

Written evidence submitted by The Centre for Social Justice

The Centre for Social Justice has been researching severe absence since 2020. As part of our evidence gathering for the Education Select Committee, we held focus groups with 10 local authorities (LAs), 10 Alternative Providers (APs), and 25 charities working with children who are absent or disengaged from school. This response reflects the intelligence gathered from those conversations.

The factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils.

Anxiety and mental health

Participants agreed anxiety is the biggest driver behind recent increases in absence. We heard of a growing cohort of children and families who struggle to leave the house.

More broadly, mental health difficulties have become endemic and are contributing to school attendance difficulties. Children are struggling to access the mental health support that they need to engage in education.

Special educational needs/disabilities

Many participants stressed the issue of undiagnosed and unmet special educational needs/disabilities (SEND) as a driver for absence. Children awaiting a diagnosis do not have access to formal SEND support and may struggle to attend school as a result. When children do not attend school, it becomes harder to get the evidence for a diagnosis.

We heard of many instances where relationships between families, schools and LAs broke down when SEND needs were not met. Parents feel blamed for not forcing attendance but do not want to pressurise their child when they are struggling.

Disengagement with the curriculum

Disengagement with school was closely tied to low academic attainment and intense pressure at school. Some children get bullied because they are getting low grades in traditional subjects. These children are not given the same sense of reward in other non-academic areas where they have talents. This has been made worse by the pandemic as there has been increased pressure to catch up on lost learning.

Disengagement with school can be intergenerational. Parents and grandparents may have struggled at school but are thriving in their careers despite this. This can cause them to doubt their child's need to attend school and hamper their willingness to engage.

Children in Alternative Provision

Many children referred to AP have missed big chunks of their education, especially if they are referred from home education. APs told us that they focus on improving attendance and developing the building blocks of learning.

AP participants told us that recently there has been an increase in the number of children with an EHCP or seeking a SEND diagnosis being placed in AP. We also heard about children in AP who were on the brink of, or already involved in, criminality.

Poverty

Poverty was seen as a key driver behind absence, made worse by the cost-of-living crisis. Families are increasingly unable to afford necessities such as travel, food, and toiletries.

When children live in temporary accommodation or are placed in a school far away from home, transport links underpin school attendance. Transport is a particular issue in rural areas. We also heard of instances of children not attending school where their commute would have involved passing through gang territory or breaking the terms of their bail.

Hygiene issues were seen as a hidden driver of school absence. Children feel too embarrassed to go into school when they do not have access to hot showers, deodorant, or sanitary products.

Food was also a massive issue for families. We heard of breakfast clubs which unearthed children who were regularly missing meals.

Disrupted home environments

We also heard of many other issues underlying absence which originate at home. Issues like insecure housing, domestic abuse, young people acting as carers, relationship breakdown, and family addictions can act as a catalyst for attendance problems. Often, families recognise they need support but do not tell statutory services out of fear of repercussions.

Participants told us that key moments to intervene were often missed. It was normal for issues to escalate beyond the stage where early intervention is possible. This was a particular problem during school shutdowns when issues at home became more difficult to observe. Since the pandemic, families have been more reluctant to invite attendance officers into their home, making it harder to spot home-based risks.

A culture shift following the pandemic

There has also been a culture shift in parents' attitudes towards children being at home during the school day. Parents who home schooled during the pandemic are more willing to let their children stay at home. LAs told us the pandemic taught families that sometimes education is important and sometimes it is not.

In some areas, families are asking for leaves of absence that they would not have considered before the pandemic.

We also heard how families are now more likely to withdraw their children from school due to minor illness or viruses (for example Strep A) to avoid contamination.

The pandemic led to a breakdown in routines which have not yet been re-established. More children are staying up late and not coming into school the next day. Parents are struggling to enforce boundaries with their children, especially as they get older.

Where are children when they are absent from school?

Participants agreed that when children are absent from school, they are mostly at home.

Parents may keep children at home because they need extra support with their mental health or caring responsibilities.

In the cases where parents do not want to force attendance, as mentioned above, they may even have to make arrangements to stay at home to look after their children.

When at home, the children are typically spending the majority of their time in their bedroom. We heard gaming addictions have become rampant and more children are spending time online. Participants spoke of children being groomed and talking to strangers online, while at home.

Truancy has become less common, although it does still happen. Some LAs have seen patterns of friendship groups crowding in one person's house during school hours. We also heard reports of children who were involved in county lines or selling sex on the street during the school day.

How schools and families can be better supported to improve attendance

Accessing the right support

Attendance issues emerge when children cannot access the support they need in a timely fashion.

The renewed focus on multi-agency working in the new guidance was welcomed. However, many participants reported that the guidance is not being picked up by all the relevant agencies because it's not statutory.

Many areas reported a bottleneck in demand for mental health services. We heard of children who were not in school for two years because they were waiting for CAMHs support. LAs stated that health colleagues often do not see their role as focusing on social and emotional development as well as mental health. When children do not meet thresholds for mental health support, they are often not triaged to the support that they need. Participants agreed some current thresholds are creating barriers to accessing support which would otherwise improve school attendance.

Similarly, LAs told us that Early Help teams did not prioritise attendance issues and often closed cases even when a child is still severely absent. School absence was often not seen through the lens of neglect, so families who could have benefitted from additional early support often missed out.

Some areas had strong local strategies built on partnership working, which were seen as key for providing the right support at the right time. These areas tended to be smaller and better resourced, but also had Director and council buy-in which enabled a joined-up approach.

The current Department for Education guidance on attendance should be made statutory.

Tracking attendance data

Some participants stated that the focus on absolute rates of attendance was creating perverse incentives. Focusing on attendance alone can lead to schools losing sight of whether the actions they are taking are in the interests of the individual or the school. Heads reported schools over relying on sanctions to force bums on seats and inflate their attendance figures, rather than tackling the underlying barriers to attendance.

New metrics should be produced to capture progress travelled on attendance. This data should examine attendance patterns at an individual and school level and should be incorporated into the attendance dashboard.

Advice: Guidance, Targeted Support and Attendance Advisors

There were inconsistencies in the extent to which guidance and targeted support was seen to be helpful. LAs thought that targeted support could help to improve attendance rates, but some APs told us that these conversations can become pointless box-ticking exercises.

Schools and LAs understand the importance of early intervention but can't shift towards this model given current resources. Some participants stated that the money invested in attendance advisors would be better spent on building capacity for whole-family support.

The inclusion plans, as proposed in the SEND Review, should be rolled out and extended to include absence.

The value of relational work

Often, schools do not know the reason for school absence. Sometimes children will be recorded as ill when families and young people do not want to disclose the true barriers to attendance.

Having a child-centred approach, where the child's voice is heard, can help improve attendance. Young people need an adult to confide in who they can trust. As quoted in our sessions, "The quick fix is the trusting relationship and then you can build out from that."

We heard about the benefits of this relationship lying with a third party who was separate from school and home – for example a youth worker or a sports coach. This can help bridge the gap between school and home.

The government should follow through on its 2019 manifesto commitment to invest £500 million in new youth clubs and services. This should form a National Youth Legacy Endowment.

Enrichment

In our sessions, we heard about how enrichment activities, such as sport, can be used to develop soft skills outside the curriculum, including leadership, determination and understanding another person's point of view. A fully academic curriculum only develops one part of a child and discounts those whose skills and talents are more practical.

Where a child has disengaged with the curriculum, due to their skills lying outside of academia, they should be encouraged and praised in what they are good at. This will increase self-esteem and help them view school in a more positive way.

Participants recognised the value of breakfast clubs and free school meals, when they were wrapped into a broader strategy for engagement and attendance. Sports coaches also talked about how they had integrated food provision into existing clubs.

Breakfast clubs are particularly helpful as a means of engaging children whose families are struggling to provide food at home. Similarly, food banks on school sites can engage parents, but must be done tactfully where families can access the support without others knowing and potentially singling out those who use it.

The government should introduce a new enrichment guarantee in schools. When activities take place in the morning, breakfast clubs should be incorporated as part of the enrichment guarantee.

Whole-Family Support

Participants fully agreed that whole-family support was necessary to tackle the root causes behind absence. Whole-family support had to be offered early and done in partnership with parents.

To engage with families and offer whole-family support, we need to understand how they want to communicate. Our evidence found that most families do not respond to formal communication, such as letters.

Participants agreed that family support was not always easily accessible, calling for the government to do more to promote what good family support looks like and offer parenting courses for all ages.

Family hubs should be integrated with existing school services and co-located within schools.

Embedding family support and outreach into school culture, before then working on the transition back into school, is fundamental to improving attendance. Schools are the one constant feature in

young people's lives, meaning they are often better equipped to provide pastoral support on an ongoing basis.

However, accountability measures are typically more focused on academic results than wellbeing. Schools must make a judgement over what is more important. APs told us that a greater focus on welfare crowds out time spent on teaching the curriculum.

We heard from participants that there needs to be a greater focus on mental health and wellbeing at school level. Many participants cited the value of a whole-school approach to mental health which would, in turn, improve attendance for children whose primary barrier is mental health or social and emotional difficulties. The child and their voice should be at the centre of this, helping them to move to a place where they want to be in school to achieve their future ambitions.

The government should fast track their commitment to roll out designated mental health leads for all schools. Schools should be supported to develop a whole-school approach to mental health.

A constant theme in our inquiry was that school staff do not have the capacity to do welfare and attendance checks. Staff in schools are burnt out and do not necessarily have the skill sets needed to engage in whole-family support.

Currently, schools must choose between funding additional teaching staff and attendance support. Often, it is schools in the most disadvantaged areas, with lower school budgets who are facing twin pressures around results and attendance.

One key theme from our inquiry was the disparities between what whole-family support is available from one locality to the next. Previously, all LAs had Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) who would conduct attendance home visits but since the money has been devolved to schools this resource has diminished. Schools now must pay for EWOs, where they exist, as a traded good.

In our inquiry we heard from a range of non-statutory whole-family support offers including charitable interventions, AP outreach work, community hubs, and youth intervention programmes funded by Violence Reduction Units. While the delivery models differed, all agreed that non-statutory support could be useful. Often parents do not want to engage with social workers out of fear that they may end up losing their child. Non-statutory agencies were typically better equipped to establish a trusting relationship with families and to develop a more thorough understanding of issues at home.

A lot of the whole-family support mechanisms that we looked at in this inquiry were funded through philanthropy or short-term grants. Participants explained that this was not a sustainable approach to funding whole-family support.

The new funding for tackling severe and persistent absence in Education Priority Investment Areas and in the attendance mentor pilot were broadly welcomed. However, there was strong consensus that the funding available would not reach the scale of need. Part of the issue is that whole-family support is piecemeal and provided on a postcode lottery basis. Whole-family support needs to be universal and available nationally.

The Department for Education should roll out a national programme of 2,000 attendance mentors. These mentors would work with families to understand and remove the underlying barriers to school attendance.

Fines

When children do not attend school and all other routes have failed, LAs can take the route of formal support, fines, or attendance prosecution. Formal support includes parenting contracts and Education Supervision Orders (ESOs). Fines can take the form of fixed-penalty notices, prosecution for School Attendance Orders (SAOs), and attendance prosecutions under Section 444 of the Education Act 1996.

LAs told us that the new guidance has helped to reset the mindset with respect to fines. They stated there used to be a focus on prosecution first, but now local areas are looking for evidence of where schools have engaged with parents and offered support to the family, before enacting a fixed-penalty notice.

We were told part of the reason fines are used is because there is no other support available, so some areas over rely on fines to improve attendance. Participants were concerned the new reforms, which would allow LAs to draw down funds from fixed-penalty notices to fund support, may create perverse incentives.

Many of our participants expressed the view that fines alone rarely work to get children back into school. However, we were also told of instances where fines and the legal system had been an important factor in getting the right support around a family to improve attendance.

Participants told us that fixed-penalty notices were used more for holidays rather than for irregular attendance. We heard reports of some families being indifferent to these fines, in these cases, and sometimes writing cheques to cover the fine to the LA ahead of taking the leave.

Participants shared the view that fixed-penalty notices and attendance prosecution could make irregular attendance worse. When schools rely on fines to get back into school children whose absence is motivated by other underlying causes, this can exacerbate issues at home and worsen relationships between schools, LAs, and families.

In some areas, ESOs and SAOs were not used because schools and LAs saw them as time consuming and ineffective.

The Department for Education should conduct a review into the effectiveness of fines and attendance prosecution, to examine the conditions under which these formal mechanisms can improve attendance.

We heard how inconsistencies in the level of fines can lead to perverse incentives for parents facing pressure on attendance issues to pull their children out of school. If a child is not regularly attending, their parents can be fined up to a maximum of £2,500 and can face up to three months imprisonment. However, if a child is removed into home education and the family are subsequently found to be providing an unsuitable education and do not comply with an SAO, the maximum fine they face is £1,000.

APs told us that this inconsistency can make it difficult to push on attendance issues. They stated that if they push too hard, parents feel forced to remove their children from the school roll.

The fines for SAOs and attendance prosecution should be made the same value to avoid creating perverse incentives which push children out of the education system.

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