

## Written evidence submitted by Catch22

### **Background**

[Catch22](#) is a national charity and social business that designs and delivers public services right across the social welfare cycle, from children's social care through to alternative provision education, apprenticeships and prison rehabilitation programmes in custody and the community. Our vision is a strong society where everyone has a good place to live, a purpose and good people around them. As an organisation, our principal aim is to help reform public services so that everyone can achieve these things.

[Catch22 Education](#) provides alternative and special full-time and part-time education for young people displaying a wide range of complex barriers to education, including those who are excluded or at risk of exclusion and those with social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH) or special educational needs (SEN). We run 4 Independent schools located across England and Wales, termed collectively under our "Include" banner; [Include Norfolk](#), [Include Suffolk](#), [Include London](#) and [Include Wales](#).

Across our alternative provision schools, our average attendance rate is 63.5%. We have a targeted approach to managing and raising attendance, the foundation of which is built on developing strong relationships with parents/carers from the outset of a student's enrolment. Approaches are planned in collaboration with parents, such that parents/carers are transparent with attendance issues and can be effectively supported to overcome such challenges. Our schools follow DfE and LA guidelines and protocols when managing poor attendance.

### **What factors cause persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils, in particular:**

#### **Disadvantaged pupils,**

- A very high proportion of the students on roll at our schools fall into the category of disadvantaged. In our Norfolk school, for example, all 83 students on roll are classed as 'disadvantaged and vulnerable'. We commonly see that students from disadvantaged backgrounds display low attendance and persistent absence due to lack of parental engagement. Attendance is not enforced from home and, critically, communication to understand and support to address such absence is challenging. The 2 main reasons for low parental engagement amongst disadvantaged families include:
  1. **Mistrust in statutory services:**  
The vast majority of students at our schools have been excluded from at least one previous education setting, sometimes more. Similarly, their disadvantage means that they are often in contact with social care services and have experienced trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). There is an overwhelming feeling of being "let down" by these services amongst our cohort and their parents. This leads to considerable mistrust and disillusionment from the system in general, resulting in non-engagement. To exemplify, the 2 students we currently have on roll who are LAC and in a children's home have an attendance rate of 0%.
  2. **Economic disadvantage:**  
Typically, a lack of at-home support and interest in a child's schooling will significantly impact whether or not a student achieves good attendance and can stem from the socioeconomic disadvantage faced by these families. Events with

good intentions, such as Christmas Jumper Day, fancy dress or World Book Day can place an enormous strain on families who simply can't afford these things, and they and their children can feel ostracised as a result, leading to disengagement. In addition, buying and washing school uniform can also prove difficult due to economic hardship – where schools do not offer free second hand uniform and students are given consequences for non-compliance of uniform regulations, again, there may be a greater propensity for the family to feel antagonised in this regard.

#### Pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds,

- Most commonly, the factor contributing to poor attendance from minority ethnic backgrounds is that of lacking English. Whilst most of our pupils speak English, several do have English as an additional language (EAL). We liaise with feeder schools in order to fully understand and assess individual needs. If necessary we will also undertake our own baseline assessment to see what support is required to help a child access the curriculum. This enables us to provide the necessary support, whether through resource, 1:1 sessions, accessing translation services etc. Despite this, EAL can pose a huge barrier to a student's motivation in attending school; anxiety, lack of self-confidence, low attainment to name a few.

Further to this, whilst some students may have English as their first language, it is often the case that their parents speak little to no English at all. Of course, this makes school-home communication a challenge. If attendance drops, it's difficult to understand why, and engage and support parents in driving school attendance. In addition, in areas where ethnic minorities are not the majority, there could be issues with language and cultural traditions that make things like homework, school events and communications difficult. We often see that this evokes a perception that they are being actively castigated by the school for not understanding how to participate in the school community which, again, can lead to disengagement.

#### Pupils with SEND and those who are clinically vulnerable to covid-19,

- A high proportion of our students have Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs. Many of our students have undiagnosed needs such as ASD and ADHD, this has an impact on their ability to learn and maintain a school day. We currently have many students with poor mental health and the waiting time to see a health care professional is 18 months. Our schools have Integrated Therapists and/or counsellors, but helping these students get into school to engage with these provisions in the first place is hugely challenging.
- Often students with SEND will find it difficult to cope in lessons – the pace and rigour of lessons and the rigidity of behaviour rules becomes a further barrier to them appearing to 'do well' in the classroom. Without a flexible and supportive approach to their schooling, they too will feel othered in a school setting and this will cause them to develop anxieties around schooling. We often see this turn into a recognised mental health concern known as 'school emotional avoidance'.

### Pupils in alternative provision.

- All of Catch22's schools are Alternative or Specialist Provision. As our APs accept referrals for students all across the region/county, a big barrier to attendance is the poor transport service that our pupils receive from the Local Authority. Transport is often very late or arrives before the allotted collection time. Our students are told to be ready 15 minutes before the allotted collection time and wait for 15 mins after. If a student's collected time is 7:45, that students needs to be at their collection point no later at 7:30am and wait there until 8am, meaning they are waiting for at least 30 minutes, in the cold at a collection point which is given to them by the taxi provider. Today, we had a student in King's Lynn who was collected at 8:05am instead of 7:45, she had been waiting at the top of her road from 7:30am in -5 temperatures. They went to five additional towns and the student arrived at school at 10am. It is common for our students to not arrive home until 4:30pm - 5pm. This makes coming into school an exhausting process for students who are already disengaged from education and has a considerable knock-on effect on their attendance.

**Recommendation:** Expand the availability of online/remote provision for the hardest-to-reach persistent non-attenders.

Catch22 have set up an online provision, Cloud22, for persistent non-attenders. Cloud22 was breed out of COVID due to the national lockdowns and the shift to remote education. Historically we always had a small number of pupils who were chronic non-attenders. Once we started the online teaching delivery, we began seeing pupils appear online who had little or even zero attendance in the school to date. We identified a gap in the market for the education of children who are too anxious to attend onsite schools.

We started with just one teacher and 6 pupils who all thrived in the small nurturing environment where they felt most comfortable learning. The curriculum is the same as our onsite schools, the teaching hours are the same and the ambition of securing positive post-16 destinations is just like a mainstream pupil. Over the next two years, the local authority loved what we were doing to meet the needs of these hard-to-reach children and supported us to expand the provision. We now have 22 pupils, 2 teachers, 2 teachings assistants, a pastoral lead and dedicated time for our school integrative therapist to work with those that need her support.

Due to our different approach to meeting their needs, we are now able to take referrals from the local authority for pupils who have been NEET for a long period of time and those who have very little attendance at previous schools due to social, emotional and/or mental health concerns.

- Due to the nature of the students our Alternative Provision schools support, many of whom have been excluded multiple times and moved around various schools, we do not always receive a complete picture of their attendance history. It's traceable if needed, though this sometimes means that students whose attendance should be "flagged" as a risk factor are not as obvious to us. We understand that the first week is pivotal in ensuring a student achieves good attendance for the rest of their time with us. Therefore, a high focus is given to the referral process and the student's first few days. During the referral process, caregiver

and student meet with the school. This meeting is pivotal in establishing relationships with the family and where necessary their network. Daily phone calls and high level of emotional check-ins with both student and caregiver also help achieve engagement and attendance. In the first week, we offer a reduced and bespoke timetable created in collaboration by school and pupil, so that they are moved slowly into the provision and given a 'taster' of how their new school life will be. In addition, we engage in a lot of 'play' via PACE methodology with them, this is a research supported approach to aid student transition into a new school, but moreover to support them in feeling safe and comfortable in the environment they are in.

### **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?**

- **Recommendation:** A local authority support network for independent schools. Lacking support from social care given to families can significantly impact attendance – this might include; failure to address SEND needs, housing difficulties, challenges claiming benefits etc. A support network for independent schools, in which they can discuss and relay trends in low attendance that relate to bottlenecks in other social care services to the local authority.
- **Recommendation:** Provide dedicated funding to be used toward parent/carer engagement strategies. We see clearly the positive impact that increased parental engagement has on attendance. At most of our AP schools, we do not find families whose children have low attendance. We find that doing this can exacerbate the already fragile nature of relationships that schools have with families who experience issues with persistent absence, most of whom are vulnerable both emotionally and economically. Instead, we recognise low attendance is a presenting need of a deeper underlying problem that we try to remedy. Developing a strong and open relationship with the family is key in ensuring the success of more bespoke interventions around attendance, especially if they will involve the participation of Social Care. Ultimately, the family need to understand that whatever we put in place is to support them. Parent evenings/engagement events, with the option of virtual attendance, calling/messaging/checking in on parents once a day with news and updates on their child's education, providing home visits where purposeful are all hugely successful strategies which contribute not just to attendance, but towards identifying and intervening with other risks and safeguarding.
- **Recommendation:** Instil a target of 100% attendance in students and families attending AP schools. Fundamentally, a SEND diagnosis or previous exclusion should not be used as an excuse by the system for a child attending school less frequently than they are able to or achieving lower grades than they could have attained, had the right support been in place. There is, however, a general mentality that these students cannot achieve full-time attendance which is not the case. Rather, all students can reach 100% attendance so long as their needs are addressed and support is in place to help them fulfil such a target.

### **The impact of the Department's proposed reforms to improve attendance?**

- Our schools follow this guidance to the letter, and this has also had a positive impact on attendance. All of our schools appoint Attendance Leads to ensure compliance.

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

- Our schools provide breakfast and a hot midday meal for all pupils. School breakfast clubs, free snacks and FSM have without a doubt had an influence on a student's decision on whether or not to attend. We have found breakfast clubs to be a very successful initiative; they make students feel wanted and contribute to the feeling that school is not simply a place to learn, but it is a community and family upon which they can rely for much more than simply teaching, lessons and exams. It provides a safe space to build trusting relationships, and is very much valued by our students. School breakfast clubs demonstrate flexibility and care to those in need, particularly for the parents of our students, many of whom are socioeconomically disadvantaged. This wrap-around and targeted support to families who, instead of being told: "give a healthy breakfast to your child, provide activities for your child, bring your child on time to school", experience the community provide the support needed to do these things. Often in the first instance *for them* until they feel able to do it for themselves.

**The role of the Holiday Activities and Food programme and other after school and holiday clubs, such as sports, in improving attendance and engagement with school?**

- Our schools do not provide after school or holiday clubs, primarily due to funding, resource and space. We do, however, link up with partner organisations and Local Authority holiday programmes that we can signpost families to over the holidays.

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