

Written evidence submitted by Schools North East

Schools North East is a charity set up in 2007 by schools and for schools. We are a movement for change, giving a voice to all 1,150 North East schools in the national education debate.

Summary

- Persistent absences have been a perennial challenge for North East schools, in part driven by the higher rates of long term and high impact disadvantage in the region.
- The pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, with increasing levels of absences across all types of students. While there have been improvements, attendance has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.
- Schools have said that this is an increasingly complex issue, with attendance linked to wider challenges of: disadvantage, special educational needs (SEN), the need for additional staff and expertise, the loss of regular contact during the pandemic with students and families, the loss of regular routines, the impact of parents working from home, changing attitudes towards education and home learning, school finances, transportation links in rural settings and schools with larger catchment areas, parental anxieties and resilience, student anxieties, and for certain year groups the loss of the usual transition arrangements.
- Schools are putting in place a wide range of interventions, including: hiring dedicated attendance and welfare officers, creating 'returners units' in schools, developing mobile education services, linking up with behaviour hubs, more one-to-one work with students, and outreach programmes to families.
- Despite the various efforts to improve attendance, there doesn't appear to be a clear solution to the challenge. This academic year has seen a constant struggle to improve attendance. Schools said that it was important to understand the reasons behind this, and recognise the rise in emotional-based avoidance and the impact of parental anxieties, beyond the usual challenges of persistent absences.
- Schools said it is important to consider the wide range of factors that drive absences. Schools said that there are currently a wide range of questions to be asked, and answering them meant more evidence and data. Schools want to better understand what the data is saying, both regionally and nationally.

Persistent absence and the need to support disadvantaged students is not a new issue in North East schools. Prior to the pandemic (academic year 2018/19), [Department for Education statistics](#) showed that the North East had the joint highest rates of overall absences, and the highest rates of persistent absences. The pandemic has greatly exacerbated these pre-existing challenges around attendance in areas like the North East. Generally the experience of Covid has weakened the engagement of students with education.

Long term disadvantaged students are the group most likely to be persistently absent. This disproportionately impacts on the North East as it has higher rates of these students. Since 2015/6, the North East has consistently had the highest rates of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), rising from 18.4% to 29.1% in 2021/22 (compared with a national average of 22.5%). During the pandemic, the North East had the joint steepest increases of students eligible for FSM.

During the pandemic, Schools North East began 'State of the Region' surveys, monitoring every term the main challenges schools in our region face. While our most recent surveys (in [Summer 21/22](#) and [Autumn 22/23](#)) showed attendance improving, it had not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. In the

Summer term 21/22, three quarters of North East schools said that attendance levels are below pre-pandemic levels. In the Autumn term 22/23, just over half of schools said that attendance levels are still below pre-pandemic levels.

As schools reopened to all students, addressing persistent absences has been a key focus in school strategic planning. This has been a regular theme in feedback Schools North East has received from school leaders across our region. This is impacting on North East schools from Early Years and nursery settings, through primary and secondary and on into FE and HE institutions.

Schools have said that this is an increasingly complex issue, with attendance linked to wider challenges, such as:

- Disadvantage
- special educational needs
- the need for additional staff and expertise
- the loss of regular contact during the pandemic with students and families
- the loss of regular routines
- the impact of parents working from home
- changing attitudes towards education and home learning
- school finances
- transportation links in rural settings and schools with larger catchment areas
- parental anxieties and resilience
- student anxieties
- the loss of the usual transition arrangements

Effectively tackling attendance is also impacted by school leadership, with schools saying that an inclusive ethos and ethical leadership are vital. Additionally, some year groups are of particular concern, especially for those at KS4. Generally, schools across all phases have reported students as not being 'stage ready', and there have been additional challenges around transitions between settings.

This academic year has seen a constant struggle to improve attendance. Schools have seen increasing issues linked to student anxieties and changes in families' and students' attitudes to school and attendance. As such, schools are having to do more outreach work, including home visits and remote learning. Many schools have dedicated attendance and welfare officers. However, a significant minority have budgets and staff under significant pressure and lack the resources for those.

Schools are benefitting from wider networks for peer support and to share effective practices. This has been particularly important for special schools and alternative provision, which always has a lower starting point for attendance anyway. Schools in this sector have said that even marginal gains are important, and that it isn't always useful to focus on headline attendance figures. Rather, it is important to focus on the individual needs of students alongside more general strategies.

Schools are working to rebuild relationships with families and improve parental and student resilience. In doing so, they are facing changes in attitudes towards education, with some parents happy to support their children to not attend school. In tackling these challenging cases, schools are having to go to greater lengths than usual.

Some schools have already hired additional attendance officers, to ensure they have the right expertise in place. While this can make a difference, the recruitment environment is currently very

competitive for schools and finding appropriate staff is increasingly difficult, especially outside of the major urban centres of the region. Funding also creates a challenge for hiring additional staff. Budgets outside of schools are restrictive as well, and other sectors have an important role to play in addressing attendance.

Schools are doing one-to-one work with students, where possible, to support those who have anxieties over being in the classroom, but this is costly and time consuming. Some schools have created a 'returners unit' to encourage students back into school. Others in the special and AP sector have put in place mobile education services, which are gradually building up relationships and routines for children and families. These efforts have managed to get students back into regular sessions, albeit not always in school buildings.

While links with other schools are important (for example with Behaviour Hubs around the country), there are concerns that the necessary resources to support attendance strategies aren't reaching the North East. This is both in terms of finances and school staff. Schools are currently facing a crisis in recruitment and retention, and tackling persistent absences is adding to staff workload. While some schools have dedicated attendance and welfare officers, budgets and staff are under significant pressure, and the problem of attendance is persisting.

Despite the various efforts to improve attendance, there doesn't appear to be a clear solution to the challenge. As mentioned, attendance is a complex issue relating to other factors of context and pupil characteristics. Schools are not an island, and tackling attendance requires a joined-up approach between the services and agencies that support children and young people. Increasingly, schools feel that they are having to shoulder this burden alone, inadequately supported by other services.

However, there is a lack of capacity in the system as a whole, and these other agencies and services are struggling with extensive backlogs. Schools are facing long waiting lists for educational psychologists, children and young people's mental health services (CAMHS), and the processing of educational and health care plans (EHCPs).

Schools need a wider range of support to address persistent absences, and greater recognition of the variety of challenges. The Government's education recovery plan has mainly focused on academic 'catch-up'. However, if schools are unable to engage students then this support isn't as effective as it could be. Education recovery needs to also aim to support students with their mental health and wellbeing, which would positively impact on attendance.

February 2023