



House of Commons  
Education Committee

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**Persistent absence  
and support for  
disadvantaged pupils:  
Government response  
to the Committee's  
Seventh Report**

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**First Special Report of Session  
2023–24**

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## The Education Committee

The Education Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Education and its associated public bodies.

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The current staff of the Committee are Niamh Baker (Committee Operations Officer), Laura Daniels (Clerk), Anastasia Lewis (Committee Specialist), Charlotte McDonough (Committee Specialist), Michael McGrath (Committee Specialist), Robert McQuade (Committee Operations Manager), Ffion Morgan (Second Clerk), Frederick Quinlan (Assistant Inquiry Manager (Apprentice)), Owen Sheppard (Senior Media Officer), Sian Woodward (Clerk).

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# First Special Report

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The Education Committee published its Seventh Report of Session 2022–23 [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#) (HC 970) on 27 September 2023. The Government's response was received on 27 November 2023 and is appended below.

## Appendix: Government Response

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### Introduction

1. The Government welcomes the Committee's report into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils, and we have considered the findings and recommendations of the report carefully. We want every child to achieve their potential. Attending school regularly is crucial - it positively impacts a child's academic attainment, safety, development and wellbeing. Children who are not attending school regularly miss out on chances to learn, to socialise, and to play an active part in their school community. The Committee's work is an important contribution to the public debate on school attendance.
2. As the Committee heard, while most children attend school regularly, the pandemic created unprecedented disruption in attendance habits and led to higher rates of persistent and severe absence for some children.
3. Recent data show improvements – the percentage of children persistently absent or not attending school for Covid-related reasons fell to 22.3% in 2022–23, down from 27.5% a year earlier, which is equivalent to around 380,000 fewer pupils persistently not in school. But there remains a long way to go to achieve the goal of achieving pre-pandemic attendance levels or better.
4. The Government had previous success in improving attendance, prior to the pandemic. As the committee has found, there are few quick fixes - sustained improvement in school attendance requires long term focus across the system. In the decade before the pandemic, the Government commissioned the Taylor Review, delivered a tougher definition of persistent absence, drove sustained Ofsted attention, and updated and improved the legal framework alongside wider school reforms. Persistent absence fell from 16.3% in 2010 to 11% in 2014/15 and remained largely stable until 2018/19. To return to these levels or better, the Government is delivering a comprehensive attendance plan.
5. At the heart of the plan are clearer and more consistent new expectations set out in guidance, which seek to promote a 'support first' ethos and one in which attendance is everybody's business. Schools are expected to: publish an attendance policy; appoint a senior attendance champion; use data to identify at-risk pupils early; and work closely with families to support absent pupils. Local authorities are expected to establish an attendance support team and hold termly meetings with every school to plan interventions for children at risk of persistent or severe absence.

6. The new expectations seek to ensure that all schools and local authorities adopt the habits of the best: they reflect the practices of schools and local authorities with higher than average levels of disadvantage, but better than average rates of attendance. They depend in turn on schools, trusts, and local authorities to implement them.

7. To help support the sector achieve these expectations, the Department has established a daily data pilot, with 87% of state-funded schools now participating, helping to ensure that they and local authorities have near real-time attendance data. This allows them to identify need early, spot trends and benchmark against the best to share best practice around the country. The Department has also formed an Attendance Action Alliance, comprised of national leaders from critical sectors like education, health, social care and policing. It works to take practical action to remove barriers to strong attendance and mobilise workforces around the issue. The Government has also launched attendance hubs to enable schools with excellent attendance levels to share resources and advice with other schools in similar circumstances but with high absence. These have recently expanded to 14 in number, which will support improvements across 800 schools, and reach some 400,000 children.

8. Alongside these steps, the Department has employed ten expert attendance advisers who are working with every local authority in the country and a number of Multi-Academy Trusts to put in place effective plans to deliver the new attendance expectations. And the Department has established an attendance mentoring program which is being piloted in five of the Department's priority education areas – Middlesbrough, Doncaster, Stoke on Trent, Knowsley and Salford – offering intensive one-to-one support for around 1700 absent pupils and building the evidence base on what works.

9. The attendance guidance sets the framework for identifying children who need additional support but, as this inquiry recognised, the individual reasons behind persistent and severe absence often arise from wider challenges. The attendance plan is therefore underpinned by wider education recovery investment and reforms tackling the underlying causes. This includes £5bn worth of direct investment in education recovery, including £400m on teacher training opportunities and up to £1.5bn on tutoring. In addition, the Government is spending £2.9bn annually on the pupil premium, on top of £1.3bn on recovery premium, Schools must spend the pupil premium on evidence-informed approaches, including attendance strategies and attendance. Recent analysis by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) of school strategy statements found that 75% of schools in England identified poor attendance as a priority.

10. The Government has invested an extra £200m on the Supporting Families programme increasing the budget to £695m by 2024–25, to help an additional 300,000 families facing multiple problems. Sustained good attendance is a key outcome of the programme. The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme (over £200m a year) will particularly benefit disadvantaged children, along with the £30 million invested in the National School Breakfast Programme.

11. The NHS Long Term Plan commits to increased investment in mental health services of at least £2.3 billion a year by March 2024, and aims for an additional 345,000 children and young people to be able to have NHS-funded mental health support by the same date. The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Alternative Provision improvement plan will involve £2.6 billion of spending between now and 2025 - including

additional investment in special schools and specific measures supporting attendance such as the inclusion of improved attendance as an outcome in the performance framework for Alternative Provision. The Government's reforms of the Children Social Care review are backed by £200m of additional investment. Better early help will particularly benefit children at risk of absence.

12. As we take forward this programme of reform, we will continue to explore opportunities to strengthen the attendance system and support available to families. In doing so, the Government is committed to working with schools, parents, local authorities, health and other partners to build upon the strengths of the current system and respond appropriately to the challenges ahead. With that in mind, the Government welcomes the Committee's report and responds to its recommendations in detail below.

### **Recommendations**

***Given that around 80% of schools have been successfully using the dashboard over the last academic year, for consistency, we recommend the Department make use of the dashboard mandatory as soon as possible, subject to a successful evaluation of the pilot and addressing any remaining concerns about data management, in conversation with the Information Communications Office.*** (Paragraph 20)

13. The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the value of timely attendance data, the progress that has been made in implementing the daily data pilot, and its important potential role in driving improved attendance.

14. The Department agrees with the recommendation of ensuring 100% of state-funded schools are sharing their daily attendance data so that there is greater consistency and schools, local authorities, and academy trusts are able identify trends, monitor vulnerable cohorts, and provide more targeted support. The benchmarking tool also helps identify best practice which can then be shared with others around the country to help them improve. It is the Department's intention to introduce regulations to mandate participation no sooner than September 2024. Mandating the collection is subject to continued work and engagement with the Department's STAR Chamber data scrutiny board, the Information Commissioner's Office and the schools sector, as well as the usual parliamentary procedures.

***We urge the Government to deliver on its commitment to introduce a register of children not in school to be fully operational for the 2024/25 academic year. We therefore expect the Government to include a suitable legislative vehicle in the next King's Speech, if it has not already availed itself of the opportunity to adopt a private members bill already before the house.*** (Paragraph 29)

15. The Government recognises the linkages between persistent absence and a parental decision to elect to home educate. Some of the most common reasons given for persistent absence are similar to the reasons behind the decision to elect to home educate, such as child mental health difficulties and dissatisfaction with the school.

16. The Government remains committed to introducing local authority registers for children not in school, as well as a duty for local authorities to provide support to home-educating families. The Government will legislate for these at a future suitable opportunity to help local authorities undertake their existing duties to ensure all children receive a

suitable education and are safe, regardless of where they are educated. Children missing education will benefit as local authorities will be better placed to identify and help those children, whilst children already receiving suitable education will benefit from additional support from the local authority.

17. In the meantime, the Department is continuing to work with local authorities to improve their non-statutory registers, and to support them to ensure all children in their areas are receiving a suitable education. On 26 October, the Department also launched a [consultation](#) on revised elective home education guidance for local authorities and parents, with the aim of increasing consistency of practice across all local authorities.

***The Department should implement statutory guidance to be applicable from September 2024. When revising the guidance, we recommend the Department should consult carefully with stakeholders, particularly those representing SEND pupils and their families, and pupils suffering from poor mental health. It should also ensure greater clarity regarding the use of attendance codes.*** (Paragraph 45)

18. The Government issued the guidance ‘Working together to improve school attendance’ in May 2022, and it has been widely welcomed both for the ‘support first’ ethos it promotes and the clearer expectations it sets out. It reflects best practice already in place across the system and was formulated following extensive informal consultation and joint working with the sector and with stakeholders representing pupils and families, including many of those who provided evidence to this inquiry. It was also subject to a [formal consultation](#) which ran for five weeks in January and February 2022.

19. The Government agrees there is a need to make the guidance statutory in recognition of the attendance challenge and to help ensure that local authorities and schools consistently meet the expectations. The former Minister for Schools confirmed this commitment at his oral evidence hearing. We will review and update the guidance document ahead of it coming into force on a statutory basis, working closely with the Department’s stakeholder groups including the Attendance Action Alliance to ensure the relevant views of pupils and families are represented. In particular, it will include new sections on mental health and targeting support meetings, and updated sections on SEND and LA services that can be traded.

20. The Government agrees that accurate and consistent recording is essential to an effective school attendance system and for supporting pupils to overcome barriers to attendance. As set out in the [consultation response](#) to ‘Modernising schools attendance and admissions registers’, published in August 2023, the Government has committed to revise the pupil registration regulations in order to provide greater clarity on recording school absence and will explore options for further improving consistency in recording, including through mandating use of the national attendance and absence codes. This is also an important step to ensure the accuracy of the information gathered as part of the daily data programme, and therefore to realise its transformative potential.

***Following a new burdens assessment, the Department should allocate ring-fenced funding for local authorities to meet the expectations of the statutory guidance.*** (Paragraph 45)

21. The Government undertook a full new burdens assessment in Spring 2022 which is publicly available on [gov.uk](#). The assessment was undertaken with the Association of



Directors of Childrens Services (ADCS), Local Government Association (LGA) and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. It was based on the available evidence at the time from those local authorities already delivering the expectations in the guidance and who were willing to share financial data with the Department. It showed that those local authorities (which varied in size and type) were doing so with or below the national average number of local authority staff per pupil (one member of staff per 5,490 pupils).

22. In the 18 months since this initial assessment was done, more local authorities have reshaped their services to meet the new expectations, in many cases drawing on support from the Department's attendance adviser programme. Throughout that period the Department has kept the burdens assessment under review. The Department has also provided clarification on aspects of the guidance – including, for example, that it does not preclude authorities continuing to trade elements of attendance services that go beyond the core expectations, and that those expectations can be met in different ways.

23. The guidance has now been implemented in more local authorities at or slightly below the national average staff to pupil ratio. Prior to the guidance being published there was significant variation in the spend per local authority on attendance, with some local authorities having historically much lower staffing levels than the average. Since publication, as more local authorities have reformed their services, the national average staffing level per pupil has not increased. Based on this emerging evidence, our view therefore remains that the expectations can be met with the national average number of staff per pupil, in line with the original impact assessment.

24. We expect that the day-to-day running of attendance services post-transition can be delivered within existing local authority education and social care budgets and should reduce any duplication across different agencies and services. Some early adopters have reported benefits from integrating attendance into other services, and providing better, more joined up whole family support that has the potential to reduce demand for higher cost crisis services over time.

25. On the Committee's specific proposal to ring fence funding for attendance, the core attendance functions of a local authority as set out in the guidance are one of the central services provided to all schools that can and should continue to be funded through the Central School Services Block (CSSB) of the Dedicated Schools Grant. This is protected by legislation to ensure local authorities have resources to provide the core service to schools. None of the funding provided via this route is ringfenced for a specific service - reflecting that local authorities are best placed to determine how to balance their legal responsibilities within the funding available to them.

26. Following further work with ADCS, the Department has published a set of worked examples to show the way different local authorities have approached implementing the guidance. The Department continues to work closely with the local authority sector to support this transition, identifying and sharing effective practice, as well as bringing together groups of local authorities with common concerns and approaches.

*The Department should conduct an audit of support provided by local authorities to tackle persistent absence. As part of this, the Department should make an assessment of the impact of providing funding for Education Welfare Officers through schools, compared to centrally funding such roles.* (Paragraph 47)

27. The Department is already closely monitoring support provided by local authorities. The role of the local authority in attendance has changed significantly from that of the pre-2014 Education Welfare Service. While core functions have been retained, the ‘Working together’ guidance also sets clear roles and responsibilities for schools for the first time. These include day to day management of attendance and casework support for families where the barrier to attendance is school based, which is the significant majority of cases.

28. This approach followed analysis of effective practice and a public consultation in Spring 2022. A significant majority of school and local authority respondents agreed with the allocation of responsibilities set out. ‘Working together to improve school attendance’ includes a core set of functions that local authority attendance support staff (whether titled education welfare officers, attendance officers or early help practitioners) are expected to provide free of charge to all schools and funded centrally through the Central Schools Service Block and Supporting Families Grant. These functions comprise: **communications and advice**: bringing schools together to communicate messages, advise and share best practice within the area; **targeting support meetings**: all schools are expected to be given a point of contact in the attendance team holding termly meetings to identify pupils and cohorts at risk and agree targeted actions; **Multi-disciplinary support for families**: providing practical whole-family support where needed to tackle the causes of absenteeism; **Legal intervention**: taking forward the full range of attendance legal intervention measures where voluntary support has not been successful or engaged with. Schools can choose to provide what is set out in the guidance using their own attendance or pastoral staff. They can also choose to employ independent education welfare companies to fulfil their expectations, or buy additional attendance support capacity from their local authority.

29. The Government monitors the implementation of these expectations through our team of advisers who are working with every local authority in England, reviewing their approach and supporting them to develop and implement a plan to deliver the guidance expectations. Each local authority remains responsible for the way in which it shapes its services to deliver the guidance expectations.

*We recommend the Department instruct schools and local authorities to explore methods of support for pupils and families before the use of fines or prosecution, ensuring that legal intervention is a last resort only. The Department should be more explicit about this in its revisions to the guidance ‘Working together to improve school attendance’. These revisions should include a national framework for fines and prosecution, to ensure consistency between local authority use. We reiterate, the Department should legislate for this guidance to be made statutory.* (Paragraph 56)

30. The ‘Working together to improve attendance’ guidance is clear that in most cases, local agencies collaborating to provide ‘support first’ is the right approach to tackle attendance problems. The core focus of the guidance is on prevention and early intervention, particularly for absence with complex causes. The guidance is also clear that there are some situations in which support to improve attendance is not appropriate



such as an unauthorised holiday in term time. In these cases, and in circumstances where support is not successful, or is not engaged with, it is right that the law protects a pupil's right to an education. Here, there is a clear role for the use of legal intervention to secure a pupil's regular attendance. This includes fixed penalty notices which the guidance says explicitly 'are intended to prevent the need for court action and should only be used where likely to change parental behaviour'.

31. As the inquiry heard, legal intervention is currently used inconsistently across the country, with 22 local authorities accounting for over 50% of all fixed penalty notices issued in 2020–21. To improve consistency, the Department consulted on setting national thresholds for fixed penalty notices in 2022 and published its response in August 2023. That response confirmed the Government's commitment to improving the consistency of local approaches to enforcement, as part of the drive towards a 'support first' approach. The Government welcomes the inquiry's evidence which will help inform work as it develops, including any future regulatory or legislative changes to establish a national framework for ensuring that local decisions are made in a more consistent way.

32. As noted above, the Government remains committed to legislating to make the guidance statutory, when parliamentary time allows.

***The Department should roll out attendance interventions nationally. Given the success of the Attendance Mentors Programme to date, the Department should start by implementing a national roll out of attendance mentors.*** (Paragraph 63)

***As part of the national roll out of attendance mentors, the Department should ensure whole-family support is at the forefront of the programme.*** (Paragraph 64)

33. The Government welcomes the Committee's support for our recent expansion of attendance mentors and the recognition in the evidence to the Committee of key elements of the associated model including the role of strong individual relationships with children facing barriers to attendance, and the difference that whole family support can make.

34. The attendance mentoring programme sits alongside our more systemic work with schools and local authorities through attendance hubs and attendance advisers, the latter of whom will have offered support to every local authority in the country by the end of this academic year. In September 2023 the Department announced a further expansion of its attendance hub programme, with 14 hubs now working with 800 schools across the country. The Minister for Schools also wrote to MATs with high rates of attendance in September inviting them to set up additional hubs. The Government's intention is to double the number of hubs by the end of the academic year, reaching up to a million children and ensuring their schools can access excellent resources and advice.

35. The Government is cautious on the recommendation for a national roll-out of mentoring at this time, given the risk of duplication of work already being undertaken via the Supporting Families programme. The Government has invested an extra £200m in Supporting Families increasing the budget to £695m by 2024–25, reaching an additional 300,000 families facing multiple, high-cost problems. Sustained good attendance for all children in a family, using a whole family approach, is a key programme outcome.

36. In addition, there is limited evidence on how best to apply mentoring to school absence. An EEF rapid evidence review from 2021 found there was weak evidence on

effective attendance interventions, including mentoring. This was reiterated in its written evidence to the committee which stated that ‘the evidence base linking mentoring interventions and pupil attendance is limited in size and had serious methodical flaws’. The EEF recognised research was needed to understand the effectiveness of mentoring programmes in England and has launched a joint funding round in partnership with the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF), called ‘A Safe, Positive Place to Learn: Improving attendance and reducing exclusions’. The funding round was set up to find, fund and evaluate programmes and practice in England and Wales that could both keep children safe from involvement in violence and improve academic attainment by reducing absenteeism.

37. In order to build this evidence base further, the Department has invested £2.3m to develop a 3-year pilot of attendance mentors currently being delivered by Barnardo’s. The pilot started in Middlesbrough in 2022 and expanded to four additional local authorities this September to support around 1700 persistently and severely absent pupils. The Department is working with an external research organisation to evaluate fully the effectiveness and value for money of the intervention. The findings will inform future decisions on national roll out and scope of the programme.

38. The Department recognises a case for expanding the scale of this pilot, both to ensure an even more robust evaluation, and to increase capacity in reaching children with particularly high levels of absence. The Government will consider options to expand mentoring investment to more local areas in 2024/25.

39. Alongside this pilot, and the Supporting Families Programme, the Government is funding other programmes that support children facing absence barriers. The Department is investing over £50 million in serious violence hotspots to fund specialist support in both mainstream and Alternative Provision schools through its AP Specialist Taskforces (APST) and SAFE programmes. Children in Alternative Provision are disproportionately likely to be severely absent. The aim is to improve children’s attendance as well as behaviour, wellbeing and attainment in school with over 4,500 children reached so far. The effect of this work is being evaluated by the YEF to strengthen the evidence base for effective interventions.

***Given a major driver of low attendance is low income, it follows that measures to tackle child poverty should be considered in the Department’s approach to improving attendance. The Department should make an assessment of the eligibility criteria for Free School Meals and adjust if necessary, ensuring all children in poverty are in receipt.***  
(Paragraph 71)

40. The Government spends over £1bn each year on free school meals. The latest published statistics show that around 2 million pupils are claiming free school meals. This equates to 23.8% of all pupils, up from 20.8% in 2021. Together with almost 1.3 million further infants supported through the Universal Infant Free School Meal (UIFSM) policy, over one third of pupils receive a free meal in school. Free meal support is also available to 90,000 disadvantaged students in further education.

41. Free school meals play an important role in ensuring the most disadvantaged children have a nutritious and healthy lunchtime meal, helping them to concentrate and achieve in the classroom, as well as encouraging school attendance. They are an integral

part of the Government's provision for families on low incomes and our wider actions to support disadvantaged pupils, which include providing around 350,000 breakfasts per day through the National Schools Breakfast Programme (NSBP).

42. The Government has extended free school meal (FSM) eligibility several times and to more groups of children than any other government over the past half a century. We have permanently extended eligibility to children from all groups with no recourse to public funds and, in 2018, introduced new eligibility criteria for Universal Credit families alongside generous protections so that no one would lose their entitlement. These protections were recently extended to March 2025.

43. Extending FSM eligibility to all families on Universal Credit would carry a very significant financial cost, quickly running into billions of pounds. It would result in around half of pupils becoming eligible for a free meal, with substantial knock-on effects for the affordability of linked provision – such as entitlement for pupil premium. It is right that provision is aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged, those out of work or on the lowest incomes. For these reasons, the Government does not have plans to change the current eligibility conditions for free school meals but will continue to keep eligibility under review to ensure that these meals are supporting those who need them most.

***We recommend the Department require local authorities to report on school attendance levels for pupils who have attended a breakfast club or holiday club. If a significant impact can be demonstrated, the Government should consider this in future funding decisions.*** (Paragraph 78)

44. This year, the Government is again investing over £200m in the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, which all local authorities in England are delivering. This is alongside further investment of up to £30m for the National Schools Breakfast Programme (NSBP) which is providing around 350,000 breakfasts per day.

45. The Government will further investigate what more local authorities can do to collect and report on the effect on school attendance of the HAF programme, though there may be data sharing issues, around parental consent of sharing their child's data with private holiday clubs being linked back to school level data on school attendance. The Department has started working with several local authorities to use pseudonymised pupil level data to track HAF attendance and will explore what this tells us regarding the effect on school attendance.

46. Local authorities are not involved with the national school breakfast programme. However, the Department will investigate with its delivery partner if and how it can collect attendance data directly from schools participating.

47. The Department is fostering independent analysis of HAF and it was encouraging to see the recent [research](#) carried out by academics at Northumberland University showing the positive effects of attending HAF across a broad range of indicators including reducing obesity, reducing antisocial behaviour and associated crime, improving children's self-confidence and increased opportunities. The Department will also reflect on what more can be done to improve attendance through HAF guidance, so that local authorities ensure low-attending pupils are at the forefront of their targeting for the programme.

48. There is evidence that breakfast clubs can help to make a difference in relation to school readiness, increased concentration and improved wellbeing and behaviour of children who attend, which is why the Department recently expanded the NSBP to a further 200 schools. The Department is keen to build on this insight, and explore further any link between breakfast clubs and increased attendance.

***We recommend the Department commission research to test the link between sports-based interventions and improved attendance. As part of this, the Department should look to the third sector for effective practice examples.*** (Paragraph 88)

49. The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the benefits of sport to pupil wellbeing and engagement. As part of the Government's School Sport and Activity Action Plan published in July 2023, it was announced that the Department will be publishing best practice guidance to support schools with effective delivery of sport and PE provision, including how to achieve equal opportunity with sport and two hours of PE each week for all pupils. With support from schools, national governing bodies, and other sporting organisations the Department will identify and include in the guidance schools that have increased their PE and school sport offer and as a result have seen improvements to pupil outcomes such as increasing attendance.

50. The guidance will also showcase the Department funded grant 'Inclusion 2024', which is increasing and improving opportunities for children with SEND to take part in PE, sport and physical activity. A sample of participating schools report a positive effect on pupils' engagement, behaviour at school, connectedness to others and happiness.

***As the Centre for Social Justice have recommended, the Department should implement an enrichment guarantee for pupils in school including the use of sport, music, drama and art, looking to the youth sector for best practice. This guarantee should have KPIs focusing on improving school attendance, and the Department should provide options for schools to incorporate this via an extended school day, should they wish to implement one.*** (Paragraph 98)

51. The Government made a commitment to a National Youth Guarantee in 2022 when the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) announced that by 2025, every young person in England will have access to regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home, and volunteering opportunities, supported by a three year investment of over £500 million.

52. The Department is working with DCMS to help schools ensure pupils are getting the most out of the National Youth Guarantee and to improve partnership working between schools and organisations providing the activities in their local area. This includes investing £2.7m in the recently announced Enrichment Partnerships Pilot. The pilot aims to test approaches to developing these partnerships in up to 200 secondary schools. Attendance will be one of the key indicators in the selection and evaluation of pilot activities.

53. In addition, the Department's Schools White Paper sets out a vision that every child and young person will have high-quality extracurricular provision, including an entitlement to take part in sport, music and cultural opportunities. The Government agrees these are an important part of a rich educational experience and can bring wider benefits to young people's mental health, confidence, social skills and wellbeing, and may have particular value in supporting attendance.

54. Schools are best placed to understand and meet the needs of their pupils and should have flexibility to decide what range of extra-curricular activities to offer. This allows them to take into account important factors including both the opportunities they provide through their core curriculum and the range of activities available in their local community.

55. The Department supports a range of initiatives to help schools do this well, for example working with the Ministry of Defence to enable more pupils to benefit from school cadet units and working with the DCMS to offer the Duke of Edinburgh's Award to all state secondary schools in England. Both pupil premium and recovery premium can be used to fund enrichment activities and in March 2022 the Department updated guidance to make this clear to schools. Schools can choose how they wish to use this funding in line with a menu of approaches.

***Absence rates in special schools have always been significantly higher than in mainstream educational settings. We understand the SEND cohort have higher absence for legitimate and unavoidable reasons, thus making comparisons with other cohorts difficult. We recommend the Department take greater care when reporting these statistics to avoid unhelpful comparisons.***

***Attendance and engagement should be seen as key metrics of educational outcomes for SEND pupils in specialist settings. However, the Department should take specific barriers into account when developing these metrics and ensure that they are not expected to behave identically to peers in other settings.*** (Paragraph 107)

56. The Government recognises that there can be clinical and other reasons why absence rates are higher in special schools and for children with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans than for mainstream schools and for children without EHCPs respectively. Data is presented for standard absence metrics broken down by those with an EHC plan, SEN support and no SEN. Data is also presented for standard metrics by school type (primary, secondary and special). There are no specific measures only for pupils with SEN.

57. When reporting against these breakdowns, the Department will include wording to acknowledge that this cohort may have higher absence rates for legitimate and unavoidable reasons, while making clear that their right to an education is the same as for any other pupil and therefore the attendance ambition for these pupils should be the same as they are for any other pupil (as stated in the 'Working together to improve school attendance' guidance).

58. The Department will also make sure these considerations are included alongside absence metrics published in the inclusion dashboard for 0 to 25 provision for those with SEND, which is due to be published later this year.

***The Department should prioritise resource for inclusion and assessment in mainstream schools, to ensure they are adequately set up to support SEND pupils and address the current level of unmet need, and therefore improve their attendance rates.*** (Paragraph 109).

59. The Government welcomes this recommendation. In March 2023 the Department published its SEND and alternative provision improvement plan which aims to establish a new national SEND and AP system. To help shape this, the Department is investing



£70m in the SEND & AP Change Programme which is working with 32 local authorities and their partners – including health, and schools – to test out key reforms from the Improvement Plan. This includes testing approaches in and around mainstream schools to identify the needs of children and young people early, and then put in place the right support as quickly as possible. Receiving the right support at the right time will help prevent future attendance difficulties.

60. Specifically, this includes testing the new AP Service, which includes providing outreach into schools to support individual pupils who need help to address problems early, and prevent them escalating. It also includes testing the Early Language Support for Every Child (ELSEC) pilot – jointly funded with NHSE – to assess the effect of community-based Speech & Language professionals located in and around early years and primary schools to spot early delays in speech and language development and to take swift, appropriate action. The Government agrees that these measures have the potential to improve attendance rates.

61. Alongside this, the Department is encouraging all 32 local authorities to consider developing models like the AP Specialist Taskforces already running in some parts of the country. These comprise multi-disciplinary teams based in AP schools that will support children and young people to get back on track, and wherever possible, re-integrate successfully into mainstream education and attend regularly. The Department is also asking local authorities and schools to consider what else they can do to improve inclusive practice by raising the standard for what support is ‘ordinarily available’ in schools, supported by community-based specialist teams that can help spot needs early, and put support in place quickly.

62. The Change Programme will run from September 2023 until August 2025 and will provide both real-time lessons that can be shared widely and provide the evidence base to support future funding or legislative changes. Improved attendance is a key focus of the work.

***It is clear that alternative provision should only be a time-limited intervention with clear structures to ensure each pupil's needs are being effectively supported. The Department should scrutinise its use and ensure they are being used as methods of support to improve attendance, and discourage its use as a means to manage behaviour.*** (Paragraph 119)

63. The Government recognises that if needs and behaviours that present a barrier to attendance were addressed earlier, more children could be supported to thrive in their mainstream school. That is why the proposed alternative provision reforms will see alternative provision schools work closely in partnership with mainstream schools to provide high-quality targeted support and one-to-one interventions. This will build capacity in mainstream schools to identify and support needs early, reducing the numbers of preventable exclusions and expensive long-term placements, and lead to improvements in children’s wellbeing and outcomes, including attendance.

64. Through the Change Programme outlined above, The Department is testing a new model for the alternative provision system across three tiers of support that focuses on targeted support in mainstream schools; time-limited placements for those who need



more intensive support; and transitional placements for those children and young people who will be supported to reintegrate into mainstream education or move to a post-16 destination.

65. This new approach will support alternative provision to be used as a time limited intervention for young people, instead of a destination. Over time, this will increase attendance and reduce the number of preventable exclusions and expensive long-term placements, as needs will be identified and supported earlier.

***The Department should also lead a cross-government assessment of the scale of mental health difficulties amongst pupils and review the current provision of support available in schools and outside of them. The Government should conclude this review and report its findings by Summer 2024. There then needs to be significant joint working across the Government to ensure CAMHS provision is adequate to meet the needs of school age children, in line with the Department’s previous commitment to a 4-week waiting time.***  
(Paragraph 132)

66. We do not believe a “cross-government assessment of the scale of mental health difficulties amongst pupils” is necessary at this time as the Government already funds work to monitor children’s mental health and extensive cross-government working is already taking place on several projects related to children’s mental health.

67. For example, in February 2023 the Department of Education published the fourth annual [State of the Nation report](#), collating and analysing published evidence about the wellbeing of children and young people over the 2021/22 academic year. These reports draw on published information from a range of government, academic, voluntary, and private sector organisations, including three “Mental Health of Children and Young People” surveys which have been funded by The Department of Health and Social Care, along with the Department of Education, in the last three years with a fourth survey due to be published later this year. These surveys are a follow-up to the 2017 survey and provide, amongst other information, headline data on the rates of probable mental disorders in children and young people in England.

68. By bringing together information in this way, the Department of Education’s State of the Nation reports help to provide a clear narrative for all those interested in the wellbeing of children and young people in England. It provides a shared evidence base for everyone - in government, services, schools & colleges, parents & families, communities, and employers - to reflect upon and deliver better wellbeing outcomes for all children and young people. Findings from this series of reports informs work across government and beyond to support young people’s mental wellbeing. Planning is underway for a fifth State of the Nation report, which would be published in 2024.

69. The Government knows that some young people are facing difficulties with their mental health and wellbeing and providing them with support remains a priority. The Government is putting in record levels of investment, including an additional £2.3 billion of funding a year by March 2024 for all NHS mental health services. This will help an extra 345,000 children and young people receive NHS-funded mental health support, compared to 2018.

70. The pandemic brought even more challenges to young people's mental health which is why the Government provided a further £79 million in 2021 to enable around 22,500 more children and young people to receive community mental health services.

71. Unfortunately, some young people who need NHS support are having to wait longer than we would like. That is why in February 2022, NHS England published the outcomes of its consultation on the potential to introduce five new access and waiting time standards for mental health services, including the proposal that children, young people and their families/carers presenting to community-based mental health services should start to receive care within four weeks from referral.

72. The Department of Health and Social Care is working with NHS England to explore the implications of introducing waiting time measures, including understanding data reporting and workforce requirements. Earlier this year, NHS England started to publish waiting times for referrals to community mental health crisis teams and liaison psychiatry teams. The aim of this publication is to increase transparency on waiting times in urgent and emergency mental health care and to drive improvements in the quality of data. Whilst these metrics are in line with the proposed new waiting time standards for mental health, they are not associated with a formal target yet. NHS England plans to publish data on the longest waits for community mental health services (for all ages, including children and young people) in Autumn 2023. NHS England then plan to publish the full community mental health waiting times, including for children and young people, in the Spring of 2024.

73. As the Committee rightly points out, support in school is vital, which is why the Government has a joint-programme across the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England to roll-out mental health support teams (MHSTs) to schools and colleges in England. There are currently around 400 mental health support teams in place across England, covering over three million children or around 35% of pupils in schools and colleges, and the Government plans to extend coverage to at least 50% of pupils in England by the end of March 2025.

74. This cross-government work on MHSTs will continue in the future, alongside other opportunities for joint working. This includes the recent announcement that the Government is making nearly £5 million available to provide earlier mental health intervention at ten hubs in community locations. These drop-in centres offer mental health support and advice to local young people who won't need a referral by a doctor or school. Services provided include group work, counselling, psychological therapies, specialist advice, and signposting to information and other services. The Department of Health and Social Care will lead on the delivery of this funding but will be working alongside a number of government departments in the coming months.

75. A key element of our approach that the committee has highlighted is the commitment to offer all state schools and colleges a grant to train a senior mental health lead by 2025, enabling them to introduce effective whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing. All have had this offer and more than 14,000 schools and colleges have claimed and received a senior mental health lead training grant so far, including more than 7 in 10 state-funded secondary schools. The Department of Education regularly reviews this offer for schools and looks to identify ways to provide further support. For example, the

eligibility criteria were recently updated to enable schools to apply for a second training grant if the senior mental health lead they previously trained left their setting before embedding a whole school or college approach to mental health and wellbeing.

76. The Department of Education's Attendance Action Alliance also focuses on improving mental health for children and young people. The Alliance regularly brings sector leaders from a range of professions – including health – together with Ministers to discuss how attendance can be improved. Having leaders of a level of seniority able to effect change across workforces regularly discussing and driving action on attendance has already proven valuable.

77. For example, Dame Clare Gerada, President of the Royal College of General Practitioners, recently introduced a set of protective Attendance Principles for General Practitioners to follow. Work is now underway to embed these principles into General Practice through Departmental and Alliance communications. In addition, Peter Fonagy, Senior National Clinical Adviser on Children and Young People's Mental Health for NHS England, has this year introduced a new training module for educational mental health practitioners on school anxiety in the revised EMHP training programme. Peter also regularly champions attendance and the benefits it can have on a child's mental health in his public communications.

78. More broadly, the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Care will continue to work together and with NHS England, to understand current and future demand and to develop wider and more timely mental health support for children and young people in England.

***As part of reforms to the guidance on attendance, the Department should introduce a mental health absence code, and set clear thresholds for its use.*** (Paragraph 134)

79. Children and young people's mental wellbeing is a priority for the Government. Schools should be safe, calm and supportive learning environments that promote and support wellbeing. The Department has issued guidance to schools about instances where a mental health issue is affecting attendance, which builds on the broader attendance expectations. It includes examples of effective practice where children with a mental health need have been supported to attend.

80. Where a pupil is unable to attend school due to illness, for either a physical or mental health related reason, schools must authorise the absence (contrary to some of the evidence heard by the Committee, there is no rule that mental ill health should not be authorised as illness). Code I 'illness' is used to record the absence in the attendance register. While the Government understands the intent behind this recommendation, there are concerns that creating an additional code is unhelpful in practice and could place a burden on schools. This is because, at the point of taking the register (at the beginning of each morning session and once during each afternoon session), it would be difficult for the teacher to determine whether an absence due to illness was related to a mental health reason or a physical health reason, or a combination of the two. Teachers will often understand the issues a child is facing but it would be inappropriate to expect them to make a judgement on the nature of a child's illness at that point in time. Data gathered via the new code is likely to give an inaccurate reflection of the underlying problem.

81. In the majority of cases a parent's notification that their child is too ill for school will be accepted without question or concern. Only where the school has a genuine and reasonable doubt over the authenticity of illness should medical evidence be requested to support the absence. Schools are well placed to observe their pupils and identify those whose behaviour suggests they may be experiencing a mental health problem, and to decide what pastoral support to provide. The Department's guidance and training initiatives aim to help schools with this in an appropriate way.

***We recommend the Department should launch a targeted public information campaign to guide parents on when and when not children who are unwell should attend school. Close working between the Department and the Department for Health and Social Care will be required to get this right, but it should aim to ensure that parents understand the types of illness, including coughs and colds, that should not require children in normal circumstances to miss school.*** (Paragraph 142)

82. The Government welcomes this recommendation. The Department has already worked with the Department of Health and Social Care and its agencies to issue a letter signed by various professional health bodies – including the Chief Medical Officer – which is clear that where a child has a minor illness – such as a cough or cold – they are normally fine to be sent to school, provided they do not have a temperature.<sup>1</sup> The letter gives a clear threshold of a temperature over 38 degrees for when a child should not attend. The advice also extends to mild to moderate anxiety, citing the fact that it is often normal for children to experience worrying feelings linked to exams, friendships, etc. and that being at school can serve to aid with anxiety, whilst being away from school might exacerbate it.

83. Working with a creative agency partner, the Department has launched a regional paid-for comms campaign in two locations which focus on disseminating positive messages on attendance and offers clear guidance on mild illness/anxiety. The channels for communication spread across radio, static media, social media and local influencers. The Department will work with the local authorities and schools in the regions in order to maximise visibility of the materials while the campaign is running.

84. Subject to the success of the regional campaign, The Department will seek to roll this out at a national level in January.

***We recommend the Department review its framework for supporting low-income families in meeting the costs of school attendance. As part of this review, the Department should conduct an impact assessment of its statutory guidance on school uniform, persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils, support available for pupils with additional costs such as school trips, and support with transport costs. Following this review, the Department should issue supplementary guidance highlighting best practice, so schools and local authorities can make informed decisions on how to best support low-income families.*** (Paragraph 149)

85. The Government is committed to supporting children from low-income families to achieve their potential, including £5bn investment in education recovery and £2.9bn annually in the pupil premium. The pupil premium funds evidence-based high-quality teaching, targeted academic support and wider strategies that will benefit pupils and help to raise their attainment. This can include wider strategies and/or interventions to support

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1 [Letter to school leaders on mild illness and school attendance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

attendance. The Department is supporting schools to consider how their pupil premium can support attendance, for example there will be a webinar on this topic in November 2023.

86. To ensure that the pupil premium and recovery premium are focused on effective approaches to raising the educational attainment of disadvantaged pupils, schools must use their pupil premium in line with the ‘menu of approaches’ set by the Department.

87. The menu has been developed and assessed in line with the EEF’s 3-tiered approach to help schools allocate spending across the following 3 key areas: support for high-quality teaching, such as staff professional development; provision of targeted academic support, such as tutoring, including through the National Tutoring Programme; tackling non-academic barriers to academic success, such as difficulties in attendance, and supporting extra-curricular activities, including sport, music lessons and school trips.

88. On the specific issue of school uniform, while the Department agrees with the committee on the importance of ensuring the cost of school uniform is affordable, it does not believe that it is necessary to conduct a further impact assessment of its statutory guidance. In line with standard procedures, the Department conducted relevant, proportionate impact assessments during the development of the draft guidance, including an Equality Impact Assessment.

89. The Department will continue to assess the impact of the cost of school uniform guidance through continued engagement with key stakeholders, including via correspondence received by the Department from parents, school leaders, and uniform suppliers. In July 2023, the Department published the results of a survey of school leaders looking at changes made as a result of the guidance. It can be found at [School and college panel: omnibus surveys for 2022 to 2023](#)

90. The Department does not believe that it is necessary to publish further non-statutory guidance that highlights best practice as the Department has already published non-statutory guidance to help support schools in developing and implementing their school uniform policy. This guidance can be found at [School uniforms - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).

91. Additionally, the Child Poverty Action Group, in collaboration with the Children’s Society and Children North East has published guidance that highlights good practice which can be found at [Affordable school uniforms: a guide | CPAG](#). The National Governor’s Association has also published a guide to help governing boards comply with the statutory guidance and to develop school uniform policies that are affordable and inclusive to all.<sup>2</sup> The Department recognises that school leaders know their community best and can make decisions on uniform policy that are appropriate to their school.

92. On school transport, updated statutory guidance for local authorities on travel to school for children of compulsory school age was published in June 2023. In line with standard procedures, the Department conducted relevant, proportionate impact assessments during the development of the updated guidance, including an Equality Impact Assessment.

93. The Government’s home to school travel policy aims to ensure no child is prevented from receiving education by a lack of transport, or the cost of transport. Local authorities

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2 [Developing an affordable school uniform policy | National Governance Association](#)



must arrange free home to school travel for eligible children. A child is eligible if they are of compulsory school age, attend their nearest suitable school and would not be able to walk there because of the distance; because of their special educational needs, disability or mobility problem, or because the route is unsafe. Where a child has an EHC plan, the school named in their plan will usually be considered to be their nearest suitable school for school travel purposes. There are additional rights to free travel for children from low-income households, intended to help them exercise school choice.

94. The legal responsibility for arranging free home to school travel for eligible children sits with local authorities. Their local knowledge means they are best placed to make the appropriate arrangements to enable them to meet their statutory duty to eligible children. The majority of central government funding for home to school travel is made available to local authorities through the Local Government Finance Settlement (LGFS) administered by Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). The LGFS for financial year 2023–24 makes up to £59.7 billion available for local government in England, an increase in Core Spending Power of up to £5.1 billion or 9.4% in cash terms on 2022–23. DLUHC will bring forward proposals for the Local Government Finance Settlement 2024–25 in the usual way later in the year. When finalising budgets, local government spending will be carefully considered to ensure councils can continue to deliver vital services. This will include considering the effect of inflation and other wider economic circumstances. The local government finance policy statement, published last December, sets out the measures expected to be maintained into 2024–25.

95. The Department also provides grant funding to local authorities as a contribution towards the cost of ‘extended rights’ travel. This funding supports children from low-income households to exercise school choice, and totals just under £45.8m in financial year 2023–24. We will shortly be calculating local authorities’ allocations of this grant for 2024–25. In doing so, we will, as always, take account of inflation and of changes in the estimated number of eligible children.

***The Department should also implement better signposting to ensure local authorities, schools and families are aware of these measures. The Department should consider whether to require a single point of contact within each local authority that families can refer to for help with support.*** (Paragraph 150)

96. The Department agrees it is important to raise the awareness of the support available to low income families and will look for opportunities to do this across policy areas and initiatives aimed at providing this support. We do not however believe that it is necessary for there to be a single point of contact within each local authority that families can refer to for help with uniform support. Parents can already contact their local authority directly or use the following search tool to find out if they offer additional support for the cost of school uniform in cases of financial hardship.<sup>3</sup>

97. Additionally, the cost of school uniform statutory guidance requires schools to ensure that arrangements are in place so that second-hand school uniforms are available for parents to acquire. It is for the school to decide how this will be best achieved in their local context. However, all schools should have second hand uniform arrangements in place and make those arrangements clear for parents on the school website.



***The Department should conduct further research on the barriers to attendance for migrant pupils, and those with above average rates of absence.*** (Paragraph 166)

98. Migrant pupils are a very diverse group with a wide range of needs. Research utilising a case study approach encompassing qualitative data collection from school staff, governors, parents and pupils (NIESR, 2019<sup>4</sup>) highlighted several issues that affected the attendance of migrant pupils including: a lack of familiarity with the education system, the practice of taking term time breaks including for visits abroad to visit family, attend special occasions, and issues of parental trust (regarding children’s welfare at school).

99. Experimental analysis published by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) in 2021<sup>5</sup> looked at the outcomes of refugee and asylum-seeking children by triangulating data from the National Pupil Database, published asylum/migration statistics, and FOI requests to the Home Office. Whilst estimated mean absence rates were similar for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and non-migrant children (6.8% and 6.6% respectively) in the cohort under consideration (those children who reached year 11 in 2016/2017), absence rates were actually lower in resettled refugee or asylum support children (5.0% versus 6.6%).

100. Recently published Departmental attendance data from the 2022/23 Autumn and Spring terms<sup>6</sup>, shows that overall absence rates are slightly lower for pupils whose first language is other than English (6.6% vs 7.4% for those whose first language is English).

101. The Department’s data consistently shows that pupils from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups (children with SEN, children in need and looked after children, and children eligible for free school meals) are more likely to be persistently absent than their peers. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner have recently published further evidence on looked after children, finding that 2.7% of them were not in school.<sup>7</sup> Within this group, unaccompanied asylum seeking children were disproportionately more likely not to be in school.<sup>8</sup>

102. The Government’s current ‘support first’ approach to reducing absence recognises that the reasons for absence are varied and complex. We will continue with our current programme of research, including evaluation of the attendance mentors programme, which will enable us to further understand the types of barriers that a range of pupils with above average rates of absence are facing in attending school. Findings from the evaluation will help us to focus any further research on particular barriers, or cohorts, where identified as priority evidence gaps.

***We recommend the Department continue to work with stakeholders from the GRT community and using examples of best practice, roll out measures on a national scale to support this pupil cohort.*** (Paragraph 168)

4 [MigrantChildrenIntegrationFinalReport.pdf \(niesr.ac.uk\)](#)

5 [Refugee\\_asylum\\_working\\_paper\\_-\\_EPI.pdf](#)

6 [‘Absence rates by pupil characteristic - autumn and spring term combined’ from ‘Pupil absence in schools in England’, Permanent data table – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

7 Children not in school are defined in this report as children not enrolled in any school (this includes children receiving elective home education, children missing education, and children education through other provision), children enrolled at a school but not attending at all, and children receiving unregistered alternative provision.

8 <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/05/cc-lac-not-in-school.pdf>

103. The Department will continue to convene the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller Stakeholder group on a termly basis to provide support, scrutiny and insight regarding the experiences of GRT communities across the range of the Department's policy responsibilities, including attendance. We have recently engaged this group on the use of the 'T' absence code and children missing education, including holding a workshop to gather views on the questions posed in our call for evidence on children missing education. The Department will share and test policy responses developed out of the call for evidence with the group. The Department will also develop a good practice webinar focused on meeting the needs of GRT pupils in relation to school attendance.

### **Conclusion**

104. The legacy of the disruption of the pandemic means that school absence levels remain too high, with some groups of pupils particularly badly affected, and too many pupils still persistently or severely absent. The Government is grateful for the Committee's inquiry which has shown the complexity of the issue – improvements require sustained attention within schools, as well as a real focus in wider support services on the importance of school attendance. The Government accepts the majority of the committee's recommendations, which complement our existing efforts to make a difference to this problem. In the few cases where the Government does not accept the committee's recommendations, we have endeavoured to provide our rationale.

105. The Government's 'support first' approach exemplified in the school attendance guidance provides a framework for early identification of individual problems, so that support can be provided before problems escalate and absence becomes entrenched. This framework is intended to support children who are struggling with school attendance whatever the specific nature of their difficulties.

106. At school and local authority levels, the improvements to data brought in through the daily school attendance data project are helping schools and local authorities to identify challenges more quickly and take action. As the committee heard, there is lots of excellent practice already underway in the system. The expanded attendance hubs programme brings together education leaders to share good practice and support each other in improving. The work of the attendance advisers will provide every local authority in the country with additional support to review their services and shape the way they implement the guidance.

107. The strategic leadership provided by the Attendance Action Alliance brings together those wider services who can make a real difference to the problems that can contribute to poor attendance. And the Government's specific programmes for those groups of children most at risk of poor attendance provide us with a strong platform for tackling the particular attendance difficulties the committee has identified amongst those cohorts facing the greatest challenges.