

Written evidence submitted by The National Autistic Society

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. Autism affects people in different ways but autistic people can share difficulties in:

Social communication - interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice e.g sarcasm, taking things literally.

Social interaction - difficulty recognising or understanding others' feelings and intentions and expressing their own emotions, finding it hard to form friendships, behaving in 'socially inappropriate' ways.

Repetitive and restrictive behaviour - the world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people making routines comforting.

Sensory sensitivity - over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain for example background sounds might be unbearably loud or distracting.

Highly focused hobbies and interests - These can change over time or be lifelong. Autistic people can become experts in their special interests and often like to share their knowledge.

Anxiety - particularly in social situations or when facing change. This can affect a person psychologically and physically and impact quality of life for autistic people and their families.

Meltdowns and shutdowns - A meltdown happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. Shutdowns are also a response to being overwhelmed, they can be equally debilitating but may appear more passive - eg an autistic person going quiet or 'switching off'.

Who are the National Autistic Society?

We are the UK's leading autism charity. Since we began 60 years ago, we have been pioneering new ways to support people and understand autism. We continue to learn every day from the children and adults we support in our schools and care services. Based on our experience, and with support from our members, donors and volunteers, we provide life-changing information and advice to millions of autistic people, their families and friends. We also support professionals, politicians and the public to better understand autism, so that more autistic people of all ages can be understood, supported and appreciated for who they are.

The factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils, in particular: Disadvantaged pupils, Pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds, Pupils with SEND and those who are clinically vulnerable to covid-19, Pupils in alternative provision.

How schools and families can be better supported to improve attendance, and how this affects pupils and families who are clinically vulnerable to covid-19.

Why autistic people?

Persistent absence is a complex issue with regard to autistic pupils. The reasons for low attendance at school include: reluctance to attend, withdrawal and exclusion. In the most recent Department of Education figures, over 40,000 autistic pupils were labelled as 'persistent absentees.'¹ That is 31% of

autistic pupils in schools across England. This is an alarming figure, and we would like to see efforts taken to improve attendance amongst autistic pupils. However, we are concerned by language in Government proposals, which reference strictness and a ‘non-negotiable’ approach to attendance.² We believe that such an approach neglects to consider the needs of autistic children and, furthermore, is representative of the very problems which currently reduce attendance. We hope that this submission demonstrates the specific needs of autistic pupils, and the approaches necessary to improve attendance.

Pressures faced by autistic pupils

Autistic people face unique pressures in a school environment. To understand why autistic people, attend school less than non-SEND peers, it is vital to recognise these pressures, what causes them, and how to remedy them.

Sensory Overload - This is an experience where an autistic person becomes overwhelmed by the sensory information around them. Too much information can cause stress, anxiety, and sometimes even physical pain. This is an experience which is unfortunately frequent for autistic students, and can result in withdrawal, distressed behaviour or meltdowns.

Struggling with unstructured times – Autistic children and young people may struggle with unstructured times at school, such as lunch and break times. These periods can cause anxiety and stress.

Transitions – Routines are important to autistic pupils. Transitions from year to year, and between different schools can be daunting. Some autistic pupils will experience great anxiety about attending a new school, or new school year if they are not supported with this transition.

Struggling with rules – Autistic children and young people may find it difficult to understand the rules of the school environment. They may also not understand the instructions given to them by teachers. This can make school a confusing and stressful place.

Social relationships – In our 2021 survey, just 8% of autistic students felt their fellow pupils understood enough about autism.

Bullying – Autistic pupils face an increased risk of bullying.³ This can make them fearful of attending school.

Why these pressures result in absence

Autistic pupils are likely to experience some of the above pressures at school every day. For some autistic children these demands are almost unbearable, leading to absence or what is sometimes referred to as ‘school refusal.’ This term somewhat unfairly implies that the child or young person has a choice, however. It is better to discuss it in terms of emotional based school avoidance.⁴ For many

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2020-to-2021>

² <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/46433/documents/1770>

³ Hebron, J., Oldfield, J., & Humphrey, N. (2017). Cumulative risk effects in the bullying of children and young people with autism spectrum conditions. *Autism*, 21(3), 291–300.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316636761>

⁴ <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/education/attendance-problems/parents>

autistic children the above pressures can mean that they are simply unable to tolerate school. Any policies on attendance must be conscious of the pressures that autistic children face in school.

Adapting the environment

It is important to recognise that this the high number of absences amongst autistic pupils is indicative of a school system which is not adapted to suit the needs of autistic pupils. Low attendance of autistic pupils must be seen as a symptom of a wider problem, rather than a problem which needs addressing in isolation. Efforts need to be made to make mainstream schools more supportive of autistic pupils. This will have the resulting impact of improving attendance of autistic pupils.

Sensory Overload

One of the key issues that autistic pupils face at school is Sensory Overload. This is an experience where they become overwhelmed by the environment around them. The school environment is frequently improperly adapted to support the needs of autistic pupils. To ensure that children are not overwhelmed in school environments it is important that schools take measures to improve the environment, such as: avoiding exceptionally bright lighting or echoey rooms. Through workshops with our Young Ambassadors, they told us that they would find the classroom environment easier to manage if they were allowed to use fidget toys to help them concentrate. Furthermore, some schools provide autistic pupils with quiet rooms, where they can go if they are overwhelmed. These are all simple inexpensive changes that can be made to the school environment that would make it easier for autistic children to attend school.

Transitions

Transitioning from one stage of school to another, particularly from primary to secondary, can cause a lot of anxiety for autistic students, and this can make them less likely to attend school. Through interviews with parents, they told us that they have found it really helpful when schools had transition protocol in place. This included giving children tours of the school and helping them meet their new teachers and staff members. Allowing autistic pupils to learn about the new school and meet their support network reduced anxiety and improved attendance. The government should consider introducing national transition protocol, which would both improve the experience of autistic pupils and attendance.

Social relationships

In our Survey in 2021, just 8% of autistic students felt their fellow pupils understood enough about autism. This is a striking figure, and demonstrates how autistic children do not feel supported and safe in school environments. Building understanding amongst peers, would help autistic pupils feel more comfortable attending school. We recommend that the government includes autism awareness in the national curriculum.

Bullying

Autistic pupils are more likely to be bullied than their peers.⁵ This is a key factor in why some autistic pupils don't want to attend school. It is important that schools and government recognise the impact

⁵ Hebron, J., Oldfield, J., & Humphrey, N. (2017). Cumulative risk effects in the bullying of children and

that bullying has on autistic children's school experience. The government should introduce national guidance on bullying which understands the specific support needs of autistic pupils. This guidance should involve a consultation with autistic children and young people. It is also important that lunch time and break clubs, as well as school breakfast clubs, are made to be environments supportive for autistic pupils. Through our workshops with young autistic people, they told us that having somewhere safe to go at break times would help them to feel less at risk of bullying.

Feeling understood by teachers

In our Schools Report in 2021, seven in 10 autistic students told us that school would be better if more teachers understood autism.⁶ This shows autistic people don't feel their needs are being supported in the classroom and may struggle to confide in a teacher if they are experiencing issues which would make attending school difficult. We recommend that the government works with the Autism Education Trust (AET), to deliver autism training to all school staff. This would transform the experience of autistic pupils at school.

Reducing exclusions

A major factor causing absences amongst autistic pupils, relative to non-SEND students, is the disproportionate rates of exclusions. According to the latest Department for Education statistics, autistic pupils are more than twice as likely to be excluded.⁷ These statistics also show that the most common reason for autistic children being formally excluded is 'persistent disruptive behaviour.'

This disparity in exclusion rates is often a result of mainstream schools having an insufficient understanding of autism. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism's 2017 report showed that fewer than half of teachers felt they had been adequately trained on autism.⁸ Behaviour that is seen as 'disruptive' is treated, and viewed, in the same way that it would be for neurotypical students. This behaviour is likely an indicator that the child's need for support is not being met. It could also indicate that the child is being overwhelmed, struggling to express themselves, being bullied, or many other concerns. These misunderstandings of autism and behaviour lead to autistic pupils being disproportionately excluded.

Exclusions can be really damaging for autistic pupils. It leads to the interruption of their education and being cut off from their friendship circles. This can make it more difficult for autistic children to attend school in future, as they continue to feel unsupported. It can cause anxiety and apprehension about returning to an educational setting where they feel unsupported in future. This anxiety can cause a significant long-term impact on a pupil's attendance. In our 2021 *Schools Report* 70% of autistic students told us they thought their teacher didn't understand enough about autism.⁹ It is therefore vital, that to

young people with autism spectrum conditions. *Autism*, 21(3), 291–300.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316636761>

⁶ <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/school-report-2021>

⁷ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england/2020-21#dataBlock-4accd7b1-f054-4e08-2a2e-08da68aa5688-tables>

⁸ <https://www.autism-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/APPGA-autism-and-education-report.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/school-report-2021>

reduce persistent absences amongst autistic pupils, schools develop a progressive understanding of autism and behaviour.

Formal exclusions are damaging to pupils, and we have the data to show the disproportionate way in which this impacts autistic children and young people. However, it is even more concerning to consider the levels of informal exclusions. These are illegal, and can be detrimental to a child's achievement and attendance. However, due to their nature, they are not being recorded, so we do not have a full understanding of the scale. We do know, that in 2021 more than 1 in 5 parents we surveyed said that their child had been informally excluded in the last two years.¹⁰ This practice is incredibly concerning and we urge the government to investigate the true scale of the problem, as well as take steps to remedy it.

To improve attendance amongst autistic pupils, we recommend that the DfE takes steps to reduce the unacceptable disproportionate rate that autistic pupils are excluded. Autistic pupils are excluded for behaviour which is deemed disruptive. In many instances, this is a sign that a child is overwhelmed. This could mean that the environment is not adapted to support their needs. In many instances a child may experience sensory overload in a classroom, this can then lead to behaviour which teachers could call disruptive. Punishing this behaviour can be really damaging. Instead, the school must understand how adapting the environment to support autistic pupils needs, as discussed earlier in the submission, can reduce the likelihood of autistic pupils becoming overwhelmed.

Whilst it is vital that school environments are always adapted to support the needs of autistic pupils, the crucial factor in reducing exclusions is understanding. Teachers must understand the relationship between autism and behaviour. An improper awareness of autism leads to autistic pupils being unfairly punished and removed from school.

The Autism Education Trust (AET) is a not-for-profit organisation hosted by the National Autistic Society and led in partnership with Ambitious about Autism. It was established and supported by the Department for Education in 2007. It works to deliver autism training to school staff. The AET has trialled its 'Mainstream Plus' model in several local councils. This is a strategy to build understanding of autism across the whole school. Applying this model in South Lincolnshire, they were able to see an 80% decrease in formal exclusions between 2015 and 2017.¹¹ This is an incredible decrease and demonstrates the value of understanding autism, in both improving educational outcomes but also increasing attendance.

The impact of the Department's proposed reforms to improve attendance.

It is noted that Ministers are proposing to introduce a new national framework for the use of fines for absence. This could have damaging impacts on the parents of autistic children. Preparing an autistic child for a day at school can be challenging for parents, and can cause them stress. It would be unfair to add to that stress the fear of potential fines for being unable to get their child to school which in turn

¹⁰ <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/school-report-2021>

¹¹ <https://www.ndti.org.uk/assets/files/Mainstream-Plus-Report-NDTi-FINAL.pdf>

may lead to more pressure being placed on an autistic child who is already anxious about attending school. Introducing fines is more likely to increase emotional based school exclusion, than it is to increase attendance.

The equality of fines was discussed in the recent consultation: *Modernising school attendance and admission registers and setting national thresholds for legal intervention*. If a new threshold for fines is introduced, this would unfairly impact autistic children and their families. This evidence submission details the ways in which the school environment is not adapted to suit autistic people's needs. The prospect of autistic pupils and families potentially being punished for not being able to cope in this overwhelming environment is very worrying. Rather than increasing fines for non-attendance, the government should focus on making the school environment more supportive for autistic pupils.

We recognise that the consultation document states 'the new regulations will require individual case by case decisions about whether a fixed penalty notice is appropriate.' However, this still leaves situations open to interpretation and does not alleviate the pressures faced by autistic people and families faced with these cases. We'd recommend that any new guidance on fines is very clear about exemptions for families with disabled children.

The impact of school breakfast clubs and free school meals on improving attendance for disadvantaged pupils.

School breakfast clubs would be useful for autistic pupils, as it would give them somewhere to go at the unstructured time before school. This would help them to feel less anxious about attending school. It is also an important point of transition in the day. If school breakfast clubs are made to be welcoming and supportive of autistic people it would encourage them to attend in the morning and set them up well for the day ahead. Furthermore, if the club is made to be enjoyable and exciting for autistic pupils, it would encourage the child to attend school in the morning and may mitigate emotional based school avoidance.

February 2023