre covid it was fairly consistent. The overall absence rate remained stable, between 4% and 5%, from 2013-14 to 2018-19. It was stable because an increase in unauthorised absence was offset by a decrease in authorised absence. The data is quite complicated there. During covid the overall absence rate increased from 4.3% in autumn 2018 to 6.9% in autumn 2021. This was driven by an increase in the illness absence from 2.4% to 4.4% and—this is the thing I keep trying to say—an increase in the unauthorised absence, not including holidays, from 0.7% to 1.2%.



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That means total unauthorised absence, not including holidays increased by 2.1 million days in a term, from 3.5 million days per term missed to 5.6 million days per term missed of unauthorised absence. You can see the covid effect.

From 2010, through putting pressure on taking holidays during term time, making sure the coding was done properly, Ofsted looking very closely at it, a very strong Department for Education, a very strong ministerial push on attendance, you saw that come down and be stable. With covid we are in a different world and that is why I am so worried about it. If children are not in school, they can't achieve. We have done so much to close the gap for children from disadvantaged areas and this is my passion. I don't believe because I came from Scunthorpe or you came from wherever you came from—

Nick Fletcher: Doncaster.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Right, from Donny down the road then. That we can achieve any less.

Q10 **Nick Fletcher:** You can find a million labels for children, basically saying if you are from a disadvantaged area, you won't achieve anything. It is an absolute nonsense. I don't care where you are from. You can achieve anything you want if you try, and you have got a decent family behind you.

Very quickly, I have always wanted to ask this question about holidays. The price of holidays goes through roof. Have you done any research into that? We have found it as Members of Parliament, and we are on good wages but we still have this. Could we do anything about that, and would it make a difference?

Dame Rachel de Souza: One of the worst things on the holidays one is that if you are from a family that doesn't earn as much as other families, if you take a cheaper holiday you are likely to get a fine from your school and it is not worth it, whereas if you come from a well-off family you can do the trade-off and say, "My holiday is £600 cheaper a day and I have to pay a fine of £200 so the trade-off is worth it." It is interesting how these things can work. I wish we could change the industry and I think we should be putting some moral pressure on there and maybe we ought to ask a Cabinet member who is passionately interested in it, like Mr Gove, to try to do that for us. That would be useful.

Councillor Nethsingha: There were a couple of points, and I will try to pick them up quickly. The first was coming back on your point about Government intervention and the impact and Government always being asked to fix the problem. We have just heard from Rachel about the impact that the pressure from Ofsted and other Government organisations about keeping children in school had and that made a difference to different kinds of absence. I think that Government intervention also has an impact on how schools feel and what is



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happening in schools. There has been an enormous amount of pressure from Government on academic attainment in schools and very much less pressure on inclusion and pastoral care and the need to be supportive of the children who are not necessarily achieving what they should be or what we hope they might be in an academic area.

When you are saying that Government need to fix the problem, Government have quite powerful levers that they can move to change what the school system feels like. They had a good impact in the run-up to covid on absence numbers, but we have seen consistent increases in mental health problems over that time as well. It would be interesting to look at the impact of that on the situation that we are seeing now and the impact of huge reductions in the amount of effort that has gone into pastoral care.

The other point I want to make quickly is that I live at the moment in one of the most privileged parts of the country. The problems of young people's mental health and rising numbers of SEND are just as true in wealthier areas as they are in less wealthy areas. The problems are much more extreme for the children in the deprived areas, and they probably don't have quite the same support networks, but it is not that those problems are not there. I am going to slip into being a parent of a 16-year-old here: I know just how difficult many parents are finding it to deal with their children's anxiety in school.

Alice Wilcock: I totally agree on the family-first approach. Ultimately it is parents' responsibility to get their children into school. I think you have to look at the drivers of absence to understand where parents feel confident supporting their children and where parents say they need more support. For example, a lot of parents are struggling to support their children because they need a trained specialist to support them with their anxiety. It has got to that level when they are severely absent, or with a special educational need, they don't have the ability to make the reasonable adjustments themselves and they need the schools to make the differences. Another thing that came through our inquiry was the rise of gaming addictions. I don't know if the Committee has looked at this.

Chair: It came up very strongly out of our county lines inquiry, and I think that we all want to look into it further because it is becoming apparent as a concern across the piece.

Alice Wilcock: Especially post lockdown, I think that parents are facing social media that they are not familiar with—they don't necessarily know about the online world. Bullying used to be in the classroom and quite visible and now it is online, and parents don't feel equipped to tackle that. Parents also don't feel equipped to tackle the gaming addictions that started during the pandemic. Some of the issues that we are focusing on are drivers of absence start in the family home. Families have their own problems such as caring responsibilities being put on children, family breakdown, addiction, and sometimes they are not in the best position,



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and they need to be empowered to support their children into school. I encourage the Committee to look at a whole-family approach towards attendance and that is what the guidance does very well.

Very briefly, fines and holidays are a really interesting point. We spoke to local authorities about fixed penalty notices, and you will know about 85% of fines and fixed penalty notices are issued for unauthorised holidays. We heard of some local authorities that received cheques in the post from parents who knew they were going to be fined and so before they got a fixed penalty notice they went, "Here is my cheque." You can understand why. It is £60 for a fine, so it is much cheaper. It is also interesting that you will not see in the data that unauthorised holidays are driving attendance issues. There are some very interesting stories here, but it is not the driver of absence issues now.

Parents have become a little bit more knowledgeable about home schooling and home education, and you are seeing the interplay between attendance and school attendance orders. We have heard of some children in year 6 or year 11 being pulled out before they take SATs or GCSEs. They know that the home education population is swelling and to get a school attendance order there is a load of steps that need to be taken, such as issuing a notice and then checking whether or not the child is attending school, so because that population is growing, local authorities are struggling to do the necessary checks in a timely fashion. Parents can pull their children out of school, go on an extended holiday and go back into school before anyone has been able to do the checks on them. We are hearing anecdotal evidence about that, but because there has been an increased awareness of home education people are now using that as a vehicle and the fines for a school attendance order are smaller than the fines that you see for attendance prosecution. There is definitely something there to look at the fine to see how it is motivating and creating alternatives.

Chair: We will come back to that later in the brief, but I think that is a very interesting piece of evidence.

Rob Williams: I know that you are talking about from 2010 onwards and from my understanding the definition of persistent absence is different over that period. It has been different over 20 years, I think. You might want to check whether this is true, but I found that from 2005-06 to 2009-10 it was classed as around 20% or more of sessions missed based on a standard threshold. From 2010-11 to 2014-15 it was 15% around that same thing, and it is only since 2015-16 it is 10% or more sessions missed based on a pupil's possible sessions. There have been slight differences. If it is possible to unpick that and see what we are measuring against previous data, it would be important to do that.

Chair: From what you have just said, it has got tougher.



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Rob Williams: Yes, which is not a bad thing. I think it is a good thing, because with the previous ones it is almost too late once they are getting to that sort of period.

The other thing is talking about family and disadvantage. I agree about the label of disadvantage. It is too broad. It doesn't describe exactly what the issues are, and it seems almost like a helplessness and that is simply not true at all in my experience. I have worked in schools in affluent areas and also in what would be classed as disadvantaged areas. There is research out that suggests that aspirations of those families are no different to anywhere else at all. Certainly in my experience the potential and the capability of the children and young people I have taught in all those different areas is not different at all.

What is different is the capability sometimes of the families to put the opportunities in front of pupils that allows them to see what is out there and what they can choose from. That is where I think wraparound care and access to things like sports for example—I will give a personal example. I have two children. My older son was a swimmer. I would go along to Cardiff swimming club with him, and it cost us a significant amount of money each month. He was training nine times a week, so it was a big commitment. I would say that 50% of the children in my primary school simply could not afford to access that at all and there was no provision in those sorts of clubs to pick it up and help them to access that.

Those things make a huge difference. They allow children and young people to see options that they might have that they would not otherwise consider. We did things like put careers in front of children very young, the kind of things that are out there and what they can think of. There are programmes that help them get access to things like HE and others, but I think we need to understand what that means. It is not a helplessness from the family's perception, it is more what—

Chair: We are in danger of straying into some of our other inquiries here, but it is a very fair point. I will move us on, I am afraid, because we have a lot to get through.

Q11 **Andrew Lewer:** Picking up on Nick's line of questioning about authorised and unauthorised absences, since 2015-16 the majority of absences recorded have been authorised absences. What do those absences include? Do you think efforts to tackle persistent absence needs to focus on authorised absences as well as unauthorised?

Rob Williams: Authorised covers all sorts of different things. There are authorised holidays, illness, medical appointments, religious observances, all sorts of things. There are key things, but they are coded for the attendance part. Can you repeat the second part of the question?

Q12 **Andrew Lewer:** It is just about needing to focus on what helps young people across the country the most where we have limited resources. All



the time through my being a county council leader to now, I have always had a view, which has not always been all that fashionable, that for well-adjusted children who are otherwise attending well and performing well, taking a few days off for a holiday is not a big issue. It certainly is not a big issue compared to some of the other things that we have been talking about and the serious nature of them.

Given that we have limited resources, it is easy to fine children whose parents say, "Yes, we have been on holiday and sorry," and so on and you tick the box and you do your stats and it is just process, but it does not achieve the things we are talking about. I am interested in with limited resources what areas of absences we need to focus our attention on.

Rob Williams: I think one of the things to focus on is the ability to continue with education when you are not actually attending school to some extent. I know we have put quite a lot of resource during the pandemic into remote learning. Our NAHT is the secretariat for the APPG for SEND and it was interesting hearing from young people with special educational needs during that period about the way in which they continued and felt really positive about their learning even when they were not physically able to attend school. I think that there is some mileage in looking at how that works. The difficulty of course—and it is a little bit like what we are expecting for alternative provision in the SEND and AP improvement plan—is for them to continue supporting the pupils who are in their settings, as well as doing outreach work and other things, there needs to be additional staffing involved in that. There is a focus in those sorts of areas.

On the authorised holidays, it varies hugely. There was a school near mine that was very close to an MoD site. When the parents came back from a military tour, they would often have only a week or two to see their children. The idea that you would stop the child going on holiday with their parents when they had not seen them for 18 months was ridiculous. I think we need the ability to have flexibility in applying it. The difficulty is when you are talking about the same pupils who have had a large amount of absence who are then asking to go on holiday. It is about empowering schools to be able to work with families in a way that means that you can have that leadership and take a sensible decision but also being able to address a persistent issue that needs to be addressed.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I will come back on the holidays thing although that is not my main point. When I travel and look at schools, I have spent a lot of time travelling in China and abroad and I cannot tell you what a different approach you get on this. A day at school and getting to school and getting an education is so important, and I would like us to have an ethos where we were all so passionate and cared so much about our education that we would not want to go on holiday, but that is by the by.

Q13 **Andrew Lewer:** Can I just interject there? I don't think those cultures have teachers who go on strike so much either. I don't think it seems



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very fair and balanced if parents are being financially penalised for taking their kids away for a couple of days on holiday and then their children miss another few days because their teacher is on strike. It is cultural on both sides.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I have argued strongly and publicly to try to dissuade teachers from striking and that schools should remain open and should have remained open during covid. I hope my position is consistent.

I would like the Committee to look at the lots of different codes used by schools for absence, and I am particularly concerned about the B code and I want to raise this with you. For example, the B code is meant to be used when pupils are present but at an off-site educational activity that has been approved by the school. This code is not meant to be used for kids who are at home working. It is meant to be used if they are in alternative provision but still on the school roll. I am seeing great inconsistency in use of the B code, and I think that is a simple place that we could look at.

The use of part-time timetables for students means that children who are attending only one or two hours a week are recorded as authorised absence. I have seen how part-time timetables can be really effective. It can rebuild children's confidence to get back to school, but I am concerned they are being used maybe as a behavioural intervention rather than because it is in the best interests of the school.

I agree totally on the SEND issue. I have looked at variation on the issuing of EHCPs, for example, and this is on my variation theme. In 2021 in the East Riding of Yorkshire, 97% of EHCPs would be delivered in a 20-week statutory time limit compared to only 14% in neighbouring North Yorkshire. There is too much variation. SEND is one of the reasons kids are out of school and we need to make sure about that.

On the point of AP, great AP can be such a support for good attendance. I would like to see AP located in families of schools or in LAs, however it is done, but part of that and used as revolving doors to get children back in. Six weeks in AP as a method to get back into school is really powerful, although probably not so powerful for some children as a tool for absenteeism if it goes on much longer. I absolutely agree with you on SEND and AP. I think we could look at those B codes quite carefully because that is where Alice's severely absent children often slide off. They are part home educated.

Q14 **Chair:** I agree with your point on AP. It also strikes me that if you talk to the people who work in some of the really good AP settings, they are the most horrified by children who are being left out of school for long periods because they work with some of the most difficult children and they see the benefits to them of getting that extra support.



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Dame Rachel de Souza: Why are we excluding children for not attending? We should be putting them into AP for a six-week get-back programme.

Chair: We need to get the AP provision right because it needs to be AP as a turnaround opportunity not a holding pen.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Not pertaining to special provision either.

Alice Wilcock: I will echo some things that Dame Rachel said about the B codes. As part of our work on school exclusions and alternative provision, the CSJ has been trying to map where all these children are, whether severely absent or excluded from school or moved around the school system through different means. It is so difficult to know where a lot of the children who are not attending school are.

You have touched upon B codes and there is not a regular analysis of B codes. You have to go through FOI processes or analyses of the National Pupil Database and that requires an authorised absence, but we have heard of some settings using that to send children home to work from home, saying they have been B-coded but they are not. They are not in an educational setting; they are just at home. We have also heard of B coding being used for minor misdemeanours. Schools that are now scared about being caught for minor misdemeanours are saying they will B code rather than put it down as a job registration.

There is a lot of inconsistency and a lot of data that is either captured and not reported on or not captured at all. I think the previous updates for school centres have been really welcome. The DFE is now looking at unregistered provision and it is trying to capture data through the school centres. It has been voluntary, and it is now mandatory. I welcome a lot of this.

I think that we need to get a greater understanding of the interrelationship, especially the relationship between severe absence and home education. We looked at the data in one local authority that found that 25% of the children who had been moved into home education this year were severely absent compared to another local authority where it was 1.1% of children. There is a lot of these very important interdynamics. I know we said before that collecting more data is not always the solution, but we have to understand the interplay between the different populations and who is being held to account for the outcomes.

I also echo that really brilliant AP is fundamental here. Often when we look at AP quality, we look at attendance as a raw rate. That is really important, we should have high aspirations for all our children in AP, but our analysis found that a quarter of children in AP are severely absent. Often they are arriving at alternative provision having not turned up to school for weeks, and so you are starting from a really low base. The SEND and AP review started talking about an AP performance framework and looking at measuring attendance as progress travelled. We would



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massively welcome that because often local authorities might speak to APs and ask why their attendance rates are so low. Often children in AP are coming from the most difficult backgrounds.

Andrew, I want to return to your point about illness absence. You will see that in the overall figures, illness absence is driving a lot of the overall attendance issues. It is not the only thing that is going on, but when we spoke to local authorities, they said that there has been a change in the culture around illness, so whereas children might have previously been sent into school if they had a cold or sniffles, now they are being kept off school. A lot of that is related to the pandemic. It is interesting that when a virus surfaces in intergenerational households there is a lot of reluctance to send children back to school. For example, when strep A hit the news, we heard of a lot of parents pulling their children out of school because they were concerned about contagion. Perhaps messaging would help with that.

Local authorities are trying to instil the message about the importance of school. It would be low cost for the Government to focus on that but not to crack down unnecessarily. I think we must look at the broader picture on absence. It will be no surprise that I would focus on severe absence because those are the children who need to get back into school.

Chair: That is an interesting point. Rachel mentioned the big focus on back to school and the September campaign. Part of that messaging was trying to redress some of the shift that had taken place as a result of covid, and I think it is an important point. That precautionary approach is a concern if it is keeping children out of school for long periods and certainly something that needs to be looked at in the messaging.

Q15 **Nick Fletcher:** I want to pick up very quickly on absence and the B code. I have just googled and there are 26 different types of codes, a full alphabet of them. One of them is religious grounds. Do you have the statistics of why people are taking their children out of school? Do you have full numbers across the country? I spoke last week in Parliament about PSHE lessons. Some of what is being taught to our children at the moment I would not be happy with as a parent. What are your thoughts and what are the statistics on parents pulling their children out of school?

This week we have had drag queens in school. There is no way I would want my son or daughter in front of a drag queen. I am sorry, but I just would not, especially at the age that they are. Are you going to see more of that if we carry on down this line, and do you have statistics for that?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I do not have the statistics to hand of withdrawal. My colleague behind me will probably have them, so we can certainly write to you with them. I hope that we are going to see good guidance coming from the Department for Education—updated guidance around some of the issues that are causing current concern, such as materials used in RSE, PSHE lessons, and obviously our colleague raised



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some of these issues in the press this week. I know certainly those discussions have been had.

I have just published my recommendations around the issue as well, making clear who is responsible for safeguarding and when things are being taught in a way that are safeguarding issues and what a school should do. I hope that there will be greater clarity there.

I think we can look at the figures of parents who have withdrawn their children from school as best we can, but one of the reasons I am keen to see an EHE register is so we can understand who is not in school to ensure that they are getting a great education when they are not in school.

Councillor Nethsingha: I will pick up on some points that are related both to unauthorised absence and the conversation that has just happened around alternative provision.

First, on unauthorised absence—authorised versus unauthorised, it is important to remember that for most of the children that we are talking about the pattern is that they are children with SEND, mental health and other family issues. Penalising those families is unlikely to be helpful in bringing them back into the system, and therefore I have a certain amount of sympathy with schools for not necessarily flagging them as unauthorised. Clearly it is not always desirable because we do not want schools to say, “Oh, it is just fine to be at home,” because it is not, but you need to have a good relationship. For good education you want a positive relationship between the parents and the school, and constantly flagging children as unauthorised probably does not help that. Given that anxiety about school return and about infections and other illnesses has been high, I can understand why schools might have been a little bit more flexible about using authorised absence than they might previously have been pre pandemic, even though probably that needs to change a little bit.

On the alternative provision discussion, if you can use alternative provision to get children back into school that is great, but quite often alternative provision does not get children back into school. It is a route into special provision and that is a huge problem for local authorities, because the costs are astronomic. It is also often not the best route for children. While special educational needs provision is clearly needed for a number of children, if children can be reintegrated into the mainstream, they are likely to end up with better outcomes. I would be wary about that. It is not often as good a route back in as I think many of us would like it to be. More often it is a route out, which is not ideal.

Q16 **Nick Fletcher:** I will get back into the variations in persistent absence rates between types of school, local authority and areas and between pupils and different ethnic groups. What are some of the reasons for these differences and how does this affect how these should be tackled?



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Rob Williams: A nice small question.

Nick Fletcher: I said it very quickly.

Rob Williams: When we looked at the ethnic element, it is very specific to different ethnic groups. That changes a lot. There are certain ethnic groups where absence is extremely low. That comes back to the point about some of the cultural parts of that. Where it is extremely high, for example, we could see it within the Traveller of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma particularly. Given the requirements of that group, what we have learned is that the two things they cite within research is a sense of general racism and discrimination, and also a difficulty to identify anything about them as people within what they are learning in school, so almost a disconnect to some extent with what the curriculum is able to deliver to them. Those were cited by them within their own research. There is not a huge amount of research out there when we looked at it, and that is something that would be worth doing.

Q17 **Chair:** If I may on this, one of the most difficult sessions I ever had to prepare for as a Minister was giving evidence to this Committee on Gypsy/Roma Traveller pupils because for quite worthy reasons the Department does not target specific support to specific ethnic groups, but with that group in particular it was very difficult to give evidence when most of what we had was anecdote about what individual schools were doing, and some were doing things very effectively. It is an interesting challenge of meeting the needs of that community and trying to build a better relationship between schools. It is one I suspect cannot really be done from the top down and needs to be done through that bottom-up approach.

Rob Williams: Working with the representative groups is key.

Q18 **Chair:** Are you aware of any part of the UK or Ireland or other jurisdictions that have a more effective approach to that community? It would be very interesting to know if there is a proven approach.

Rob Williams: I think it is in pockets, rather than in any particular nation. Lucy might be better placed than I, because one of the challenges is because of the fact that there is a nomadic element, for local authority services it is quite hard for them to engage. In the local authority I was the head in, I worked with a specific ethnic minority service that would assist us in dealing with the groups, but getting in and having a positive relationship with the families you are dealing with at a school level is critical on this. It is difficult and challenging, particularly around absence and particularly around expectations of the way in which they manage their day-to-day lives.

Councillor Nethsingha: I will try to pick that up. On Gypsy/Roma Travellers specifically I cannot quote you any national data or pictures. I can give you some personal knowledge of two places where I have been involved, because both places are places where I lived and represented and where there was quite a large Gypsy/Roma Traveller population.



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Certainly the attitude of the individual schools is important, but the other thing that has definitely been the case in my area over the last 10 years has been a huge reduction in the support that our local council has been able to give that population. There used to be specific members of staff employed by the local authority whose job was engagement with the Traveller community. Those are not statutory jobs, and they have all gone because of funding issues for local councils. I cannot say that is necessarily the case across the whole country, but it is certainly the case in the area that I represent. We have had to strip back non-statutory functions because we struggle very much to fund our statutory functions. It is hard to find the money to do the things that we are legally obliged to do, and anything not in that category is stripped away.

The original question was about variation, so I will just pick that up very quickly and you may have other questions on this. There were two points that I wanted to make. One is that there is very significant variation in funding across different areas, both for schools and for local authorities, and that probably does not quite map across quality of provision, but it certainly has an impact. The other thing that I wanted to pick up, which has not been mentioned at all, is the impact of rurality on people's ability to get into and out of school. If you live in a very rural area and your mum is ill and you miss the school bus, you cannot get in. It is that impact and the additional disengagement and inability to access all sorts of things.

Q19 Chair: It is a very interesting point. Around the funding formula, the Government have looked at sparsity with varying success over the years. Do we have any figures for the impact of rurality on attendance or severe absence? Are you aware of any figures out there about that? It would be a very interesting thing to look into.

Rob Williams: I have not seen that level of data. It is an important point.

Chair: It might be a point we want to take up with Ministers when we have evidence from them, because it is an important element affecting people.

Q20 Andrew Lewer: It absolutely is, but it does illustrate the near-impossibility of tailoring funding formulas. When I was involved in coming up with local government funding formulae, you have a sparsity formula and then you have an urban density formula. There are so many elements, and you end up better off just having a general pot.

Councillor Nethsingha: Rural transport is a problem that has an impact across a huge number of areas.

Alice Wilcock: Briefly on Gypsy/Roma Traveller pupils and attendance, I do not know what the outcome of the scheme was, but the Department for Education funded a £1 million intervention for children in this cohort with a focus on educational attainment and drop-out rates. That was in 2021 and I have not seen an evaluation to date, so that might be



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something you want to ask Ministers about when you are collecting evidence on this.

On local authority variation, you are right to point to the rural aspect of this. We did interviews with 10 different local authorities, and some were very much rural local authorities that said, "If a child misses the bus, they have to go on several different buses to get here." Also the issues seem to be different in cities. That is where there is a greater concentration of gangs and the commute into school involves going through different gang postcodes. That is a problem too, so the public infrastructure might be there, but it is difficult to get children into school because of the geography of the commute to school.

This is a specific issue too for alternative providers because alternative provision tends to be one or two schools in a massive local authority. Where a child is moved into a school such as alternative provision or a school not in their catchment area there are repercussions of difficulties in getting into school and the resultant commute. There are also big problems around the travel budget that is available for schools that are alternative provision to get children into school.

We talked about local authority resources. I would echo that point that came through very strongly, but also local authority buy-in. A lot of the local authorities that we spoke to said that the new guidance about working together to improve school attendance was vital, but in some local authorities this is second nature. They have directors of children's services buy-in, and they have regular attendance meetings every fortnight. One local authority I am thinking of met with their schools every other week and they had an attendance officer assigned to their schools—six schools in the local authority and six attendance officers—and it was really well resourced to do these kinds of interventions. They had started to see a turnaround in their attendance rates, so they were perhaps still having poor relative attendance rates, but since they have taken this approach, their attendance has started to improve. Another local authority had six attendance officers for 600 schools.

There is a disparity here not only in resource but also the capacity to offer that support, through director buy-in. A key thing that came out through our local authority interviews was that until this new guidance becomes statutory, they will always have different local authority agencies saying, "You should be abiding by this," and they say, "We do not have the resource so until it is statutory, we will not do so."

Chair: Some interesting points there.

Q21 Mrs Flick Drummond: I want to talk about the role of local authorities and the role of schools. In the submission it says that the local authorities do not have the full purse to fulfil the duty to ensure that every child is receiving a suitable full-time education and children can slip through the net. I am a passionate believer of the register, so I am working with Alice to put a ten-minute rule Bill through on that one, so we have that going



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and we will keep pushing that. New guidance on attendance was issued by the Department in May 2022 for September 2022. Is it enough? What else is needed to effectively tackle persistent absence? You also mentioned resources, so what does that look like? Maybe between Lucy, Rob and anybody else who wants to.

Councillor Nethsingha: It is good to hear about the register and the ten-minute rule Bill. That will be extremely welcome. It is something that local authorities and the LGA have been very clear that we feel is important, and it was disappointing to see it disappear, and it will be a big relief if it comes back. Thank you for that.

On additional things that would be helpful, one of the things that the LGA is very keen to request is the ability to direct schools to take a child, which we do not have at present for MATs. In good situations, and there are lots of good situations, and the relationships between local authorities and schools I think are generally slightly better post covid than they were before and there is more collaboration, but there is still an issue that if a child has been expelled from a school we do not have the ability to make another school take them. It would be very helpful to have that.

Q22 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Is there anything else that you think would help from a local authority point of view to ensure that children are in school?

Councillor Nethsingha: At the moment the legislation is quite vague about responsibility. They are very clear that local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that every child gets an education, but they are not at all clear about how we do that. More clarity broadly about the relationship between schools and academy trusts and how they need to work together would be very helpful.

Q23 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Can local authorities take that responsibility anyway? Does it have to be government legislation that does it?

Councillor Nethsingha: If we cannot mandate things, we can ask for them and we do. I think the vast majority of local authorities and MATs do work together in a constructive way, but there are situations where that is not happening. We can go to the regional schools commissioners and complain but the levers are unclear.

Rob Williams: On the register, we would be supportive of that. That is something we have been publicly pushing for some time. It is an incredibly important piece of work, so it is good to hear around that.

On the non-statutory guidance and what else is needed, I suppose one of the questions that came up is we like the narrative in it and the way in which it was pitched around understanding how hard you must work to try to make sure there is the support you are looking for. You are trying to make sure you are addressing any barriers that are in place before you do anything in a formal process with families. I think that is incredibly important. The key bit from schools is often, "We have to maintain some kind of constructive relationship between the families even in difficult



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circumstances,” so when you can avoid having to go along that line if at all possible it is important you manage to do so, because if that breaks down it makes things 10 times worse.

We like the narrative in it. We also like the fact that the advice was to flag relevant support services and also link it with local authority services. One of the questions that came up was what are schools and family to do if there is a suggestion that a particular service or support organisation would be of support to them, but that support service does not have the capacity to pick them up because they are doing so much? Where do you go from there? It would be unfair to take a formal route in that circumstance. Where are schools supposed to turn if it is beyond their control and where are families supposed to access it? There is a query on that.

Also, there is another query about a pupil or family’s characteristics where absence is more prevalent and is there a risk in anything that was in the guidance that might at least give potential for differing access to support, so that particular group finds it harder to access for whatever reason? It is something we are looking at and we spoke with EHRC around it, to look at if they had been getting any indications that certain families are saying, “We want to engage with services but because of our circumstances it is more difficult.” For example, for families where mental health or SEND or communication issues mean accessing services may be more difficult advocacy might be required, and is that accessible and is that possible? If it is not, you potentially have a family there that want to engage but simply cannot.

Those are the areas we looked at. In general, the narrative around the guidance was fine. It is that element about the formal process. If you are going to take it forward to a sanction for persistent absence, we need to be careful to ensure that everything has been exhausted before we get to that point. We need to ensure that it is not a lack of capacity in support services that is driving that, rather than a lack of engagement.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I agree with much of what both colleagues have said. The point about massive variation, about how attendance works, is key. My answer to that must be attendance needs to be everybody’s responsibility. That is, everybody in local authorities, everybody delivering services. Of course, great support for children with SEND, great mental health support, early family help, all of those things are great and are going to have a massive impact.

I want to raise two particular groups of children, looked-after children and children with a social worker, so children in need. Their outcomes and their attendance are often the absolute worst and yet certainly for looked-after children they do have the right to say what school they want to go to. I would like us all to step up and ensure that the looked-after children are in outstanding schools, are in the best schools and are supported to be in them. I do accept the point about placing children and



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that needs to be strengthened. I want our local authorities to be champions of our vulnerable children and all our children. I think that is important.

Obviously, there is a request here for resource, but with that should come accountability. I would like to see Ofsted inspecting attendance as part of local authority children's services inspections. Then there might be a bit more of a razor-sharp focus on it. I absolutely accept that in having the power to place children and the clarity of what is asked for and the resource is important.

Alice Wilcock: The guidance is very welcome and the specific focus on whole-family support, and also the clear steps that should be followed before a child escalates down to the legal sanctions route are welcome. Even the local authorities that do not have a lot of resources have been able to use this guidance and say, "We are resetting the culture on fines." That has been interesting. They have said to schools, "We want to see evidence that you have engaged with families, that you have followed the principles in this document," and that has helped them to have a more nuanced conversation about when fines are important and when attendance prosecution can be helpful and when it cannot.

Again, I echo that until it is statutory not every single agency will pick this up. We have heard time and again about social care and early help may close cases where children are severely absent, because they do not see education as part of that system of harm. That is a difficulty when social care is not able to pick up the cases of severe absence and the local authority attendance team are still grappling with that issue.

With health, when children do not meet the thresholds needed for CAMHS and they are not then triaged on to additional support. There is clear responsibility in that guidance, but until it is statutory it will not necessarily be fully adopted. Again, we welcome the new data collection powers. They are very helpful, and it has been a constant blind spot in this space, that there is a big time lag between attendance and then seeing the data on the ground. I would push for the Government to collect data on severe absence. At the moment they have just released their data on persistent absence, but we do not have estimates of severe absence. I welcome the fact that 78% of schools are using this data dashboard—the regular attendance capture—but that does leave about 20% of schools that are not, and they are the schools that local authorities are most concerned that they cannot get their eyes on so a big push to make that statutory.

Picking up on Rob's point about advocacy for support, this is a big problem. When children cannot access the support and they are caught in this Catch-22 of not being able to get the support they need to go into school, it does not feel right to fine them. It does not feel right to go down the route of attendance prosecution and yet so often families find



themselves facing letters and attendance prosecution and trying to pull their children out of school to avoid that kind of additional pressure.

One thing that CSJ has continued to push for since July 2021 has been for a national programme of attendance mentors. We are calling for 2,000 attendance mentors who could support 60,000 children every single year. That is half of our total severely absent children. The Government have started to pilot some attendance mentors. They have released a tender for a bid for I think £2.5 million investment on attendance mentors, originally to be piloted in one local authority to be then scaled up to five local authorities. That is promising, but ultimately the scale of need is much greater. I think their attendance would suggest that about 1,600 children will be supported by this advocacy scheme, but 118,000 children are severely absent, and we need to get support to them now.

Rob Williams: On the point made about the placement—the ability to place children who have been excluded, for example—I absolutely agree that needs to be done swiftly because having children out of education is not a solution. My point would be and what our members would say about the appropriate placement for them, and being in the right place. We are seeing already where there is a lack of capacity, for example in special schools in some local authority areas. Even if it has been agreed they have to have special schools, mainstream schools are being asked to hold for a term or two terms but without the requisite funding and support. There is a risk then of that placement breaking down and then non-attendance happening. We need to have some caveats and safeguards around that process to ensure that it is not just finding any old place. It needs to be the right place for that individual child.

Q24 **Caroline Ansell:** I think my question has been covered under the guise of the different questions put forward. As you say, everybody is involved here, and I think, remembering back to Rachel's report, you said the most defining thing for a child's life chances and educational outcomes is the family. Parents are very key to this. We talked about the culture, so I think we have covered that off too and how effective or otherwise fines and prosecutions can be.

The question rests on the Education Act 1996, which created that statutory duty on parents to ensure they are in full-time education. In your view, are parents aware of this duty and how well does that duty put pressure on parents to ensure their children are in school?

Dame Rachel de Souza: We have seen a change. I think the figures that I have talked to you about today show that we have seen a change in persistent, severe absence and children not going to school that suggest there has been a change after covid. In our discussions with parents, with children and with particularly children who are severely absent and their families we have picked up a number of things. One is because of online learning in covid there is a little bit of, "Well, why can't



we just have online learning and that is fine?" so that attitude has come through a bit.

My trust was one that was a founder of Oak National Academy and I think it is a great thing. If a child is off sick being able to look at the lessons and catch up, or if they are in hospital, there are all sorts of good reasons why we need that online service. That whole online curriculum is important, but I want to assure the Committee that online learning is in no way as good as in-teacher learning. All the evidence shows that having a teacher in front of children gets far better outcomes. I want to underline that and that is what I am telling parents. I think we should be saying that a little more.

Q25 Caroline Ansell: I think that sense of duty of taking children into school has dulled a little, because of the change with covid.

Dame Rachel de Souza: The other thing that would make me say it has a little in some places is I asked several large MATs to give me all their attendance data and analysed it, to have a look at the difference between before and after covid and what we were seeing. We are seeing a huge amount of Friday absence that was not there before. Parents are at home on Fridays. We have heard evidence from kids, "Well, Mum and Dad are at home, so we stay at home."

Q26 Caroline Ansell: Parents working at home?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Potentially. That is one of the things that is flagged. We are seeing in the post-covid world slightly different attitudes. I think it is important that all of us, and that is why I think attendance is everyone's business, particularly Ministers, leaders of education, leaders of local authorities, MPs—all of us are saying how important that contract between parents and schools is, and how important school is for children. As we have heard today it is not just about getting a great education. It is also safeguarding, good mental health, all the activities—the wider things we want. We need our children back to school. I just cannot urge everyone enough to be singing that from the rooftops.

Q27 Caroline Ansell: It is a question of messaging. Do others have a view on it?

Councillor Nethsingha: I have two very quick points. On whether parents understand their duty to provide a full-time education, many do not. There are two parts to that. First, I am sure there has been a significant increase in the number of children who are being home educated. The ability to check on what kind of education is going on there, this is all part of the same register and why are they being home educated, why are they not in school? Those are all questions to do with what parents understand to be full-time education.

Coming back to why they are not there, we do need to come back to which children are not there. The evidence that we had at the very beginning of this session on the fact that most children who are not there



are children with SEND, with mental health problems and with major disadvantages—not in all cases but clearly the majority. I suspect that the parents of most of those children would want them to be in school. The fact that they are not in school is probably because the parents are not getting the support that they need to help them to be in school—school being a great, supportive place where the child feels safe and where the parent is not having to chase them out of the house.

It would be interesting to look at the Friday data. It is nice to think of that being a nice, cosy household where it is nice to stay at home with mum. I think probably mum would rather the child was at school, especially if she is working—I should be gender neutral. Whoever is at home, I suspect that most parents want their children to be in school and want their child to feel happy about going to school. Again, we are back at sticks versus carrots and support versus—

Q28 **Caroline Ansell:** Do we actually know that? I think it is very true to say that most parents want their children to be in school and most children are in school. That is a faithful reflection. Do most parents of those children who are absent, persistently absent or severely absent, want their children in school or do they not have that strong—

Councillor Nethsingha: I think the evidence from parents of children with special educational needs is that they want their children to be in school for a long time until they feel that that school is no longer a safe space for their child.

Q29 **Chair:** They want their children to be in a school that meets their needs, fundamentally.

Councillor Nethsingha: Absolutely.

Q30 **Caroline Ansell:** The question was more around what support we need to give to parents to help get their children into school, but what we are saying, in that interpretation, is what more support are we giving to schools?

Councillor Nethsingha: It is down to the whole support network around a family and a child to make it that going into school does not feel scary and difficult.

Q31 **Caroline Ansell:** I know that Alice has been involved in this area around providing that home support, which can often make the difference and some very real physical challenges can be around transport or any number of things. What are parents saying about those barriers to school for those children who are not in school?

Alice Wilcock: Focusing on children who are severely absent and focusing on children who are anxious or have special educational needs or may not have their needs met in school or may be being bullied, that is a growing cohort of children. Their parents would love them to be in school if they thought that school was a safe place that was meeting their



needs. Often parents understand the importance of education. I have met some incredible families who are trying to home educate their children because they see the value of education, but they do not see a school that is set up to meet their children's needs. I think they put a massive priority on education, but their concern is that they are being done to and the big focus is just trying to get them across the school threshold to access support. They want the support, but they may say, "Well, I cannot access the mental health support if it is just based at school because my child does not want to go to school." The child may be very nervous, with panic attacks, if they try to get them across the school threshold.

A common theme when I have spoken to severely absent parents is they feel like they are being done to—"The school says that they want to support us and put all this infrastructure in place, but we are getting these letters and very menacing communications from school. I am trying everything but that is not being respected and almost I seem to be the issue." It is almost like parents are being treated as if they are the ones to blame. I think we must have a system where parents are treated as equal partners in getting their children back into school.

Going back to Nick Fletcher's point, parents are fundamental here. A lot of them do understand their duty, but often we get to them so far down the road where they are persistently or severely absent, where the opportunity to re-engage them has largely been missed. There needs to be much more support with parents before they get to that stage. Parents need to understand their duty.

Speaking more broadly about general issues around attendance, not just severe absence, we are seeing a great shift towards disengagement with education. Local authorities have said to us that the pandemic taught parents that sometimes school is important and sometimes it is not, and that is really engrained into our attendance patterns. Even before the pandemic, and this has continued post, there were some families who do not see school as very important. There are some parents who had a bad experience of education themselves, or some parents who did not leave with qualifications but went on to a family industry and are very successful in their own right, and it is that culture of trying to say to them, "You have a duty and also education should be important for your child." It is a small minority of parents, but it is something that the Committee should focus on in their inquiry.

Q32 **Caroline Ansell:** In your experience how is that group best reached?

Alice Wilcock: Time and developing relationships. This is the difficult thing. A lot of the incentives around attendance are getting children across the school threshold, such that you can tick a box and say, "They were in school and our attendance performance looks great," but often trying to take that approach pushes them further away from the school system. Sometimes you will not see an immediate response in the attendance figures because children might still be at home, but what the schools are doing is knocking on the door, reaching them where they are



and putting the support in place. They may not be crossing the threshold of the school, but the school is doing an enormous amount of work in the background, either by themselves or by non-statutory services or with early help. Ultimately, our accountability prizes just looking at overall attendance rates and does not look at the enormous amount of work that it takes to get children who are severely absent back into school.

Rob Williams: That is something that is key. When you talk to our school leader members who work in alternative provision, for example, what they say is if you are trying to manage a pupil who has been almost not attending at all back into a mainstream setting, there has to be a period when you are not measuring their attendance against the norm. You are looking at progress, improving attendance over time. If you keep on measuring, there is always the sense that they are constantly failing anyway and then that re-engagement is made more difficult.

I think there is sometimes a perception that has happened probably through the pandemic for vulnerable people particularly about their perception around their academic ability during that time, their occupational and university aspirations—all those sorts of things—and the sense that they are different from their peers because they have not been with their peers during that period so much. That is quite a difficult one to unlock over a long period.

When you talk to parents who have children with chronic anxiety about going into schools, they desperately want their children in school. They want them to be in there because they see the benefits for the children, and even those individual children and young people, if you talk to them, know it is the place they need to be, but they are just crippled by whatever it is that is creating it. The support and the way you can have a transition period that allows them to be able to move back into that without being measured against a standard they are not going to meet for a certain period might be helpful.

Q33 **Caroline Ansell:** Understood. I am not quite sure how that data might be in this very black and white—

Rob Williams: It is linked in with accountability for the schools too, so I think there is an issue around that. That can be particularly difficult for small schools—and I speak as an ex-small school head—if every single child is worth more than 1% for example, as it can be, so I think we must be realistic about what that data tells us, rather than just look at headline figures in those circumstances. That is difficult for policymakers to decide on that, because of course you must have that nuance.

Chair: You lose some visibility if you do that.

Q34 **Miriam Cates:** We have a breakdown of the persistent absence rates by ethnicity, free school meals and special educational needs, but are there any patterns in the age groups where persistent absence is most prevalent? Is it a general accumulation as children get older or are there



some bulges in the data?

Alice Wilcock: We tend to see a general accumulation in the data especially around severe absence. Ultimately primary school children are less likely to be severely absent or persistently absent, and as children transition through to secondary school you see a big uptick in attendance issues. The issues have historically been around year 9, year 10, year 11 where you are preparing for GCSEs. That is a massive issue, because when you get to year 11 a lot of local authorities told us that they are reluctant to use a sanction or legal route because it takes too long to reach them. The pupils have already left the school system before they can put that support in place. That has historically been the case.

We did see a massive bulge in primary school severe absence when schools returned, but that has normalised back, not to pre-pandemic levels, but they are not growing at the same rate as it was when schools returned.

Rob Williams: At the most basic level, what we have seen is that that group of disadvantaged pupils has higher rates of absence at the end of primary school and then that gap widens over the first three years of secondary school. That is the point about the early intervention bit. Where you see that first indication that there is a risk, that is where that needs to be targeted really carefully. If you think about it, the transition between primary and secondary is particularly fundamental—the support you put in place for those pupils. If they have any degree of anxiety or concern, we only need to think back to our own days going from primary to secondary—all the stories that you would hear of what would happen to you. I think those things are important, particularly for certain groups of pupils to understand that they are going to get that support when it is not what they are hearing. That is fundamentally important if you want to address that risk.

Q35 **Miriam Cates:** Anecdotally we often hear that particularly boys around the age of 13 or 14 often start to disengage from formal traditional education. Is that reflected in the data, or is it a fairly consistent picture across the two sectors?

Alice Wilcock: I expected there to be a gender split on this. You do see boys being excluded at greater rates, but you do not see the care pattern and attendance. I am not too sure what the reason is for that.

Q36 **Miriam Cates:** One of the things that you all mentioned earlier was mental health and anxiety, which again can affect both sexes but social media-related anxieties often affect girls more, and I want to dig into that a bit more. We have covered some of the other reasons for absence. During the pandemic, children spent hours and hours per day unsupervised online. Sometimes they may have been on Google Classroom, but a lot of times they were not. Even going back before the pandemic there is a clear link between the rapid uptake of social media by teens and this deterioration of mental health. How much do you think



is being done to tackle that specifically at the moment, and do you support campaigns from groups such as UsForThem to regulate smartphones in the same way that tobacco is, for example?

Dame Rachel de Souza: You might have seen our recent research where we surveyed 1,000 18 to 21-year-olds about when they first saw pornography and the impact on them. What we found was of that nationally representative group we talked to it was shocking to me that one-quarter had seen it at age 11, to half at 13. We are not talking about top-shelf stuff; we are talking about serious, negative, coercive, anti-women. I think that links very much to your point about older teenage girls. When we were asking about the attendance question, I would say you are looking at more exclusions with boys, but I think the mental health issues with older teenage girls are well known. In our Big Ask survey, 14 to 18-year-old girls were the most miserable, and lots of the survey work we have done with that age group shows that the prevalence of them seeing violence, gore, pro-dieting material, pro-suicide material is shocking. We have tried to create useful things for parents so that they can understand the experience online.

On what schools can do, you know that I have been quite clear about the child bit with the Online Safety Bill so there is that bit, but parents and schools can do a huge amount. For parents it is understanding what their children are seeing and some very clear boundaries. The children themselves, the older 16 to 21-year-olds, talk to us about, "We want boundaries. We do not want to be allowed to have our phones in bed at night. We want our mum to keep asking when we come home, 'How are you? What happened?'" and for them to understand a bit about it." I think most schools in one way or another ban or limit the use of smartphones at school. That is very sensible. I think school leaders have stepped up to that.

I wonder why any child needs an internet connected phone at all. If it is for safety, you can have a non-internet connected one, and I urge parents to realise that that argument of, "All my friends have one," is not true and that we can make a change here ourselves. Schools could do a lot there but also in our RSE curriculums—in the ethos that they create there is a job to do. I think we need to do more, and I would like to see the DFE do more in producing the guidance and support for schools about how to do that. One of the best ways to do that is sharing the models of great practice that are out there. We are a self-improving system. Our schools will look at great things and do them. We can do far more on how to do that and how to support our girls and our teenage girls in particular. It is just a deluge, and it is awful.

Q37 **Miriam Cates:** You can quite imagine a girl who, let us say, has been sent explicit images by boys in her class, who has perhaps had images of her own taken and sent round the class. You can imagine the barriers to going back to that classroom ever again. That is quite a difficult barrier to get over.



Dame Rachel de Souza: Totally, Miriam. Worse than that, I had a student myself when I ran a trust of schools out in Norfolk and Suffolk who had a difficult experience with a boy. He put that right around the school on social media, and she went out into the local woods and killed herself and left a note. I had never seen that in my career before. I think this is a serious issue and I would love the Committee to look at it separately. We have the Online Safety Bill going through and we are all very supportive of the child bit and my office has done a huge amount of work on it, but there is the impact on attendance and older teenage girls—just from what they are telling us about how they feel. Your point about this being ubiquitous, that it is not just a bunch of kids, it is everybody. It is a huge issue of our age.

Q38 **Miriam Cates:** One more on that, talking about the change in attitude by parents and also the Government in schooling pre and post pandemic, before the pandemic perhaps we had gone too far in the other direction. I know friends who were phoned by the school on the third day of their child's sickness: "Are you sure your child is really sick? Please get them in. We need 97% attendance to get an Ofsted rating." Children were given prizes of 100% attendance if they were lucky enough not to be ill. That is probably too extreme, but overnight the Government made schooling optional, and our schools were closed for longer than anywhere else in Europe apart from Italy.

Even when schools did return, Government and local authorities took a very lenient approach to parents who were not sending their children back, understandably. Many local authorities resisted schools reopening even when Government told them they should. I personally think Government have lost the moral authority for quite a long time now to tell parents that school is not optional, but what can the Government or local authorities do to gradually move the dial back away from this school is optional position?

Rob Williams: I think it is about providing absolutely clear evidence about what happens when you do not attend school, and making it so explicitly clear about the negative impacts of that upon children's social development, as well as their aspirations and movement into adulthood and whatever they do. I think making absolutely clear why it is of benefit makes a compelling case for doing that.

On your point about the online pressures, we are seeing it with misogynistic attitudes, which are horrendous at the moment. Again, I would back the Committee looking at this specifically in its own right, because it does have a knock-on effect in so many other ways. Schools do some good stuff around this, but they find—they sometimes do it by putting on training and development for parents too—that they cannot compel parents to come. Often the parents who do not come are the ones we are most concerned about.

What was quite interesting when we went to remote learning was the number of concerns that schools were expressing that they were seeing



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quite young children who were not being hugely well supervised—understandably because some parents were being asked to continue working at home at the same time, and trying to supervise a younger or primary-age child at the same time is difficult. There is a balance to be struck on how you manage that without nannying the parents, but I think there are some things that could be done to make it so compelling and make so clear to parents the risks involved and why it needs to be managed carefully. There are certainly some opportunities there.

Councillor Nethsingha: There are several things to pick up. First, I think that the issues that have been raised around anxiety and teenage girls are absolutely spot on, and I am massively concerned about the impact of what children are seeing online on their lives. It is not just about school; it is also about their relationships and about what young men—boys—think is normal. It is hugely worrying so do look at it.

I do not think that saying children should not have access to the internet is the answer. To your question about why children might need a phone with access to the internet, some children need to work out where their bus is. There are other reasons why you might need access and, again, that is important for some children with rural issues.

On the issue that we were talking about a little while ago—about encouraging children to come back into school when they have had a bad experience—I do think that we want to look at what makes school attractive. Most children do want to be there with their friends, but there are too many things there that are frightening and not enough safe spaces—not enough things that make it feel worth jumping over the hurdle of going in.

I want to bring that a little bit back to the wraparound and the after-school activities in the broad curriculum. If music is the one thing that you love, going in because you have an after-school orchestra might be the thing that gets you over the doorstep. It might be music, it might be drama, it might be football—whatever it is, anything that encourages children to be back in school in a place where they feel comfortable and happy and they can be successful is important. We have seen a reduction in that broader curriculum in schools recently.

Alice Wilcock: I echo what has been said. Part of the difficulty with social media is that a lot of the issues that surface come up so quickly and become viral so quickly, and parents struggle to understand what is happening on TikTok or Instagram and what the trends are. It is difficult to get the balance right here about what is the parents' responsibility when they are totally blind about what is happening. It is important that schools do take ownership of this, and there is an amazing school called Grace Academy that is integrating this understanding of online issues and other issues—not just about social media but some of the root causes behind absence—and they are threading this into their curriculum and into their assemblies.



They are wonderful because they are doing wraparound, looking at the ethos of a school and unpicking some of these issues that relate to social media but going broader, and also offering a youth support worker and a family liaison officer and integrating it into the ethos of that school. It is a big demand on schools, but they see that this is the way to get those children back into school and that leads on to greater attainment, greater outcomes and the rest of it. It is a big demand on schools to move towards this system and, ultimately, they are very well placed to tackle some of these things around social media because they have greater understanding—they see what is happening in schools.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I want to come back on your point about, perhaps because of school closures, the Government being a bit squeamish about stepping into this space now and saying, “Right, we need to do better.” I received over half a million responses from children when they came out of lockdown—a huge number. There was both a massive keenness and, indeed, a desperation to be back at school, back with their teachers, back with their peers, and a cri de coeur about support, whether that was SEND, mental health issues, whatever it was. “Support, support, support,” came out of those pages.

I want to give a difficult message to Government, to school leaders, to local authorities, to all of us, which is we cannot afford to be squeamish. We need the vision, the care, the accountabilities, and this needs to be top priority. Again, thank you for having this as a Committee thing, but we cannot afford to back away from it on any level. Children, particularly children from vulnerable backgrounds and disadvantaged backgrounds, are not going to achieve the dreams, the lives and the hope that they have talked to me about in their thousands if we do not take a strong line on this. We must.

Chair: I am aware we are running down the clock fairly swiftly towards midday, when I think we do need to finish, partly because of the recording. I am grateful for the patience of the panel.

I want to bring in Andrew specifically on some of Rachel’s recommendations and then a brief set of questions to Alice. I thought we might go to the recommendations from the Children’s Commissioner. I think we have covered some of the other ground.

Q39 **Andrew Lewer:** We have had such a good debate we are missing out some of the things that we were going to do because we have already done them. You identified a number of child-centred solutions for improving attendance. Can you give us an overview and why you think this child-centred focus is so important for improving attendance?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think I made it clear that I do think systems and processes are important too, but we are never going to crack it. Whether it is fines or whatever, you are never going to crack attendance just that way. We must truly understand the situation a child is in and the



situation that they are in with their family to understand why they are not attending and to put the support in that we need.

I have made a range of recommendations: teacher training, so we need our teachers trained to deliver inclusive education. We have talked about children's special educational needs. We have the new SEND implementation plan now coming through, and my office challenged and worked really hard on that. I am so pleased we are talking about all schools being inclusive and ensuring they support children with SEND—really practical things. Teachers need training in how to do low-stimulation afternoons, how to use blended living—all kinds of things that can make children who are neurodiverse or who have other SEND issues feel and be supported and learn in an environment. It is about teacher training and development, getting AP right, which is really important, building a team around the school and ensuring that mental health support—the whole range of support—does not stay in the offices but is sitting around the school and able to give that support and pick up children and work closely.

I am passionate about supporting young carers. We need to ensure that young carers are identified. That is a distinctive group for me that suffered during lockdown, and we need to support it. You know that, as the Children's Commissioner, I am going to be absolutely passionate about children in care and support for children in care, the early family support and really understanding what works—what we know works—and using everything we have to support whatever the barrier is to attendance, and make sure it is supported. Yes, all of these things take resource, but the only way to solve this issue is to invest in these things. My recommendations were numerous, but those are some of the key ones.

Andrew Lewer: That is a good run-through. Thank you.

Q40 **Chair:** Thank you. Finally, let's come back to Alice on the recommendation from the CSJ around attendance mentors. Clearly that is something that this Committee pushed very hard on under my predecessor, and as Minister I accepted to do the pilot. You made the point about the lack of scale to that, and the fact that it is only a pilot and it is not reaching sufficient children. Where would you go to ensure that could be rolled out more widely, and do you see it as purely a DFE issue or ought we to be looking across Departments in the support for that?

Alice Wilcock: With the attendance mentors, our ambition is to be much bigger than the pilot that has been rolled out by DFE. I do understand the need to collect evidence on this. Over the pandemic, we had the EEF doing analysis of what works for attendance, and whole-family support did come up as quite important in that, but the evidence base in England is less secure. I would say there are some amazing charities and community hubs and family hubs. Bedfordshire police are offering all different models of whole-family support, but it is based on the same principles, and we could work on the evaluations of that, rather than



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waiting for a new pilot, which will take three years. My concern is that by the time we have any evidence and we get through to delivery, it will be far too late. Lots of children will have left the school system, and we will have left them behind and forgotten about them. That is why we are saying we should roll out a national programme.

I think the responsibility must sit with the Department for Education, because that is where we focus on education and attendance and understand the barriers to attendance, but it cannot be solely an education issue. A lot of this spans into health, a lot of this spans into social care, and a lot of this spans into issues that families see themselves on the ground. I would make this a priority across Government.

I am grateful that the Education Committee is focusing on this, because it needs to remain a priority.

Chair: I will very quickly bring in Caroline, because I see she has some important issues to touch on, but I am afraid we are running out of time.

Q41 **Caroline Ansell:** Alice, on the enrichment guarantee in schools you spoke of earlier, what is required to see that rolled out and what are the costs involved?

Alice Wilcock: The enrichment guarantee would be a significant investment if we want to see it rolled out for all pupils, and there are a lot of enrichment activities that are already going on now. I would encourage the DFE to look at what enrichment activities exist and to look at existing enrichment activities outside of the school setting that are done through charities and other clubs and how we could integrate that within schools.

Q42 **Caroline Ansell:** Does anybody have any insight on the impact of the holiday activities and food programme and, specifically in this context, how it relates potentially to that September return?

Alice Wilcock: We heard about a lot of APs who are using the programme to sustain engagement. When they got children up to attending in school, they were targeting that support. I have not seen an evaluation specifically done on attendance, but it would be great to see that evidence. We know that this can be effective in helping sustain and rebuild relationships.

Chair: Thank you very much and thank you for speaking quickly in your answer to that question. I am grateful to all our witnesses. I think it has been a very valuable session to open this inquiry so, with that, thank you.