

Written evidence submitted by NASUWT - The Teachers' Union

Executive Summary

- To explore the factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils, it is crucial that the link is made between poor attendance and unmet needs. The NASUWT has explored these in detail throughout this Call for Evidence, and would urge the Government and policymakers to recognise this societal issue.
- The issue of attendance cannot, therefore, be examined in isolation. It must also be explored alongside other policy areas, including special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), mental health support and financial assistance for disadvantaged families.
- The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing cost-of-living crisis, are not being borne equally. Those who were already vulnerable in society are facing increased pressures. For children and young people, it is often those in these situations that will encounter multiple barriers to securing good attendance and accessing educational opportunities.
- While schools and educational settings play a central role in securing good attendance, it is important that this remains relative to the role that other organisations must play. Parents, academy trusts, governing bodies and local authorities also have responsibilities in tackling persistent and severe absence.

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.**

1. Exploring the factors that cause persistent and severe absence is extremely important. The NASUWT has always maintained that the best place for children and young people is to be in school or college, with guaranteed access to education, and for their wellbeing to be looked after.
2. This is in accordance with The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which confirms that it is a responsibility of the state to ensure that children and young people, as well as having access to an effective education, are safe, secure, can make a contribution and enjoy good physical and mental health. It is incumbent on the Government and policymakers to ensure access to school is as universal as possible, by the removal of the barriers that can often lead to persistent and severe absence. The NASUWT therefore welcomes the Select Committee's decision to focus on this vital matter.
3. The NASUWT has raised concerns for many years on the issues facing different groups of children that may cause persistent and severe absence. It is crucial that there is a widespread recognition that poor attendance is often the result of other unmet needs, particularly by the Government and those making policy that impact on this societal issue.
4. Some groups of pupils may be at particular risk of poor attendance, particularly if action is not taken to identify and provide appropriate support before attendance becomes an issue. These groups of pupils include those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); those struggling academically, socially, or emotionally; and pupils experiencing problems at home, such as domestic violence. This is also the case for pupils who are vulnerable, such as looked after children or those with young carer responsibilities.

5. The NASUWT argues that there needs to be a greater recognition of the link between poor attendance, attendance issues and wider school responsibilities. This includes ensuring the curriculum stipulated by the Government and policymakers is appropriate and meets the needs of pupils, and that teachers are properly supported and resourced to deliver this curriculum. To ensure access to education is equal and fair for all children and young people, a clear national framework of entitlement for every child is needed which provides access to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum and recognises the centrality of the cognitive, emotional, cultural, creative, ethical and social dimensions of children's learning. The NASUWT has made representations for this prior to, and particularly since, the COVID-19 crisis.
6. In the NASUWT's annual Big Question survey from May 2022, when asked about behaviour problems that cause NASUWT members concern on a day-to-day basis, more than half (54%) cited late arrivals at lessons, and 63% selected pupils with irregular attendance patterns. This has increased by 15% since 2019, when irregular attendance was cited by less than half of respondents (47%).
7. The findings also showed that an overwhelming 96% are teaching pupils with mental health challenges.
8. Of these teachers, more than three quarters (77%) believe that appropriate support is not available to help them address pupils' mental health issues. Additionally, nearly 9 in 10 (88%) of respondents feel that the rates of adverse emotional, personal or social issues among the pupils they teach has increased over the previous 12 months.
9. The Big Question 2022 showed that more than half (54%) of schools are continuing to provide remote education/distance learning to some groups of pupils. When asked which groups of pupils, they include pupils who are school phobic (25%); pupils with mental health need such as anxiety (33%); and, pupils with SEND who struggle with the social aspects of school (19%). Another identified group was pupils with SEND whose needs are not being met by the school (9%).

10. While all of these issues cannot be explicitly linked to poor attendance, they are no doubt a contributing factor. The House of Commons Research Briefing on school attendance in England¹ demonstrates this. The briefing highlights Government data showing that in 2020/21, pupils with complex SEN which means they have an education, health, and care plan (EHC plan), had much higher absence rates than those with no identified SEN (13.1% compared to 3.9%).
11. Additionally, in 2020/21 the ethnic groups with the highest absence rates by far were pupils who were Travellers of Irish descent, or who were Gypsy/Roma (19.1% and 15.0% respectively).
12. Research by Cardiff university into the association for children and young people in Wales of school absence and exclusion with recorded neurodevelopmental disorders, mental disorders, or self-harm², found pupils with mental health and neurodevelopmental disorders (e.g. ADHD, autism) or who self-harm are more likely to miss school through absenteeism.
13. The NASUWT is concerned that many schools are struggling to access external services, and in many cases these services have been cut. Adding to this pressure, waiting times are excessive, which is likely to cause a barrier in accessing support services. Both of these challenges cause a barrier for schools in supporting pupils struggling with attendance.
14. As there is no national waiting time standard for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), there is no nationally collated data on this. However, excessive lengths of time for young people to receive a first appointment are well documented. In a recent (January 2022) Freedom of Information (FOI) Act request from 48 NHS mental health trusts about the time children were waiting for a first appointment with CAMHS following a referral³, the data showed vulnerable children were waiting almost three years to access mental health care in some parts of the

¹ Long, R, Danechi, (2023) [House of Commons Research Briefing: School attendance in England](#)

² John, A, Friedmann, Y, DelPozo-Banos, M, Frizzati, A, Ford, T, Thapar, A (2021) [Association of school absence and exclusion with recorded neurodevelopmental disorders, mental disorders, or self-harm: a nationwide, retrospective, electronic cohort study of children and young people in Wales, UK](#)

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/child-mental-health-waiting-times-b1972830.html>

UK. The data, which was published as part of a report by *The Independent* newspaper, also highlighted one of the worst cases where it took 1,019 days for a young patient in South Yorkshire to be assessed.

15. The challenges around accessing CAMHS cause a barrier for schools in supporting pupils struggling with attendance.
16. Some of these factors driving poor attendance have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent cost of living crisis. This issue is explored in more detail below.
17. Evidence from the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)⁴ confirms that in 2019/20, 4.3 million children were living in poverty in the UK. Children of lone-parent or large families and Black children are among those at greater risk of living in the most economically disadvantaged households.
18. As significant numbers of society now face the cost of living crisis, an overwhelming number of families are struggling with financial hardship and growing levels of deprivation. Demonstrating this, a study of families on low incomes undertaken by CPAG in November 2020⁵ found that almost six in ten families were experiencing difficulties covering the cost of three or more essentials, including food, utilities, rent, travel or child-related costs.
19. There is a well-established link between child poverty and access to education. The Government's own data⁶ show that there is an annual pattern of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM) on average having higher absence rates than those not eligible. In 2020/21 the absence rate for eligible pupils was over double the rate for non-eligible pupils (7.8% compared to 3.7%).
20. The Union has campaigned consistently for more effective action to ensure that no child grows up in circumstances where they are deprived of the economic, social and cultural resources they need to thrive and make the most of their potential.

⁴ [Child poverty facts and figures | CPAG](#)

⁵ <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/poverty-pandemic-update-impact-coronavirus-low-income-families-and>

⁶ Long, R, Danechi, S (2023) [House of Commons Research Briefing: School attendance in England](#)

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.

Pupils struggling with social and emotional issues

21. The NASUWT is currently working in partnership with Citizens UK and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) to campaign for the statutory provision of school-based counselling in every primary and secondary school in England.
22. The NASUWT asserts this is an important route for pastoral support that schools should have access to when trying to support students. As many cases of persistent absence can be attributed to an unmet emotional need, pupils could greatly benefit from exploration of these issues with a school-based counsellor.
23. Additionally, the non-stigmatising nature of a school-based counsellor intervention can make it particularly effective in addressing the root causes of persistent and severe absence.
24. Unlike in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, there is no statutory requirement for, or provision of, school-based counselling in England. This leaves some pupils in England without access to a counsellor, which the NASUWT asserts is an indefensible situation.
25. A study led by the University of Roehampton, in collaboration with the BACP, found school-based humanistic counselling led to significant reductions in pupils' psychological distress over the long-term, compared to pupils who only received pastoral care⁷. The study also found pupils who were offered counselling experienced significantly improved self-esteem, as well as large increases in their achievement of personal goals. This type of counselling costs between £300 and £400 per pupil.

⁷ Cooper, M, Stafford, M, Saxon, D, Beecham, J, Bonin, E, & Barkham, M, Bower, P, Cromarty, K, Duncan, C, Pearce, P, Rameswari, T, Ryan, G. (2021). [Humanistic counselling plus pastoral care as usual versus pastoral care as usual for the treatment of psychological distress in adolescents in UK state schools \(ETHOS\): a randomised controlled trial.](#)

26. These positive outcomes were reflected in an analysis of information provided by Scottish local authorities on the school counselling and community mental health supports in their area from July to December 2021⁸. From the local authorities that had evaluated the impact of this access, this ranged from 88% to 100% of children and young people having reported improved outcomes.
27. With strong evidence of its effectiveness and positive impact on children and young people, it is hard to understand why provision has not been made a statutory requirement in England as it is in other nations of the UK.
28. The NASUWT would urge the Committee, in seeking evidence from the Department for Education (DfE) on the wider issues associated with attendance, to press Ministers on their continued reluctance to introduce provisions for school-based counselling in England, particularly given the evidence of its efficacy and benefit to children and young people.
29. Other authoritative bodies have called for school-based counselling. The Local Government Association (LGA) has also called for school-based counselling to be made available and fully funded by Government in all state-funded secondary schools and academies to help support the rising numbers of children and young people reporting mental health issues.⁹
30. The introduction of NHS mental health support teams (MHSTs) was a welcome addition to the structures in place to support children and young people. These teams are now expected to have coverage across 35% of the country by 2023. While this is a positive development, it still leaves 65% of the country with limited access to mental health support.
31. Evidence gathered through the NASUWT's member engagement activities has uncovered the problems that schools are facing in supporting pupils with mental health difficulties. While MHSTs are providing support to some pupils, there have been a number of occurrences where the teams would not support pupils who had

⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/access-to-counsellors-in-secondary-schools-and-children-and-young-peoples-community-mental-health-services-summary-report-july-to-december-2021/>

⁹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-make-school-based-counselling-available-all-children-tackle-rising-child-mental>

previously been referred to CAMHS. This is even the case when the pupil no longer needs the level of support that would be provided by CAMHS.

32. There have also been reported incidents where MHSTs have refused to see referrals where the school has asked for support as an interim measure because of the very long waiting times for CAMHS.
33. While this may seem reasonable, given the remit of the MHSTs is not to provide higher level support, the consequence is that schools have to fill the gaps where support is not available, even though they are educators and not mental health specialists. Children and young people are being failed, with the lack of prompt and appropriate support also having negative consequences for the health and wellbeing of teachers, leaders and other staff in schools.
34. The NASUWT also welcomed the trial of the four-week waiting time standard for children and young people referred for mental health treatment. However, without the funding and resourcing to meet these new waiting times, the trial is unlikely to deliver any meaningful change to the currently inadequate system.
35. This leaves many children and young people without more high-level support. For children in areas where they can access MHSTs, this still only addresses more low-level mental health issues.

Pupils with SEND

36. Focusing on the challenges facing those pupils with SEND, a 2018 NASUWT survey of SEN teachers and those working in special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs), painted a picture of a lack of support with three in ten (30%) teachers saying they rarely or never got the support they needed to teach children with SEN effectively.
37. With regards to support for pupils themselves, almost two thirds (62%) of teachers said support for children with SEN had decreased in the last five years, while 83% of

teachers said the workload of teachers and school leaders had increased as a result of cuts to specialist services for SEN.

38. The NASUWT has set out evidence which shows that overall levels of investment in the special and alternative education system and the mechanisms in place to allocate funding efficiently and effectively are not adequate to ensure the needs of children and young people can be met fully in all circumstances.¹⁰
39. A system built around an understanding of education as a public good and a human right, and therefore, one best placed to make effective use of resources, is demonstrated by meaningful and sustainable partnerships at all levels. While there is evidence of effective collaboration in the area of special and additional needs, it is clear that meaningful co-operation occurs in spite, not because, of current national policy.
40. The NASUWT asserts that there is an urgent need for the reinstatement of arrangements for the provision of special and additional support for pupils based on the public service ethos values of partnership and collaboration at all levels of the education system. An effective reform to national policy would include the introduction of accountability and regulatory regimes that encourage joint-working, and disincentivise organisations from behaving in ways that advance their narrowly-conceived self-interest.
41. Looking specifically at the SEND Green Paper, while the NASUWT supports its broad aims, the Union has a number of significant concerns. Firstly, the primary driver for the proposed reforms is to cut costs rather than to secure improvements across the system. Secondly, schools, teachers and headteachers are being blamed for the shortcomings in the system, which are an outcome of years of government underinvestment and failure to provide the support needed.
42. Additionally, the proposals will result in fewer children and young people with SEND receiving the support they need, and the demands on teachers, leaders and support staff becoming even more unsustainable.
43. Stakeholders across the sector remain frustrated that there is still no sign of the promised implementation plan following the SEND review that was due in autumn.

¹⁰ NASUWT (2020) [Issues paper on funding for special educational needs](#).

The system is continuing to operate in circumstances of extreme uncertainty, in large part due to the Government's failure to publish even an overview of next steps, This is serving to undermine confidence of SEND professionals and the wider education workforce in the Government's ability to resolve the identified issues within the SEND system.

Disadvantaged pupils

44. One undeniable driving factor of mental ill-health in children and young people is living in poverty. In a Buttle UK survey of over 1,200 child support workers¹¹, 65% reported that poverty has a high negative impact on children's mental health. Mental health can be one of the root causes of school avoidance and associated poor attendance.
45. In the short-term, the NASUWT asserts that the Government must reverse its decision to remove the £20 per week uplift to Universal Credit and tax credits, enhance other child-related benefits, and remove current arbitrary benefits caps. The ability of all children to access universal free school meals would also have a positive impact on addressing the food insecurity that many households with children continue to face.
46. In a recent study conducted by Suration on behalf of Chefs in School¹², teachers reported 88% of children who come in hungry show excessive tiredness at school. 84% are easily distracted and 74% exhibit disruptive behaviour. These are all barriers to securing good attendance, as children are at risk of feeling isolated from their peers and unable to engage meaningfully in their education.
47. Research by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), on behalf of charitable organisation Magic Breakfast¹³, evaluated the impact on attainment and other outcomes of schools offering a free, universal, before school breakfast club. The findings showed attendance improved for children in breakfast club schools, resulting in about 26 fewer half-days of absence per year for a class of 30. This could

¹¹ <https://buttleuk.org/our-research/research-reports/the-impact-of-poverty-on-child-mental-health/>

¹² <https://www.suration.com/83-of-primary-school-teachers-say-children-come-to-school-hungry/>

¹³ Education Endowment Foundation (2016, updated 2019) [Magic Breakfast Evaluation report and executive summary](#)

be a result of improved health leading to fewer sick days, or a greater incentive to arrive at school knowing a nutritional meal was provided. The majority of headteachers in the trial schools felt that concentration, behaviour, attendance and attainment had improved.

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

Wider responsibilities in securing good attendance

48. The NASUWT is concerned that the DfE guidance on attendance policies does not go far enough in recognising the challenges that can often be involved in achieving good attendance, and the need to treat attendance in its entirety, rather than simplifying it to a behaviour management issue.
49. It is also vital that the role of schools in ensuring good attendance remains relative to the role that other organisations must play. Schools are not solely responsible for attendance. While this is explored to some degree in the guidance, the NASUWT does not feel the DfE has done enough to clearly set out the roles and responsibilities of parents, schools, academy trusts, governing bodies and local authorities – as set out in the *'Summary table of responsibilities for school attendance'*¹⁴.
50. The NASUWT has, at multiple opportunities, shared its significant concerns over the effectiveness of multi-agency working, which is highly variable across different local authority areas and, in many cases falls, short of acceptable standards. This is in no small part due to systems and structures that were in place prior to the taking of office by the Coalition Government in May 2010, which supported and sustained impactful multi-agency working, having been dismantled and not effectively replaced. The NASUWT has consistently raised this in previous consultation responses and in our wider communications with the DfE and other government departments.

¹⁴ DfE (2022) [Summary table of responsibilities for school attendance](#)

51. Regarding the responsibilities placed on the local authority to improve attendance, the NASUWT has long held the view that local authorities are not funded properly, nor supported sufficiently, to discharge the duties put upon them. This deep-rooted problem cannot be addressed by simply setting out minimum expectations.
52. Compounding this, Government policies, including academisation and the marketisation of education, has undermined the role of the local authority and resulted in a locally fragmented education system. When combined with a reduction in budgets, and austerity measures that have led to the cutting of services, the DfE's proposed attendance reforms are challenging to deliver.
53. As the guidance was released at the beginning of the academic year 2022/23 and is not yet statutory, the NASUWT does not feel the full impact will yet have been realised by schools. It is also a matter of concern that the means by which the guidance will be placed on a statutory footing by September 2023 remains unclear following the withdrawal of the Schools Bill. The NASUWT will be keeping the impact of the guidance under review over the coming months, and will monitor this through engagement with members.

Achieving effective attendance policies

54. Taking the wide-reaching issues that can cause poor attendance into account; the NASUWT has asserted that for attendance policies to be effective, they must address the underlying causes of poor attendance. They must provide a basis for prevention, rather than purely focusing on punitive action. The effectiveness of the Department's proposed reforms on encouraging schools to adopt this approach will only become apparent in time.
55. As many schools are reporting difficulties in accessing external services due to demand outstripping supply, or services simply being cut, the NASUWT is concerned that schools wishing to follow an escalation route to improving attendance may simply bypass prevention and move more rapidly to punitive action.

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

56. The NASUWT recently joined with other unions and organisations to call for free school meals to be provided to all children from families receiving Universal Credit in England. The NASUWT asserts that a good-quality school meal can help improve children's concentration and behaviour during lessons. Our members can also attest to the effect they can have on improving school attendance, on children's health and on academic performance.
57. The escalating cost-of-living crisis has led to more families struggling to afford school lunches, even though their circumstances mean they fall outside the restrictive free school meal eligibility criteria. Expanding entitlement to free school meals would have significant benefits in terms of pupils' health, wellbeing and educational attainment, particularly at a time when many families are finding it increasingly difficult to afford to put food on the table.

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.

58. With reports of a growing number of children attending school without a decent breakfast¹⁵, or missing out on support at the end of the school day and during the holidays, the provision of extra facilities through extended schools could make a significant difference to children's lives.
59. Government funding for free access to provision for children, especially for those who are deemed vulnerable or eligible for free school meals, could make a significant contribution to improving outcomes for disadvantaged children. This includes improving attendance, for the reasons set out in this evidence submission.

February 2023

¹⁵ <https://www.survation.com/83-of-primary-school-teachers-say-children-come-to-school-hungry/>