CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Hidden NEETs

The attendance of 16- and 17-year-olds in further education colleges in England

September 2026

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

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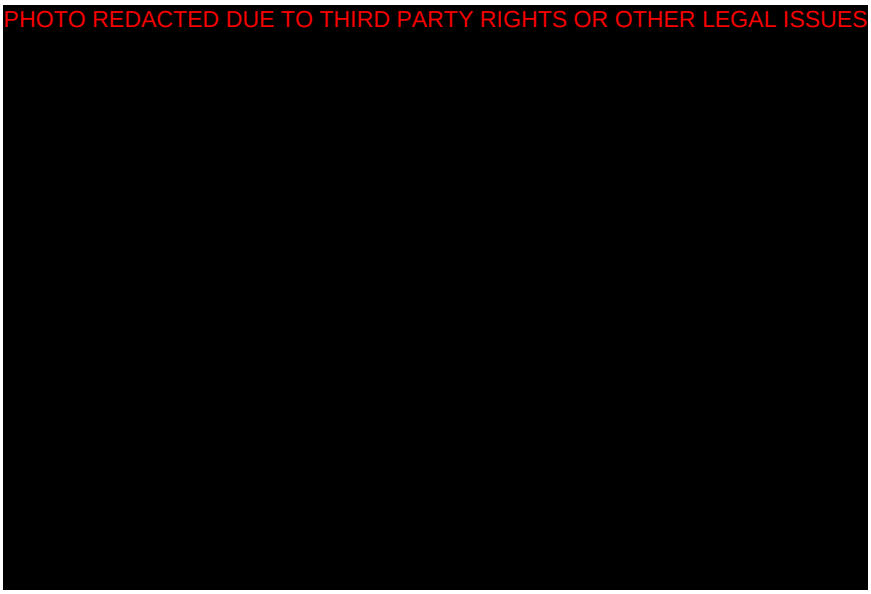
Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



This report comes at a particular time in our national discussion around education. It is written with this moment in mind.

This discussion focuses on the rising numbers of young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), with proposals to fix this problem suggesting measures that reverberate all the way down the age range and throughout our education system.

It is, of course, good that we are focusing on young NEETs. I hear so often from young people about their desires to get on in the labour market, and the current NEET crisis is felt in communities across the country. When young people from an area go away to university, only to return to limited employment opportunities, children notice. When their friends cannot find Saturday jobs, children notice. Employment is a children's issue.

But if we are going to focus on NEETs, we have to know who and where they are. Without that, you cannot begin to address the problem. You cannot know what might work. You cannot assess the impact of any interventions.

As I considered this problem, I found myself thinking about one of the major concerns of my time as Children's Commissioner: educational attendance. I firmly believe that education is the path to a good future for England's children, and that everything begins with attendance.

Over the last five years, the way we measure attendance in schools has dramatically improved with far more transparency and visibility where attendance is too low. This has been a crucial first step, although progress on actually improving attendance, particularly for severely absent children, has been far too slow.

However, at the critical point, where children start their transition from education into the world of work, we lose that visibility. Further Education settings, where most children go when they leave school, are not required to collect or report attendance data like schools are. The national picture of attendance for FE is simply not where it should be. And so, I began to worry about one cohort in particular – what about those children who were on roll, but whose attendance was so low that they might as well not be? Who would even know about them?

Precisely because the data collection is poor, this cohort is uniquely vulnerable in any proposed reforms. After all, they will show up in the data as 'in education'. We could, in theory, achieve 'NEET Zero' and do nothing for this cohort. They would be, for all intents and purposes, 'Hidden NEETs', with all the negative impacts of being NEETs, yet none of the targeted interventions reaching them.

And so, for the second time in two years, I used of my data powers under the Children Act on colleges; this time to request data from all colleges about their overall attendance levels. I wanted to see if there were indeed hidden NEETs, and if so, how many there were.

I have found tens of thousands of these children.

Children who, otherwise, would have simply slipped through the cracks, who existing data collections would not have taken into account, and whose very existence existing systems genuinely do not have the ability to understand.

Understanding children like this is, in my view, the purpose of the Children's Commissioner.

This is, to my knowledge, the most comprehensive data set currently available on FE attendance, and the results are stark.

Half of the children in colleges are persistently absent by the standards that we apply to schools.

I hope that this data collection adds real light to the existing and fast-moving policy debate around NEETs in England. I hope it acts as a call for us to make sure that we have a full understanding of children's lives.

This data shows clearly that attendance recording in FE settings needs to improve, and that the Department for Education should act as soon as possible to ensure that it does so.

As we are getting ready for a world in which a greater proportion of our young people across the nation attend an FE setting. We are fixing some of the quirks in FE policy to do so – such as fully funding college places. These fixes are useful, and overdue, but I believe that the Government must act urgently on FE attendance. We need to do far more to understand the reality of attendance at college, and it is mystifying to me that we have not done so already.

I know how much this matters. As Alan Milburn's recent report has highlighted, further education colleges are the primary institutional bridge for the most at risk young people. 40.9% of students aged 16 and 17 attend an FE or sixth form college. Young people with lower attainment and less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to enrol in FE colleges at 16.

There is no path to improving their outcomes that does not run squarely through understanding, standing with, and working together to improve, our FE sector.

Executive Summary

This report sets out the national picture of attendance in college groups for 16- and 17-year-olds in England, using new data obtained by the Children's Commissioner from England's Further Education (FE) settings.

Using her statutory powers, the Children's Commissioner requested data from 290 college groups to understand the culture around attendance, actual attendance and severe absence in Spring 2026. Data were included from 262 college groups (90.3%)— making this the most comprehensive overview of attendance in the FE sector.

It identifies a significant group of 'hidden NEETs', 16- and 17-year-olds enrolled in college but attending so infrequently (severely absent, defined as missing more than 50% of sessions) that they cannot truly be considered as engaging in education, alongside a larger group of young people with attendance challenges. The recommendations in this report seek to address the attendance challenges for young people in post-16 education at a critical point in their transition to adulthood.

Key findings

Hidden NEET: A child who is enrolled in a FE setting, but has attendance of lower than 50%, meaning they are not engaging in their FE education in a substantive way.

Severe absence and hidden NEETS

- Across the college groups included in the analysis, **28,528 students aged 16-17** were severely absent in Spring term 2025/26. This means that **5.9% of students aged 16-17** were absent for at least 50% of the time they were expected to be in college.
- Extrapolating to all 290 college groups suggests **there could be a substantial additional group of 42,000** (an estimated 41,995) students aged 16-17 who are enrolled in education but are severely absent. This is an average of 145 students per college. If these '**hidden NEETs**' were considered alongside the 46,520 young people aged 16 and 17 known to local authorities as

NEET, as reported by the Department for Education[1], **the total 16- and 17-year-old NEET population would be almost twice** (1.9) **as large.**

- **Severe absence varied considerably between groups of students**. For example, rates were higher among students receiving free college meals (8.8% compared with 5.5% among those not receiving them); those with an EHCP (9.7%, compared with 5.4% among those with no identified SEND or EHCP); and those looked after (12.5% compared with 5.9% among those with no social care involvement). There were particularly large differences by level of study, with far higher rates of severe absence among Level 1 and Entry Level students (13.4%) compared with Level 3 vocational/mixed students (3.4%) and Level 3 academic students (1.1%).

Overall attendance rates

- The attendance challenge extends well beyond the most severely absent students. **Average reported attendance rates were 84.8% for 16-year-olds and 83.4% for 17-year-olds.** These compare to the 94.8% overall attendance rate for pupils in Primary school and 91.6% for pupils in secondary schools in the same Spring term of 2026.[2]

- **Over half of college students are persistently absent by school standards.** 52.2% of 16- and 17-year-olds included in the analysis were reported as having attendance below 90% – the closest available proxy for persistent absence which is used in schools.

- **Reported attendance was particularly low for GCSE English and Maths resit courses**, at 75.6% and 74.4% respectively. This is a cause for concern. Not achieving Level 2 qualifications in English and Maths is a strong risk marker of a young person becoming NEET.[3] Colleges highlighted to the Commissioner the need for teaching that is high quality, and some colleges referenced work on linking these qualifications to young people's futures.

- **Reported attendance targets varied widely between college groups**. Most (61.1%) reported that they set attendance targets above 90%; almost one-third (31.3%) set targets below this level — levels that would correspond to persistent absence in the school system; and 7.6% did not have an overall target for their 16- and 17-year-olds at all. The range for the attendance rate among 16 year olds was 67.2% to 98.7% and the range for 17 year olds was 64.9% to 97.4%.

Barriers and improving attendance

- In written comments colleges reported a range of barriers preventing young people from attending regularly. The most common were: **mental health challenges, poverty and financial hardship, transport difficulties, caring responsibilities, paid work commitments, transitions from school to college** and **previous negative experiences of education**. Some colleges also raised concerns about poor sleep patterns and digital habits affecting attendance and engagement.

- Colleges reported barriers that make it harder to respond to attendance challenges effectively, including: **funding pressures, a lack of statutory levers to support attendance,** and **insufficient data sharing between schools and colleges** – particularly on previous attendance patterns.

- Despite these challenges, colleges reported a wide range of examples of promising practice to improve attendance. Successful approaches included **early identification** through data tracking, **personalised support** to address underlying barriers, close **partnership working** with families and external agencies, and creating opportunities that strengthen students' **sense of belonging and motivation** to attend.

Young people's own views on the importance of educational engagement.

- Colleges told us attendance is higher when **young people can see a clear connection between their studies and future employment**. However, children have told the Children's Commissioner's office about the barriers they see in the job market including the number of jobs available and a lack of opportunities.

- Young people who are NEET have told the Children's Commissioner's, through her current survey *The Big Future*, that they want support to **re-engage with education, access work experience, find apprenticeships** and **navigate key education transitions.**

Recommendations

This report highlights the importance of identifying and supporting young people before they disengage completely. Attendance in further education should be recognised as a priority, and its measurement needs to be made consistent. To reduce the number of young people who are NEET, greater attention must be paid not only to those who have already left education but also to those who remain enrolled yet are disengaged from it.

To do this, the Children's Commissioner is calling for:

1. Immediate and medium-term policy changes that the Department for Education should implement to ensure that children attending FE settings, and the settings providing education, are supported.

Monitoring attendance and participation in post-16 education needs to be strengthened. The Children's Commissioner recommends the Department for Education, in consultation with the FE sector, set ambitious targets for attendance in FE and begin statutory attendance data collection across all FE settings. School attendance statistics should be extended to cover all 16- and 17-year-olds at all educational providers paid for by the state.

To address children's barriers to participation, the Children's Commissioner recommends the enhanced roll-out of Mental Health Support Teams in post-16 settings is prioritised. Additionally, an offer of wrap-around support should be offered to 16-year-olds who are offered a place at college as part of the automatic college place for those without a post-16 study plan.

2. Steps to improve children's engagement in education more broadly, and so there transition into the labour market.

Broader steps are needed to address disengagement in education which will have positive flow on effects to children's transitions into the labour market. Better work experience is one important part of the solution, and employers need a way to work effectively with schools with incentives to ensure engagement is impactful.

The Children's Commissioner proposes Metro Mayors and Combined Authorities should be given regional responsibility for coordinating employer engagement with schools and colleges, funded by central government to create and staff this function. This function will link schools and colleges to an established resource bank for completion of their work experience guarantee at a minimum. The Department for Education should hold MCAs as accountable for employer engagement outcomes and the quality of the proposed service above. Further details and recommendations are outlined in Chapter 6.

1. Introduction

England's children have consistently told the Children's Commissioner about their desire to get on in life, and to find a good job when they leave school. Nationally representative polling for the Commissioner this year found that getting a good job was children's most common worry about their future.[1] Good jobs for the future were an important theme in the Commissioner's landmark *The Big Ambition* survey, and have formed a large part of her discussions with young people as she speaks directly to children about her current survey *The Big Future.*

For too many - and an increasing number of – children, that isn't what happens as they transition out of education. At the start of this year, more than a million 16-24 year olds were not in education, employment, or training (NEET).[4] Rightly, that figure and the reasons behind the recent increase have received a good deal of policy attention. The ongoing Milburn Review – looking at young people and work – is due to report shortly, and the new government has made reducing the number of young people who are NEET one of its priorities.

While exact figures vary between official sources (since they use different data and methodologies), there were 46,520 16- and 17-year-olds known to local authorities to be NEET last year.[5] Those years, though, are vital for children's transition into the labour market. The majority of policy attention in this area has focussed on attainment and the curriculum. Much less has been given to something even more fundamental, children's attendance, something 67% of college leaders said was one of their top concerns in our census of colleges last year. In this context, examining the attendance of children in FE settings seemed an urgent task.

This report is based on analysis of data on attendance from England's Further Education (FE) settings obtained using the Commissioner's data powers under Section 2F of the Children Act 2004 (see Annex A for more details).

[1] By OnePoll, n=2,000, April 2026, 2,000 UK children aged 6 to 17. 'Getting a good job' and 'Having enough money' were joint first placed on 43% in response to 'What worries you most about the future, if anything? Pick all that are true for you'.

1.1 Context

In England, 40.9% of young people aged 16 and 17 attend an FE or sixth form college.[6] Despite this being a significant percentage of young people, attendance data is patchy and poorly collected. This report seeks to remedy that.

Current requirements to collect attendance data

Schools have a statutory duty to keep an attendance register which records pupil attendance under the *School Attendance (Pupil Registration)(England) Regulations 2024*. These regulations only apply to schools. Further education colleges are defined by a different legal framework, the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* which does not include attendance register regulations. However, it is common practice for colleges to record and monitor attendance.

Under the *Education and Skills Act 2008,* institutions within the further education sector have a duty to promote good attendance. Additionally, under the *Department for Education's funding rules for 16 to 19 provision 2025 to 2026* which applies to Further education colleges, institutions must have evidence that individual students were undertaking their specific study programme during the learning period for which funding and retention is being recorded. However, this is not required to be submitted as part of their Individualised Learner Record return. In the funding rules, institutions are told to consider the benefits of a good register system to help them to monitor student attendance and progress.

This report focuses on two groups of children attending colleges, both of whom are of real concern. The first is children who are in college but attending poorly. This may impact their education, and in turn risks negatively impacting their future life outcomes. As things stand, the lack of understanding nationally around FE attendance, caused both by longstanding undervaluing of the FE sector by successive governments and the lack of data collected on FE attendance by the Department for Education, means that these children run the risk of lacking the robust attendance intervention that we would expect elsewhere in the education system. It also introduces worries about the evidence base for those interventions – after all, if we are not measuring attendance at a national level, it is incredibly difficult to know what works at scale.

The second is children who have slipped beyond 'persistent' and into 'severe' absence. Below 50% attendance, a young person is not meaningfully engaging with their education. In the case of 16- and

17-year-olds, there is a real risk that these children are, in essence, 'hidden NEETs' – children on the rolls of colleges, who were never engaged with their education or have dropped out of it.

1.1.2 Where are 16- and 17-year-olds?

All children are required to remain in education or training until they are 18 under the Raising Participation Age (RPA) provision in the Education and Skills Act 2008, and colleges are the chosen pathway for many. 88.2% of 16- and 17-year-olds are estimated to be in education and apprenticeships. However, there remain a number of 16- and 17-year-olds who are not participating in education and apprenticeships: these children may be in wider training such as those in privately funded training outside of an apprenticeship (5.9%) or in employment (1.9%). The remainder are estimated to be NEET (4.0%).[7] [8] This indicates a gap with RPA effectiveness and how education and skills systems support children to remain engaged.

The Milburn Review has argued that FE colleges are the primary institutional bridge for the most at-risk young people.[9] The government has rightly recognised this crucial role of colleges, including their role acting as children's primary pathway for vocational qualifications and apprenticeships. The policy commitment to offer a guaranteed automatic place in college at 16 reflects this.[10] However, for education to act as a protective factor and set children up for success in the future, they need to be attending and engaging.

1.1.3 Attendance in FE

Links between attendance and NEET risk are well established in the school context. Persistent absence in school, particularly at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 is strongly associated with being NEET at age 17 to 19.[11] Attendance is an issue that travels with children beyond school. The Children's Commissioner's colleges findings from her School and College Census showed widespread concerns among college leaders about attendance.[12]

Currently, there is no statutory requirement for FE colleges to report attendance data and therefore there is no comprehensive picture of the challenge nationally. This is a challenge both for research but also the sector itself - as one college leader commented in their written response:

"The fact that there isn't a clear way of recording attendance at Post 16 is farcical" –Assistant Principal[2]

The government's Post-16 skills and education white paper committed to working with all 16 to 19 education providers to track student attendance and intervene early when attendance starts to decline, and the Department for Education is undertaking work to achieve this. This work includes the recently developed Risk Of NEET Indicator tools and guidance for schools and colleges.

The issue of attendance in college is complex, largely because the challenges children are facing outside education are complex. Barriers for children who are care experienced, young carers or with mental health challenges may become more prominent in the post-16 education environment. At 16 and 17, some children work part-time to support themselves or their family. The transition from school to college brings unique challenges and attendance issues may reflect difficulties with this transition.[13] Other factors reported to impact attendance in this transition include children's previous experience with education, their understanding of and alignment with their chosen pathway, and the requirements to re-sit GCSE English and Maths until a grade 4 or better is achieved.

1.1.4 16 and 17 year olds who are disengaged or NEET

Local authorities have statutory duties for tracking young people's participation to ensure those who are not participating can be given support to re-engage.[14] The Department for Education monitors how local authorities are tracking and supporting 16- and 17-year-olds using data submitted to the National Client Caseload Information System (NCCIS), and local authorities are expected to act on any information they collect. However, in addition to the 46,520 NEET 16- and 17-year-olds known to local authorities, the Department for Education recently reported that an additional 32,100 'phantom NEETs' aged 16 and 17 where their activity was not known.[3] [15] . The Government plans to work with the 26 councils where this issue is most pressing, defined as those 'who do not know the activities of 3% or more of their teenagers' and agree improvement plans 'over the next six months.'[16] An additional

[2] All quotes in this report are comments written by colleges as part of the Commissioner's statutory data collection, unless otherwise attributed.

[3] As noted above, between the ONS and two different DfE projects, different organisations use different methods to calculate this number.

investigation by FE Week found that thousands of young people were missing out on the 'September guarantee' which is supposed to ensure every 16 and 17-year-old is offered education or training.[17]

Shortly, the Government will receive and respond to the findings of the Milburn Review into Young People and Work. My report on attendance in FE colleges shows that there are children who are in enrolled in further education at 16 and 17 who are effectively not participating. That is important both for understanding why young people go onto become NEET. But, more fundamentally, it highlights that there is a group of children who are effectively NEET due to severe absence.

When the Government responds to Alan Milburn's work, that response must also include a focus on attendance, particularly at 16-17. It must treat these 'Hidden NEETs' as simply 'NEETs' and treat these children as part of the same strategy.

2. The scale of attendance challenges for 16- and 17-year-olds in college

To understand attendance in the FE sector, the Children's Commissioner focused this new data collection primarily on FE colleges and sixth form centres. While attendance isn't monitored nationally for school sixth forms either, schools have already given a high priority to attendance. Therefore, the Commissioner's priority focus was FE and, as such, will not capture young people who may be formally enrolled in school sixth forms but have similarly low levels of attendance or engagement.

Using her statutory powers, the Children's Commissioner asked for data from 290 college groups. The Children's Commissioner's office received 283 submissions, of which 262 were retained for analysis after initial data cleaning. Responses were therefore available for 90.3% of college groups.

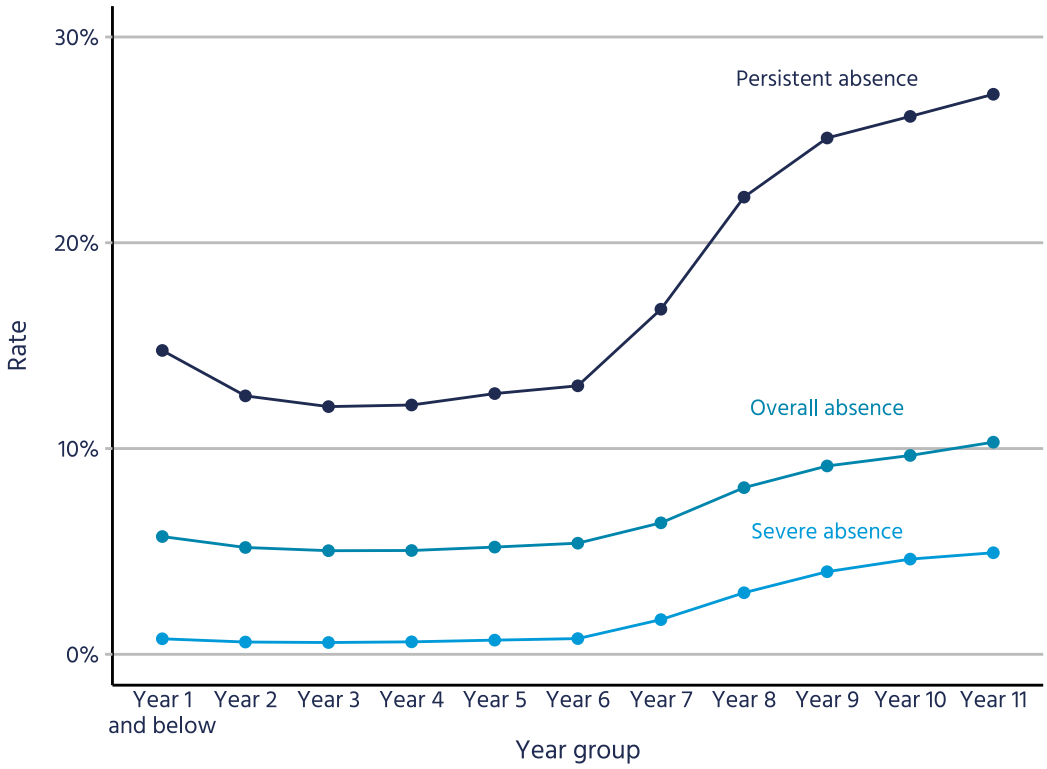
In the absence of a standardised approach to measuring attendance across the sector, college groups reported attendance based on their existing practices. While this means that differences in how attendance is defined and measured cannot be fully accounted for, this data nonetheless provides an important first picture of attendance across the FE sector as well as new insight into where greater consistency in attendance measurement may be needed. Further details on the data request and data quality are provided in Annex A and the corresponding data tables are provided in Annex B.

2.1 College attendance in context

College is a different educational context to school, where young people have more independence and may have different commitments outside the education environment as they get older. However, school attendance provides a useful benchmark for comparison.

The rates of overall, persistent and severe absence increase as children get older, becoming particularly pronounced after the transition to secondary school and reaching their peak in Year 11 (Figure 1). While nationally comparable attendance data for those in Years 12 and 13 are not published by the Department for Education, we may anticipate that absence rates will increase during the 16 to 19 phase.

Figure 1: Absence rates by year group, Academic Year 2024/25



Source: Pupil absence in schools in England, Department for Education (2026). Note: Children's Commissioner's office analysis of published Department for Education data

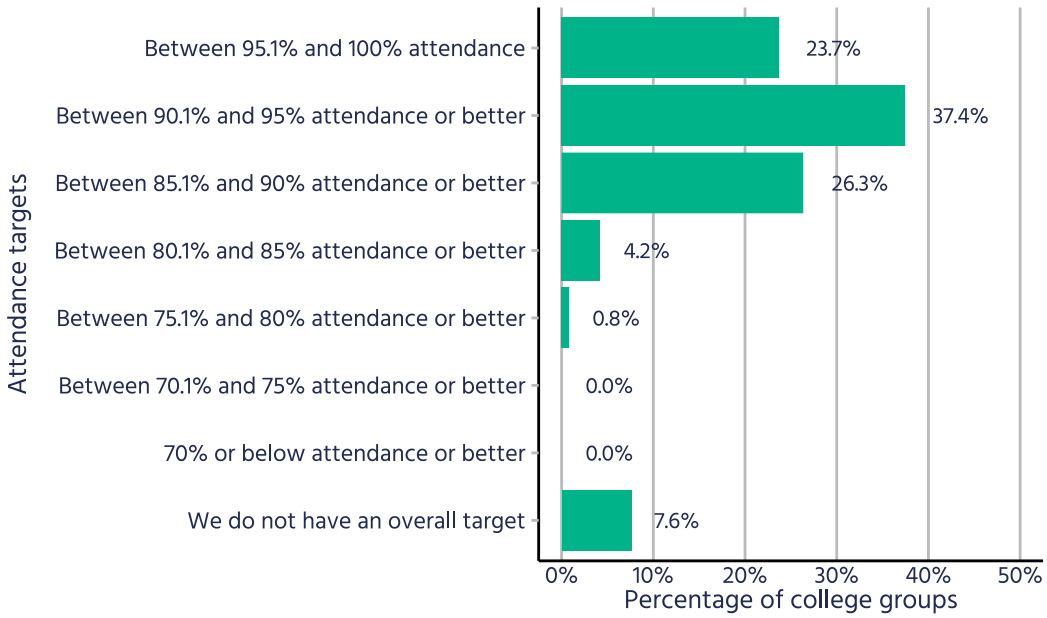
The findings should also be interpreted in the context of the college groups included in this analysis. The majority (71.0%) of the 262 responses come from FE colleges which serve a markedly different student population to many of the setting types not included in this data collection, like selective school sixth forms and independent school sixth forms. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately represented in FE colleges and absence rates are known to be higher amongst pupils eligible for free-school meals during earlier phases of education. [18, 19, 20] It is therefore important that the findings are not interpreted solely as a reflection of provider performance or quality; the wider socioeconomic context in which colleges operate is also likely to shape attendance patterns.

2.2 Attendance targets and overall attendance

2.2.1 Attendance targets

Colleges were asked to tell the Children's Commissioner what their internally set targets for attendance were, shown in Figure 2. Among the 262 college groups, most (61.1%) set attendance targets above 90%; however, almost one-third (31.3%) set targets below this level — levels that would correspond to persistent absence in the school system. 7.6% were categorised as not having an overall target at all.

Figure 2: Attendance targets reported by college groups



Notes: Analysis based on 262 college groups with available attendance target data

2.2.2 Overall attendance

The Children's Commissioner asked colleges to report their overall attendance rates for 16 and 17 year olds in Spring term 2025/26. To estimate attendance across the sector, attendance rates were weighted by the number of students enrolled in each age. The mean attendance rate among responding colleges was below 90% for both age groups, at 84.8% for 16-year-olds and 83.4% for 17-year-olds (Table 1). This is the equivalent of missing around one in six days over a 190-day school year or missing around 6 weeks of a 38-week school year

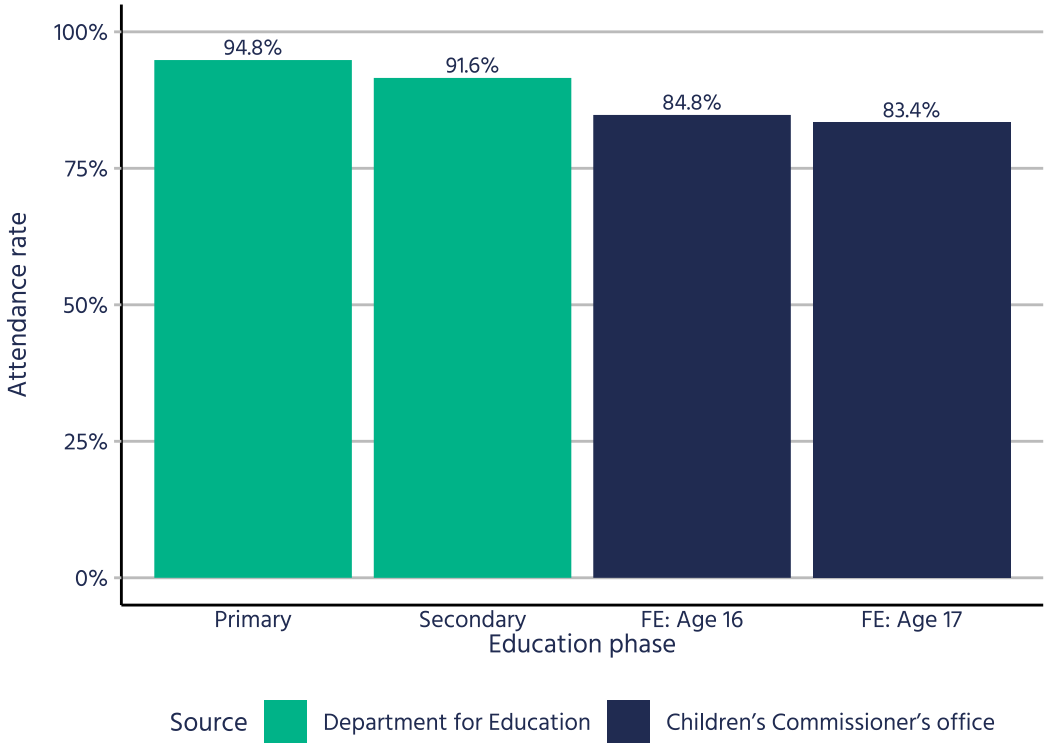
Table 1: The mean attendance rate by age, Spring term 2025/26

Age	Mean attendance rate (%)	Number of college groups included in the analysis
16	84.8	208
17	83.4	208

Notes: Analysis based on 208 college groups with consistent enrolment data and complete data for both age groups. Mean attendance rates are weighted by the number of students of each age enrolled in each college group.

To put these findings in context, we compared them with published attendance data for schools. In the Spring term of 2025/26, attendance was 94.8% in primary schools and 91.6% in secondary schools, substantially higher than the attendance rate reported by FE settings in our data request (Figure 3).

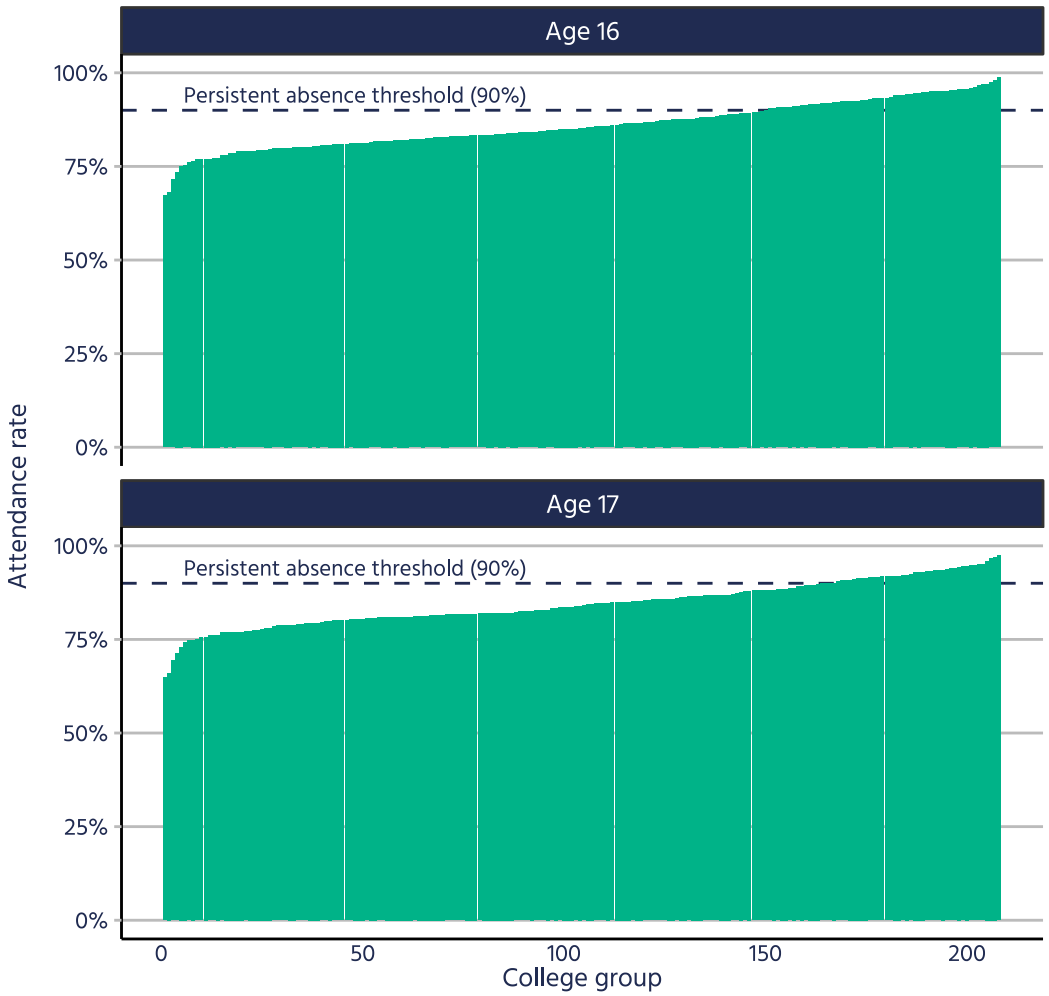
Figure 3: Attendance rate by education phase, Spring term 2025/26



Sources: Primary and secondary schools – published Department for Education data; FE – Children's Commissioner's office attendance data. Note: CCo analysis based on 208 college groups with consistent enrolment data.

Attendance rates vary widely from one college group to another (Figure 4). The range for the attendance rate among 16 year olds was 67.2% to 98.7% and the range for 17 year olds was 64.9% to 97.4%. Further research is needed to understand whether these reflect differences in the composition of pupils who attend them or college practices that may encourage or serve as barriers to attendance.

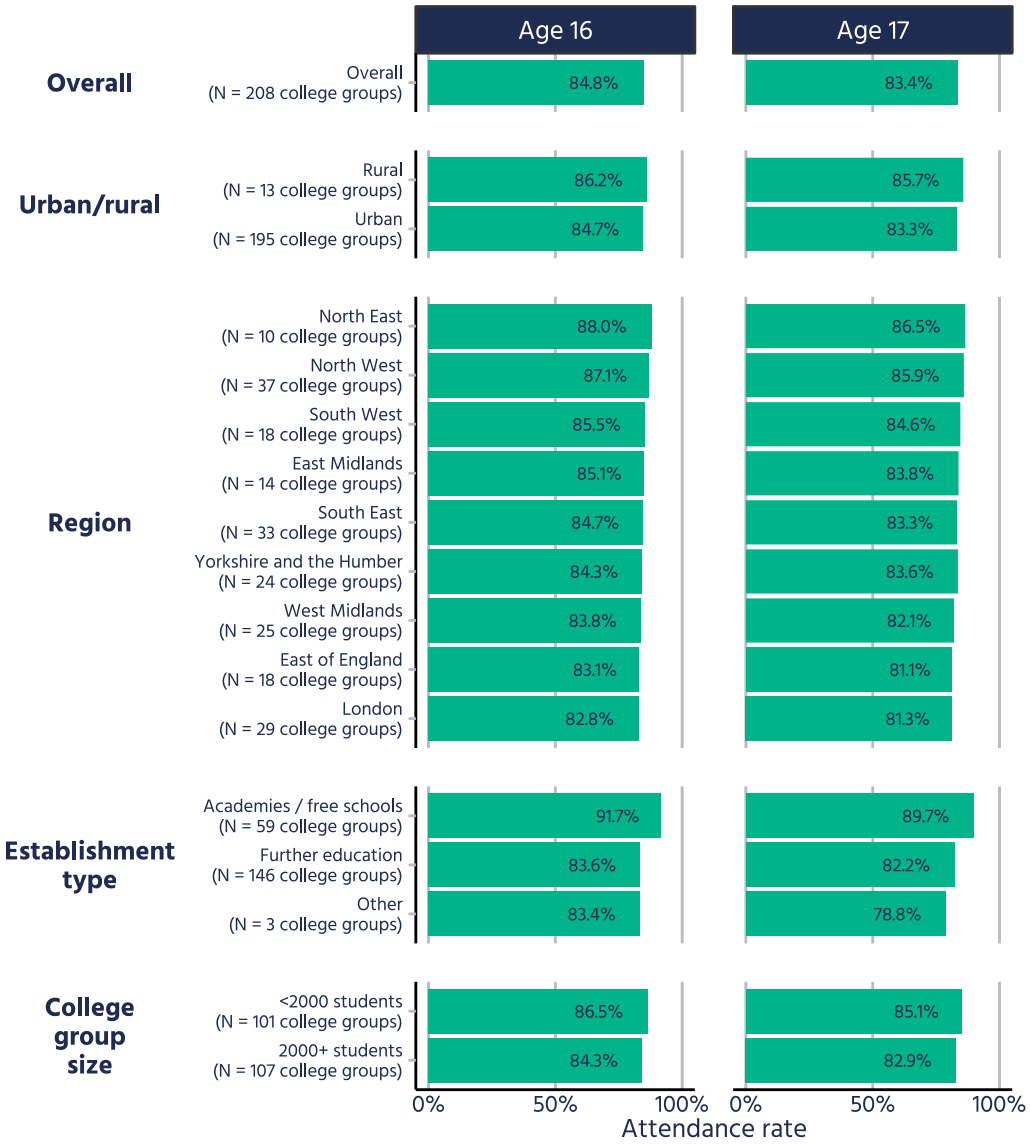
Figure 4: The variation in the attendance rate, Spring term 2025/26



Note: Analysis based on 208 college groups with consistent enrolment data. College groups have been sorted from lowest to highest in terms of their attendance rate.

Attendance varies by some characteristics of college groups, but not others (Figure 5). For example, attendance was lower among students in larger college groups and higher among students in Academies/Free Schools than among those in general FE colleges. It is important to note that Academies/Free Schools are a broad group, including specialist settings such as Maths Schools, whose students may differ substantially from those attending the average FE college. This finding is therefore of research interest, but differences in the kinds of students served by different establishment types make it difficult to draw clear conclusions from it.

Figure 5: The attendance rate by college group characteristic, Spring term 2025/26



Notes: Analysis based on 208 college groups with consistent enrolment data. Attendance rates are weighted by the number of students enrolled in each age group. College group size was categorised based on the total number of 16- and 17-year-olds. 'Other' establishment types include a community school, a higher education institution and a special post-16 institution, as recorded on the Department for Education's Get Information About Schools service.

We also asked colleges what proportion of their 16 and 17 year olds fell into different attendance bands. This allows us to look beyond average attendance and understand patterns of low attendance. Figures were again weighted by enrolment numbers to reflect the number of students represented by each college group. Table 2 therefore shows the estimated percentage of 16- and 17-year-olds in each attendance band.

Among 16- and 17-year-olds (and based on analysis from 193 college groups) 52.2% had attendance below 90% – the closest available comparison with persistent absence in schools.

These figures are far higher than those reported by the end of Year 11 in Figure 1. This may reflect a continuation of that trend (albeit at an accelerated pace) although it is important to note that firstly, the post-16 context differs from compulsory schooling and secondly, college groups measure attendance in different ways. Further research is therefore needed to unpack what is driving this increase.

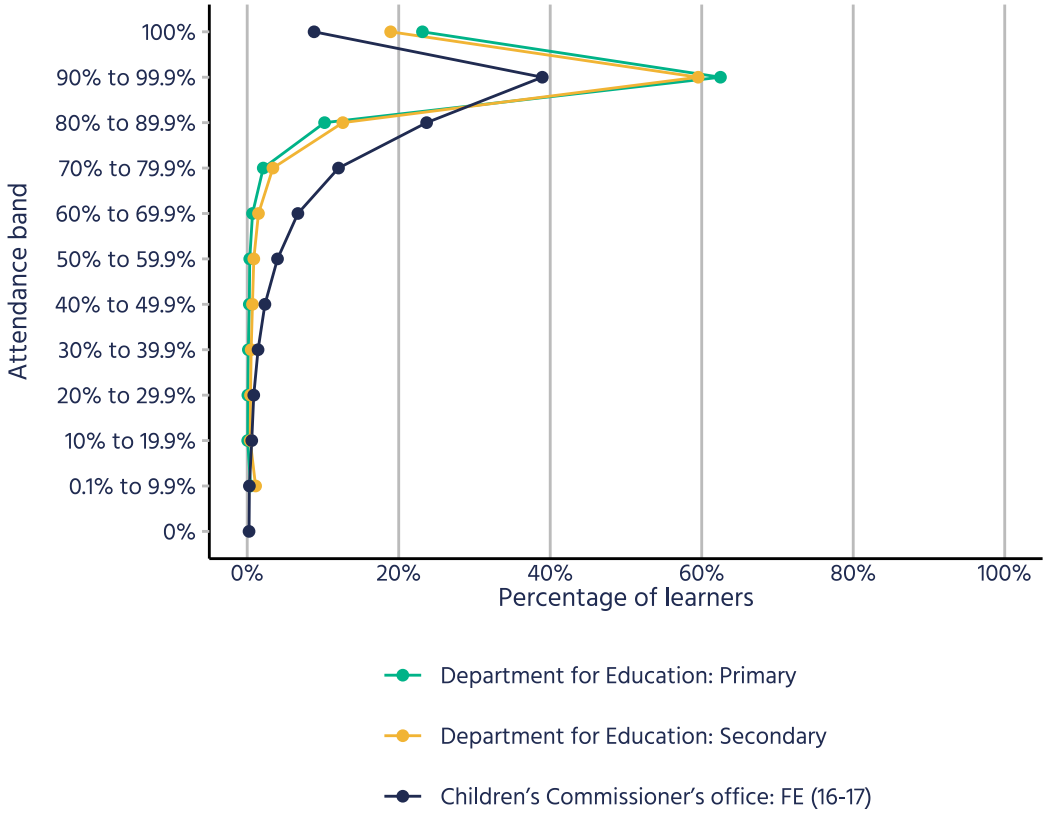
Table 2: Percentage of 16- and 17-year-old students in each attendance band, Spring term 2025/26

Attendance band	Percentage of 16- and 17-year-old students (%)
100%	8.8%
90% to 99.9%	39.0%
80% to 89.9%	23.7%
70% to 79.9%	12.1%
60% to 69.9%	6.7%
50% to 59.9%	4.0%
40% to 49.9%	2.3%
30% to 39.9%	1.4%
20% to 29.9%	0.9%
10% to 19.9%	0.6%
0.1% to 9.9%	0.3%
0%	0.2%

Notes: Analysis based on 193 college groups with consistent enrolment data and attendance band data (college groups whose reported attendance bands totalled approximately 100%). Percentages are weighted by the number of 16- and 17-year-olds enrolled in each college group. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

To put these findings in context, we compared them with published attendance data for schools. Compared with primary and secondary schools, college groups reported a smaller proportion of students in the highest attendance bands and greater proportions in lower attendance bands (Figure 6). It is important to note that the data cover different time periods (Autumn 2025 for schools and Spring term 2025/26 for colleges) and attendance is measured differently across the two sectors. Nonetheless, the comparison provides useful context, showing that college attendance is lower than school attendances.

Figure 6: Attendance profiles in college groups compared with primary and secondary schools



Sources: Primary and secondary schools – Pupil absence in schools in England, Department for Education; FE (16-17) - CCo attendance data. Notes: CCo analysis based on 193 college groups with consistent enrolment data and attendance band data (college groups whose reported attendance bands totalled approximately 100%) in Spring term 2025/26. DfE figures

are based on CCo analysis of the absence data which were converted into the closest equivalent attendance bands in Autumn term 2025/26.

2.3 GCSE English & Maths resit attendance

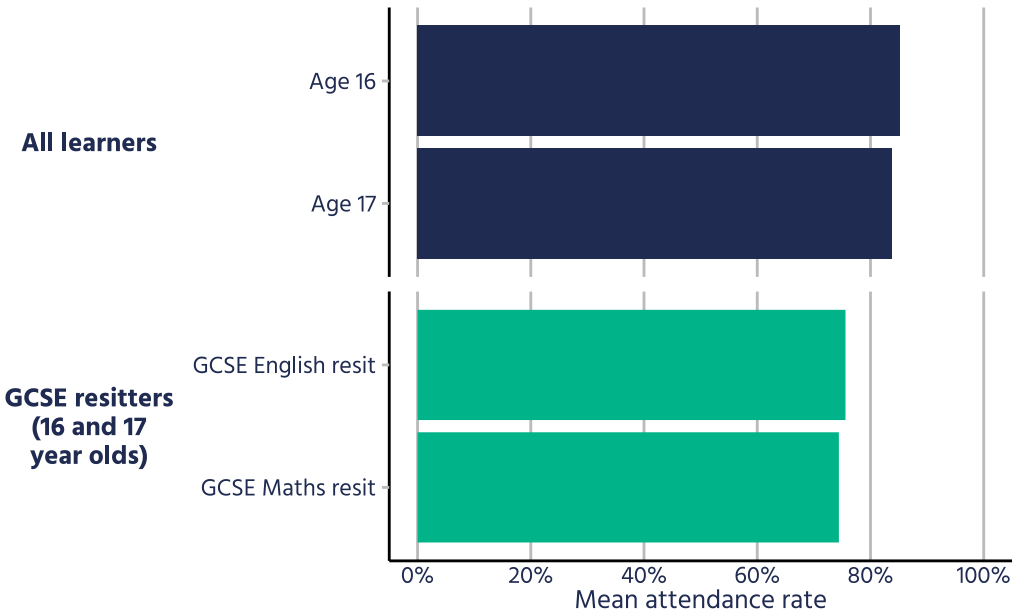
We also asked colleges about attendance among 16- and 17-year-olds taking GCSE English and Maths resits. In England, students who have not achieved a grade 4 or above in English or Maths GCSE at age 16 are required to continue to resit these qualifications alongside their main programme of study. As Table 3 shows, across the analysed college groups, the mean attendance rate was 75.6% for GCSE English resit courses and 74.4% for GCSE maths resit courses. The range was wide with attendance rates for GCSE English resit courses spanning 47.5% to 98.6% and the range for GCSE Maths resit courses spanning 47.0% to 97.6%. As shown in Figure 7, attendance for both was considerably lower than the overall attendance rates reported by the same college groups for all 16- and 17-year-olds.

Table 3: Attendance rates amongst GCSE resitters, Spring term 2025/26

GCSE resit subject	Mean attendance rate	Minimum attendance rate	Maximum attendance rate	Number of colleges included in the analysis
English	75.6%	47.5%	98.6%	184
Maths	74.4%	47.0%	97.6%	184

Notes: Analysis based on 184 college groups with consistent enrolment data across both outcomes. Figures show unweighted mean attendance rates reported across college groups because the data request did not collect information on the number of students taking GCSE English and Maths resits.

Figure 7: Attendance rates amongst GCSE resitters compared to all students, Spring term 2025/26



Notes: Analysis based on 184 college groups with consistent enrolment data across all four outcomes. The data request did not collect the number of students resitting GCSE English and Maths so for a fair comparison all figures in the chart are unweighted. Accordingly, the all-learners figures therefore differ from the enrolment-weighted estimates in Section 2.2.2.

Colleges were asked to provide data on GCSE English and Maths resit attendance for Spring term 2025/26. Some colleges informed the office this may not correctly capture the attendance of all resit students. In particular, students who took resits in November may no longer have been attending these courses in the spring.

2.4 Measurement approaches

Comments from colleges show variation in how post-16 attendance is defined, calculated and reported.

Differences exist in the activities that count towards attendance. Some colleges record only physical attendance in timetabled classes, while others include examinations, tutorials, work placements, educational trips, workshops and enrichment activities.

The treatment of authorised absence also varies. Some colleges record these as attendance, some as neutral and others as absences.

Comments show differences in the student cohorts included in college attendance data. Some colleges include all enrolled students regardless of status, and some only focus on continuing students and exclude those who have withdrawn.

Comments showed colleges also use different methodologies and reporting periods to measure and calculate attendance. This includes measuring attendance by lesson, sessions or AM/PM registration marks. Some colleges separate English and Maths attendance from overall attendance.

There were differences in what data was collected by colleges and by what demographic marker. Some colleges commented they do not regularly report on attendance data disaggregated by age group in their college. Another mentioned they do not have attendance data available broken down by care leaver status.

How attendance is measured and recorded at a college level has implications for interventions. One college indicated that attendance targets are set according to course type and year of study. Another outlined how students who missed learning in lessons can make it back.

"The College piloted a payback system 2025-26 which is being rolled out in 2026-27 and aims to ensure that all learners engage in learning activities outside of planned lessons to 're pay' missed learning." - Vice Principal

Overall comments from colleges highlight a need for national guidance. As one respondent noted,

"Unless all FE providers measure attendance in the same way, i.e. what counts as positive, negative and neutral, it's not a consistent dataset." - Director of MIS

3. Finding the Hidden NEETs: severe absence in FE settings and breakdowns by student characteristics

The Children's Commissioner asked colleges how many 16- and 17-year-olds that they classified as severely absent and the characteristics of these students. This section first examines the overall picture of severe absence — as well as its implications for existing estimates of NEET — and how this varies by student characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity, Free College Meal status, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities status, social care status, and main programme of study. While the analysis focuses on students reported as severely absent (defined in the data request as attending less than 50% of sessions) underlying approaches to measuring attendance may differ between college groups. Nevertheless, the analysis provides insight into which groups of students are disproportionately represented among those reported as severely absent.

3.1 Overall rates of severe absence

As Table 4 shows, among the 197 college groups included in the analysis, 28,528 16- and 17-year-olds were reported as severely absent, representing approximately 5.9% of the 16- and 17-year-olds enrolled in the analysed college groups. Scaling the total number of severely absent students reported by these college groups to all 290 college groups suggests that approximately 42,000 (an estimated 41,995) 16- and 17-year-olds may be severely absent in England.

Table 4: The number of severely absent 16- and 17-year-old students, Spring term 2025/26

Region	Number of colleges included in the analysis	Number of 16-and 17-year-olds who are severely absent	Proportion of enrolled 16-and 17-year-olds who are severely absent
London	28	3,651	7.5%
East of England	17	3,963	7.1%
Yorkshire and the Humber	23	3,262	6.5%
West Midlands	24	4,218	6.2%

South East	31	5,339	6.0%
South West	15	1,969	5.3%
North East	9	732	5.2%
East Midlands	13	2,113	5.1%
North West	37	3,281	4.0%
Overall	**197**	**28,528**	**5.9%**

Notes: Analysis based on 197 college groups with consistent enrolment and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks

3.1.1 Implications for current estimates of the number of NEETs

Using the Commissioner's definition of hidden NEETs, this suggests that current estimates of the number of 16- and 17-year-old NEETs are likely to be a substantial underestimate. While estimates of the number of young people who are NEET vary by data source, based on data from the National Client Caseload Information System (NCCIS), [4] the Department for Education reports an estimated 46,520 16- and 17-year-olds[5] known to local authorities to be NEET in 2026[6]. This would suggest that existing NEET estimates may be understating the scale of non-participation among 16- and 17-year-olds: the number of children aged 16 and 17 who are NEET could be almost twice (1.9) as high as this estimate.

3.2 Breakdowns of severe absence by characteristics

Next, we examined whether severe absence rates varied by age, gender, ethnicity, free college meal status, SEND, social care status and level of study. For each group, the severe absence rate was calculated as the total number of severely absent students divided by the total number of students in that group who were enrolled. For example, the severe absence rate for girls is the number of severely absent girls as a proportion of all girls in the analysis. Again, while differences in how attendance is measured across the sector remains, this approach is intended to be as comparable as possible with the way severe absence rates are reported for schools.

[4] The NCCIS is an administrative dataset used to track the whereabouts of young people and their participation in education, employment and training.

[5] Aged 16 or 17 on 31 August

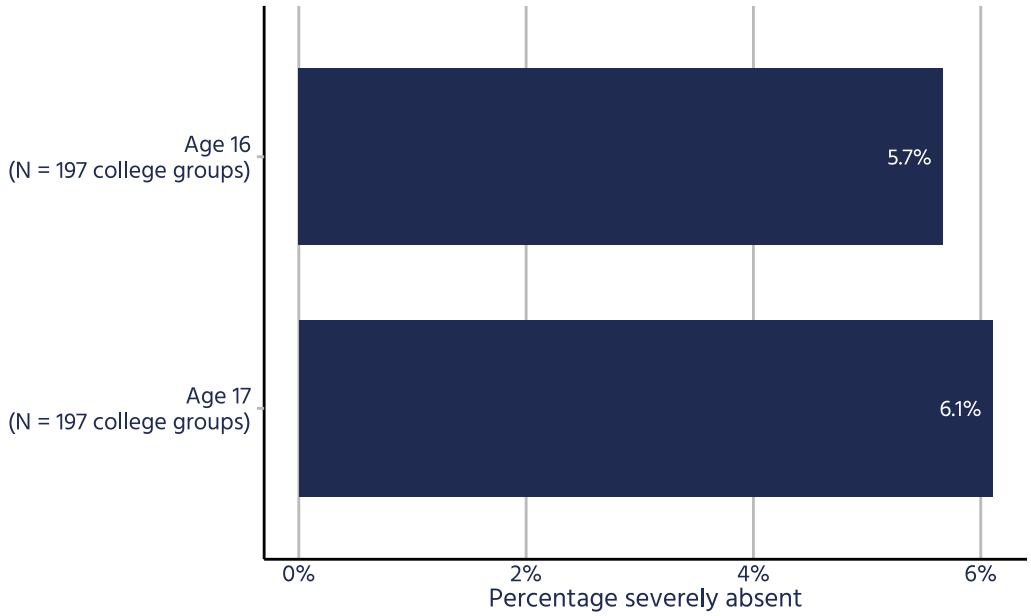
[6] Average estimate based on NCCIS data for December 2025 to February 2026

It is important to note that these figures describe differences in severe absence rates among students in the available college data. They should not be interpreted as evidence that a student characteristic itself *causes* the differences in severe absence.

3.2.1 Age

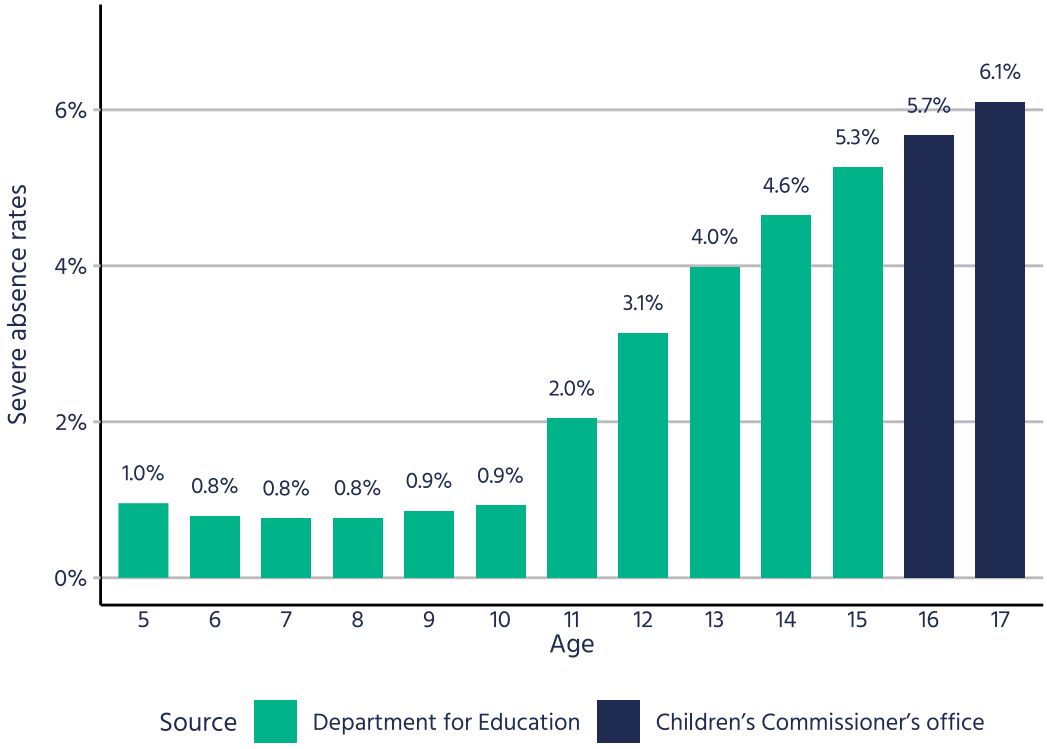
As shown in Figure 8, severe absence rates were higher at age 17 (6.1%) than it was at age 16 (5.7%). It is likely that severe absence in this age group is a continuation of a trend earlier in childhood. Severe absence rates start to worsen at 11, particularly in the transition to secondary school and progressively get worse as a child gets older (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Severe absence rates by age (16 and 17), Spring term 2025/26



Notes: Analysis based on college groups with consistent enrolment data and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks.

Figure 9: Severe absence rates by age (5-17), Spring term



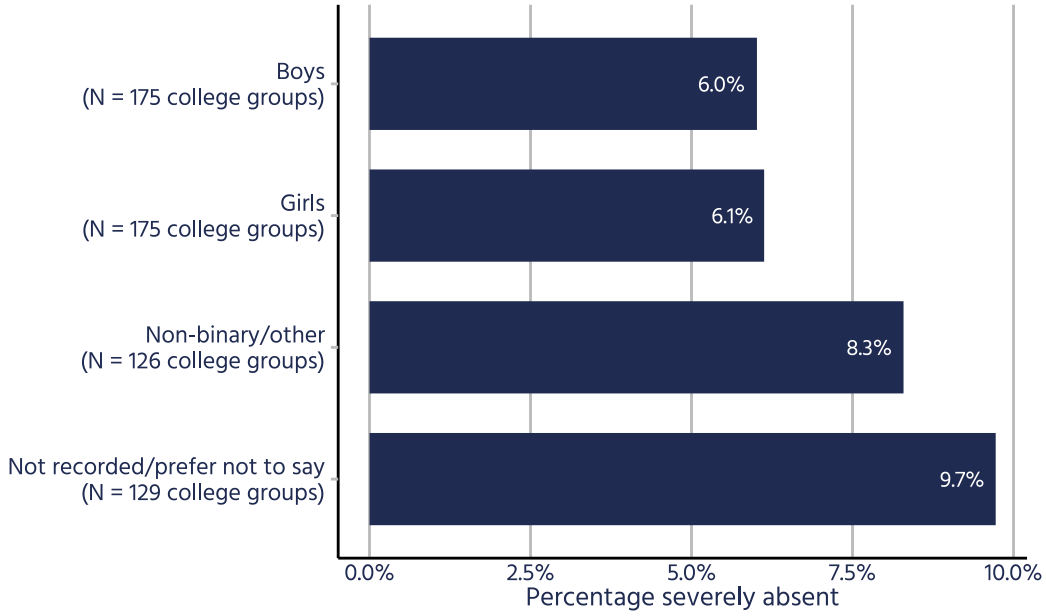
Source: Ages 5 to 15: Freedom of Information request, Department for Education (2026). Ages 16 to 17: Children's Commissioner's office attendance data. Notes: DfE figures are based on school pupil enrolment records in England in Spring term 2024/25. CCo analysis based on college groups with consistent enrolment data and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks; these figures are calculated from aggregate data reported by FE college groups in Spring term 2025/26.

3.2.2 Gender

As shown in Figure 10, severe absence rates were similar for girls and boys at 6.1% and 6.0% respectively. This concurs with the pattern seen in schools where severe absence rates for girls and boys are very similar; for example, in 2024/25, 2.43% of girls and 2.35% of boys were severely absent. [21] From 2023/24, the school census data item 'gender' was replaced by 'sex' so the patterns among gender diverse young people are unknown. However, our newly collected data suggest that rates

were higher among students recorded as non-binary/other (8.3%) and those whose gender was not recorded or who preferred not to say (9.7%).

Figure 10: Severe absence rates by gender, Spring term 2025/26

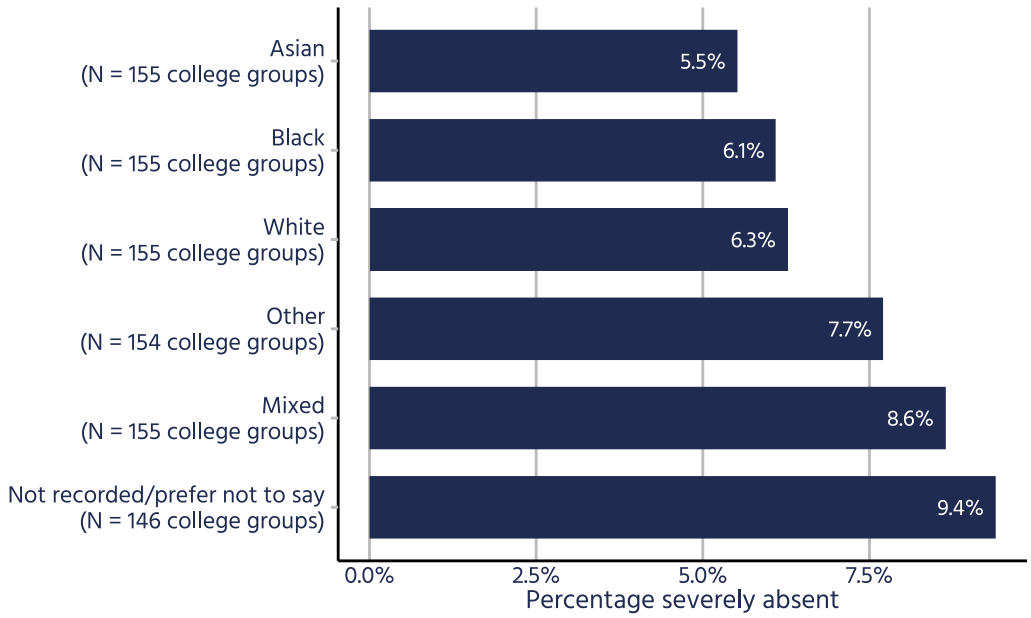


Notes: Analysis based on college groups with consistent enrolment data and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks.

3.2.3 Ethnicity

As shown in Figure 11, severe absence varied by ethnicity, ranging from 5.5% among Asian students to 8.6% among students from mixed ethnic backgrounds. The highest rate was found for those whose data was not recorded or those who preferred not to say at 9.4%.

Figure 11: Severe absence rates by ethnicity, Spring term 2025/26

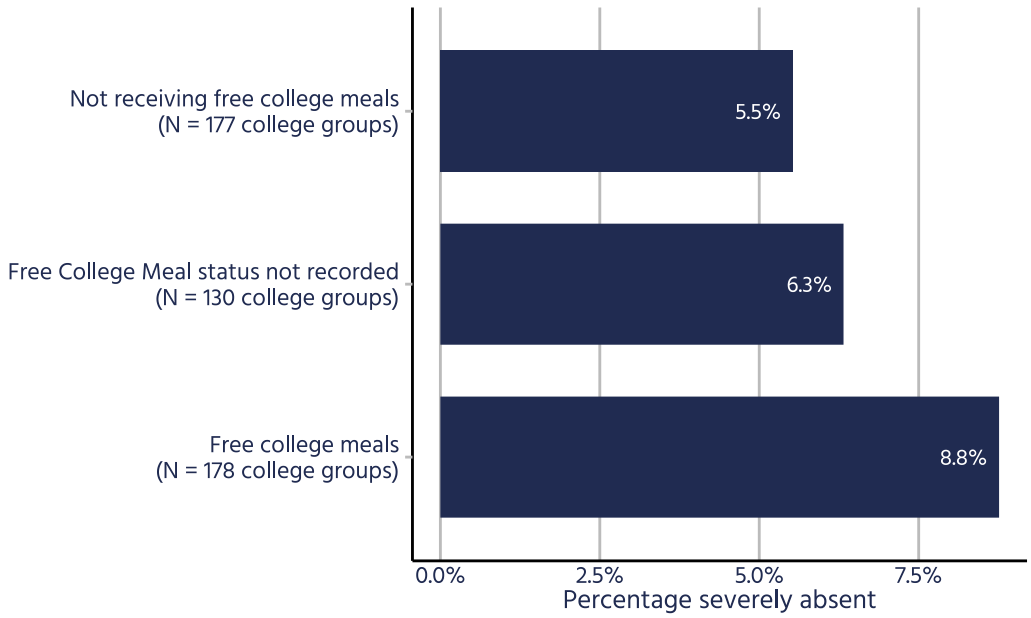


Notes: Analysis based on college groups with consistent enrolment data and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks.

3.2.4 Free college meals

On average students receiving free college meals have higher rates of severe absence (8.8%) than those who were not (5.5%), see Figure 12. In schools, severe absence is also substantially higher among pupils eligible for FSM (4.2%) compared to pupils not eligible for free school meals (1.2%) in 2024/25.[22]

Figure 12: Severe absence rates by free college meal status, Spring term 2025/26

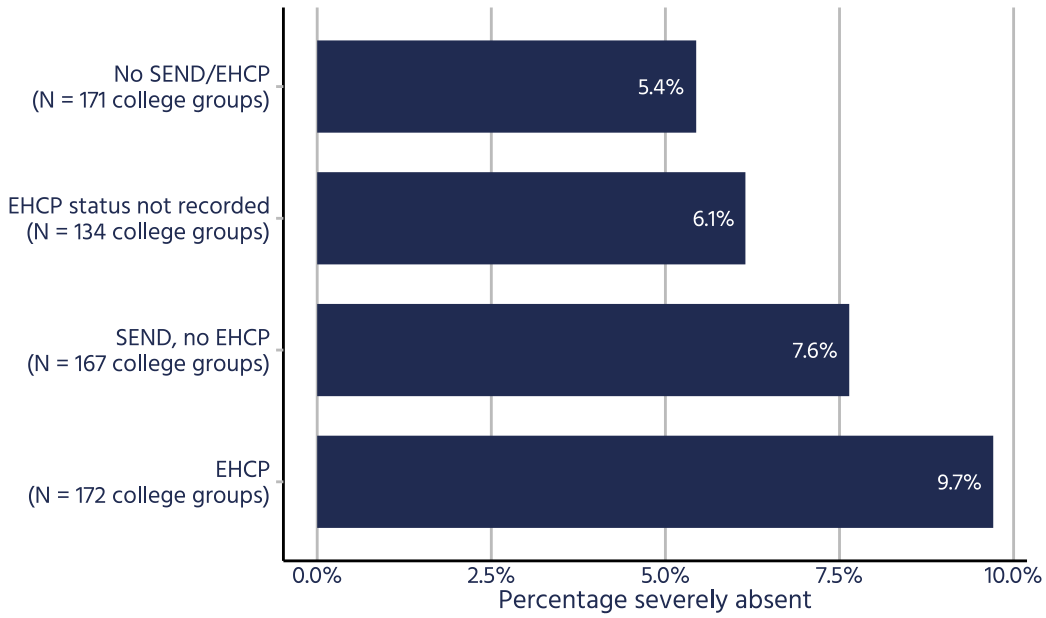


Notes: Analysis based on college groups with consistent enrolment data and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks.

3.2.5 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Considering SEND status, severe absence is highest among students with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP; 9.7%), compared to students identified as having SEND without an EHCP (7.6%) and students with no identified SEND or EHCP (5.4%) (Figure 13). This pattern is also broadly consistent with the data from schools where severe absence was highest among pupils with an EHC plan (7.5%), followed by pupils with SEN support (4.5%) and lowest among pupils with no identified SEN (1.2%) in 2024/25.[23]

Figure 13: Severe absence rates by Special Educational Needs and Disability status, Spring term 2025/26

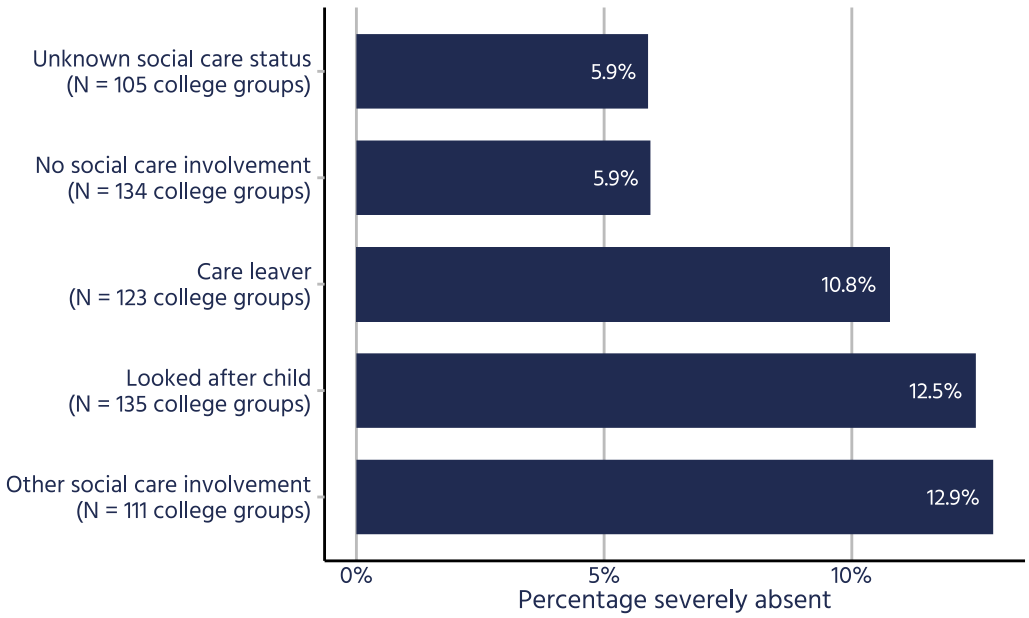


Notes: Analysis based on college groups with consistent enrolment data and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks.

3.2.6 Social care status

Figure 14 shows that severe absence was particularly high among students with social care involvement. 12.5% of looked after children and 12.9% of students with other social care involvement were severely absent, compared with 5.9% of students with no social care involvement. Among care leavers, 10.8% were severely absent.

Figure 14: Severe absence rates by social care status, Spring term 2025/26

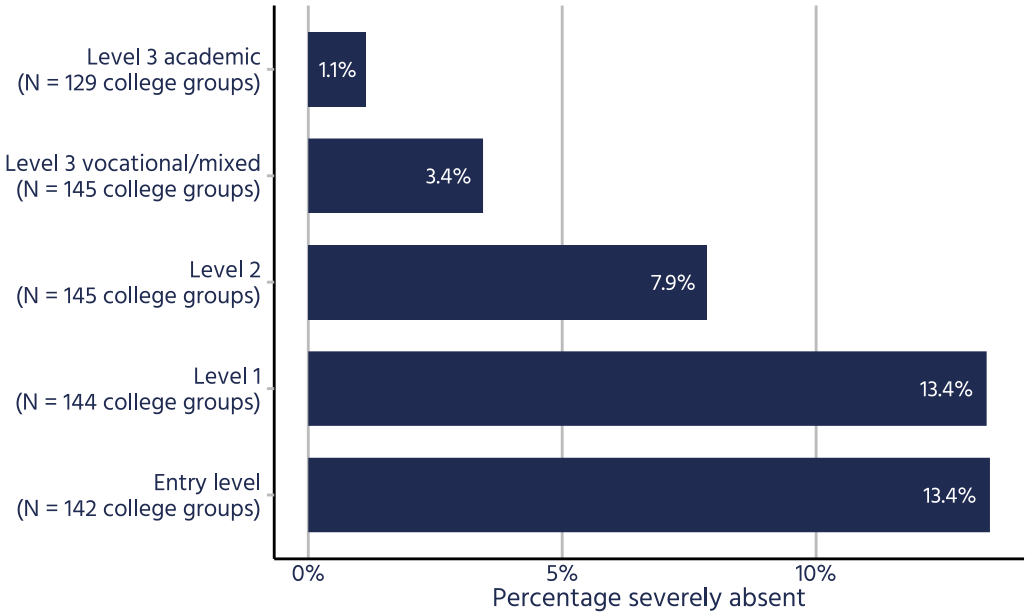


Notes: Analysis based on college groups with consistent enrolment data and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks. College groups were instructed that 'care leaver' can include any care experienced learners (i.e. a qualifying care leaver, relevant child or former relevant child) and that 'other social care involvement' can include children on a Child Protection Plan and a Child In Need Plan

3.2.7 Level of main study programme

Figure 15 shows that there were particularly large differences by level of study. Severe absence was low among students on Level 3 academic programmes (1.1%), rising to 3.4% for Level 3 vocational or mixed programmes and 7.9% at Level 2. Around one in seven students on crucial Level 1 and Entry Level programmes were severely absent (13.4% for both).

Figure 15: Severe absence rates by level of main study programme, Spring term 2025/26



Note: Analysis based on college groups with consistent enrolment data and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks.

4. Improving attendance

College responses show they take varied approaches to severe absence. One college noted severely absent students are removed from roll as they are not fit to attend and study. Another outlined their preference to retain students where there are significant barriers to attendance *"as an inclusive college this is the most appropriate approach to take."* One college noted severe absence can often be episodic rather than continuous, with attendance dropping sharply due to specific life events. However, colleges cited many of the same attendance barriers for students and colleges, which are explored below.

4.1 Barriers for students

"Our learner voice work shows that attendance is rarely about unwillingness to learn. More commonly, it is linked to confidence, anxiety, transport costs, financial pressures, wellbeing and whether learners can see the relevance of what they are studying." – Assistant Principal

Colleges told the Children's Commissioner that young people face a combination of complex and overlapping barriers which impact their attendance. As the Association for Colleges and Youth Employment UK noted in their 2025 report, absence is rarely just an attendance issue.[24] It can be an early warning sign linked to mental health, financial pressure, family responsibilities and whether a young person has the right support around them.

Mental health

Colleges repeatedly raised mental health as a substantial barrier contributing to severe absence. Some colleges commented that severely absent students often faced ongoing medical issues requiring prolonged hospital stays.

"The most significant issues relate to mental health, wellbeing and anxiety - we offer a wide range of support and signposting but there is a crisis and not

enough support accessible in the timeframe required. There a significant waiting lists for those with mental health struggles." – Head of Business Intelligence

Mental health is a significant barrier to college attendance for young people, and one the sector is having to manage with less support than secondary schools. The primary vehicle for mental health support in educational settings is via Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) and colleges lag behind secondary schools in the roll-out of these. This makes it likely that a child who transitions from secondary school to a post-16 setting will go from having access to an MHST to not having access: coverage is currently 42% of post-16 students compared to 79% of secondary students.

Colleges are trying to help. Findings from the Children's Commissioner's College Census show that 51% of colleges have an Education Mental Health Practitioner, and of colleges who do not have one, 76% report being in favour of having one in their college.[25]

"The single biggest driver of non-attendance is mental health, particularly anxiety. Funded mental health support teams, equivalent to those being rolled out in secondary schools, should be extended to post-16 settings." – Academy Systems Lead

Disadvantage

College responses show attendance is a particular challenge for some cohorts of young people. Colleges told us children with disadvantaged backgrounds or experience of poverty face a particular set of overlapping barriers. These barriers include transport costs, housing instability, caring responsibilities such as caring for siblings, and limited access to devices or digital connectivity.

Care experienced students

Young people who are care experienced face their own specific attendance barriers.

"For specific cohorts, such as Looked After Children (LAC) or Care Leavers, low attendance is frequently driven by external, mandatory appointments (social work reviews, housing meetings, court dates) that are scheduled during college hours and are completely out of the student's control." – Group Director of Management Information Systems (MIS)

Transport

Colleges frequently mentioned transport availability, reliability and cost, particularly in rural areas, as a barrier for students. One college highlighted how transport barriers can compound challenges for young people with additional needs at the start of their college journey.

"One prospective student with autism, anxiety and communication needs faces a journey of up to two hours each way to access his chosen construction programme. Transport barriers have already limited his ability to engage with transition activities, increasing the risk of disengagement before starting college" – Director of MIS

Outside college commitments

It is important to recognise the context of young people at college when looking at attendance. At 16 and 17, college students may have positive commitments outside of college which are barriers to attending. For example, one college mentioned a student was a member of a national sporting team. Additionally, colleges told us many students are juggling part-time jobs which builds crucial workplace experience.

School-to-college transition and previous education experiences

Many colleges reported barriers to attendance associated with the school to college transition. Low attendance habits formed in school often move with students to college. Previous negative experiences of education also create attendance challenges. For example, colleges are increasingly

serving young people who were previously electively home educated. Additionally, young people may arrive from school with unmet SEND needs impacting their attendance.

"We also see lower attendance among students with low prior attainment or negative previous experiences of education, which can reduce motivation and confidence." – Head of MIS

Impact of the online world

Some colleges reported how poor digital habits and sleep-related behaviours are impacting student's attendance at college. For example, one college mentioned how government online safety measures are welcomed to help young people avoid harmful content online which may be increasing disengagement. This is of particular concern to the Children's Commissioner given the emerging body of evidence linking sleep to a variety of negative outcomes. Existing research, both international and domestic, links poor sleep to poor school attendance, and the Milburn review makes specific reference to the links between sleep and NEET status.[26]

Case Study: Henry's journey towards becoming a hidden NEET

This case study is taken from casework of the Children's Commissioner's advocacy team, Help at Hand. All children referenced have been anonymised.

'Henry' is 17. He was taken into care at a young age, and has been diagnosed with foetal alcohol syndrome, autism and ADHD. His early experiences in school were very negative but he thrived in the special school he attended for Year 10 and 11, gaining GCSEs and a BTEC. Henry, his EHCP in place, then enrolled on a vocational course at a mainstream college. Although academically able to meet the requirements of his course, he found the lack of individual support and the social aspects hard. Henry also struggled with the journey on public transport. After six months, he told his parents he could not go back, and they supported his decision, having seen the impact of college on his mental health.

Henry has now been out of college, and therefore a hidden NEET, for many months. However, he remains on roll, as his local authority SEND team is insisting that the college can meet his needs and is refusing to consider alternative educational provision. His parents have been told he cannot be offered tutoring as an interim measure, because he has a college place. Their only option is to appeal to the SEND Tribunal, meaning a wait of many months in their area. The longer he waits, the more challenging it will be to return to education or training, fulfil his potential, and have a positive future.

4.2 Barriers for colleges

Funding and external services

Colleges are clear about what they need to offer additional support to their students. In responding to previous questions in the Children's Commissioner's School and College Survey about the barriers to providing additional support to their students, almost unanimously (90%), colleges said that the availability of funding was the top barrier to providing additional support to students. This was followed by three-quarters of colleges who reported the availability of local services and overall staff capacity as top barriers.[27]

The Commissioner has highlighted how children's mental health services have not kept pace with demand and more children are waiting for treatment and waiting for longer. Demand for children's mental health services is rising and over one million children had active referrals to children and young people's mental health services in 2024-25.[28]

This is consistent with college responses on the barriers they face improving attendance. Many colleges told us how funding constraints impact the level of personalised support they can provide. They noted pastoral support, attendance officers and outreach all require sustained investment. One college highlighted the effectiveness of targeted youth workers and home visits for vulnerable students, however explained financial constraints were limiting this support. Additionally, the long waiting times, particular for mental health services impacts students' ability to get the support they need.

"In terms of providing support, colleges face several challenges. These include limited funding and capacity in specialist services (such as mental health and SEND support), delays in accessing external agencies, and funding constraints which can restrict the level of personalised intervention available." – Head of MIS

When asked what government could do to help colleges improve student attendance, many colleges provided suggestions to government about funding. This included more funding for targeted financial support for learners to address transport and cost-of-living barriers, funding for college outreach resources, funding for college support services, funding for college data systems and dashboards, and funding for transition and re-engagement support. Some colleges noted the link between disadvantage and poor attendance and suggested poverty reduction efforts should be continued by government.

"Ideally, we would have an attendance and welfare team that would do outreach, I feel this would prevent withdrawals and potential NEET numbers

in one of the highest areas. This could be funded as NEET Prevention strategy" – MIS Manager

A lack of statutory levers

A barrier noted by some colleges was the lack of statutory levers post-16 to address attendance. This lack of formal powers, combined with parent engagement challenges such as language barriers or a general lack of engagement, can make it difficult for colleges to enforce attendance. One college suggested measures such as fixed penalty fines, education supervision and college attendance orders would be useful.

Data sharing between schools and colleges

Another frequently reported barrier was the lack of information received from schools on attendance and safeguarding. In free-text responses colleges made suggestions for government to help colleges improve attendance. Many colleges commented on the importance of recognising attendance improvements from school to college when addressing absence. However, to do this they need data on previous attendance from schools to provide targeted intervention and support and monitor improvements.

"In some cases we can obtain school attendance records to show this comparison [to college attendance], but if there was a central/systematic way to obtain this data in a similar way to PLRs, all Colleges could benefit from such a solution." – Head of Digital Transformation

Sharing and guidance

Some colleges suggested national benchmarks and guidance on attendance would be helpful for the sector. Suggestions included:

- national systems for information sharing between schools, local authorities and colleges to enable early identification and support

- clear national guidance on post-16 attendance measurement to enable consistent national attendance data, setting out clearly how post-16 attendance should be measured.
- sector benchmarks for college attendance
- retention as a key performance measure for post-16 providers
- a mechanism to enable sharing of effective practice to improve attendance across the sector

4.3 Approaches to improving attendance

The Children's Commissioner asked colleges for examples or case studies of good practice in supporting attendance. Despite barriers, colleges provided examples of their approaches to improving attendance for 16 and 17 year olds.

Data and identification

Some colleges highlighted the importance of setting a strong culture of expectation and making attendance easily visible for students, staff and parents. This includes early identification and tracking of students through approaches such as developing a learner risk framework. Many colleges spoke of taking a threshold approach to decisions about who to target interventions on based on attendance data.

Personalised approaches

Some colleges focused on the importance of understanding and addressing underlying reasons for absence. For example, one college reported exploring blended learning approaches to support students facing persistent transport barriers. Another college provides alternative provision options for students with historic attendance challenges.

"Sustainable improvement comes from building trusted relationships, understanding individual circumstances and removing barriers to learning, rather than adopting a purely compliance-based approach" – Vice Principal (DSL)

Partnerships

Colleges reported they often work in partnership with schools, families and external agencies to improve attendance.

"Some of our best practices are in the partnership work we have done with the eating disorder clinics. Working collaboratively, we have helped students stay up to date with work, and we have been able to integrate students back in to college." – Head of Guidance

Encouraging attendance

Colleges reported various approaches to enticing attendance. This included setting up strong pastoral support and fostering a sense of belonging. Some colleges highlighted their focus on enrichment activities to encourage attendance. Some colleges focus on celebrating attendance successes. Some colleges commented they focus on communicating the importance of attendance for employability and work-readiness. One college highlighted the importance of high-quality teaching and learning to deliver engaging lessons, including demonstrating relevance for students.

4.4 Maths and English Level 2 Resits

Responses from colleges make it clear GCSE Maths and English resits are a particular attendance challenge for 16 and 17 year olds.

Colleges have repeatedly referenced engagement challenges across the sector in their results, but that does not make some of the attendance figures referenced below less stark.

"Attendance on GCSE resit courses is 68% for English and 70% for maths, which is in line with the known engagement challenges of this cohort. The college continues to implement targeted attendance monitoring, pastoral

support, and engagement strategies to improve participation and support positive outcomes." – Director of Information

"Usual difficulties in engagement as seen across the sector" – Head of MIS

"On average, resit rates sit about 10 percentage points below main college attendance..." – Chief Information Officer

Colleges commented students can struggle with low motivation and engagement due to previous challenges with English and Maths in school. The impact of repeated resits for students can reinforce feelings of failure, stress, anxiety and negatively impact confidence and engagement. Many colleges reported that engagement dropped after November resits, which often can result in a student failing.

"Attendance rates are impacted by the wait for November resit results, published in January. The attrition between exam and results is detrimental to attendance rates and is a constant battle." – MIS Manager

Colleges noted the cohort of students taking GCSE re-sits have struggled previously with these subjects and may face other external barriers such as part-time employment commitments and travel barriers.

"Students undertaking re-sits are often very demoralised having spent time in schools where they may not have been taught by a qualified maths or English teacher. This can impact on their appetite for the subject as they feel they just can't do it." – Principal & CEO

Some colleges commented young people struggle to see the relevance of completing GCSE English and Maths for their practical based course or future work.

"Attendance varies based on the student's destination. For example, students who want to eventually attend university have better attendance than those who wish to leave and enter employment. They do not value the GCSE for employment as they do not see this as a prerequisite to enter employment." – Vice Principal Curriculum

However, research indicates not having Level 2 English and Maths qualification is one of the key indicators for young people becoming NEET.[29]

Colleges are finding ways to encourage attendance of resit classes. Many colleges mentioned timetabling strategies and integrating English and Maths delivery within vocational areas. Colleges are also using strategies such as attendance and performance monitoring, pastoral and academic support, notifications to parents, and increasing staffing levels to better contextualise the learning for students.

"This year we have undertaken pilots in GCSE Maths and English in specific areas to contextualise the learning by double staffing the lessons with a curriculum specialist in the first term and have seen both improved attendance rate and improved November resit pass rates." – Chief Information Officer

Some colleges mentioned staff turnover, absence and vacancies have impacted resit attendance in their college.

5. Children's perspectives

The Children's Commissioner has heard from a variety of young people on the issue of college attendance, including barriers to attendance, as well as broader perspectives about engagement in education and work. The quotes in this section are drawn from her discussions with young people as part of her *Big Future* tour, as well as responses so far to *The Big Future survey.*

5.1 Barriers to engaging in education and work

Responses from young people highlight the barriers they face to engaging in education and work more broadly.

Many young people referenced the existing resit regime as a key barrier to children attending college. These responses varied in specificity – some children asked for the abolition of Maths and English Level 2 requirements, while others referred to a sense that failing those qualifications had made things more difficult for them or their friends. However, the Children's Commissioner believes that Level 2 English and Maths are amongst the two most important qualifications that a young person can attain. The proposed Level 1 'Stepping Stones' qualification – if implemented in a way that facilitates continuation to Level 2 qualifications – could be a positive step in the right direction in terms of setting a baseline of knowledge for pupils and building a more positive relationship between young people and English and Maths. The fact that young people are calling for their abolition reflects a culture that makes these exams emotionally draining – the existing incentives regarding resits, for instance, clearly results in young people taking these exams without being ready to do so. It is not a reason to give up on young people. The Children's Commissioner, in her response to the Department for Education's recent consultation, agreed with the proposed changes to FE resits to ensure that they work better for young people.[30]

"Make it easier for young people to get on to higher courses without maths and English resits so that we can achieve our goals" – Girl, 17, The Big Future survey

"More opportunities provided for those who may have failed resits. I didn't fail, but I just noticed some of my friends not being given a second chance. More vocational opportunities given out, [such as] degree apprenticeships, more work experience opportunities" - Girl, 17, The Big Future survey

Children drew attention to specific barriers with educational access, in particular for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

"Not everyone can do GCSEs and school. More opportunities for SEND children to have access to alternative education and training." – Girl, 15, The Big Future survey

Other responses reflected on young people's experiences with the job market. These varied in content, with some respondents focusing on wider support and also the number of jobs they perceived as being available:

"More apprenticeships and support getting them. I chose not to go to college, as I don't want to go to Uni, and wanted to learn on the job. I did secure an apprenticeship but was let go due to financial pressures on the business. That was October. I still have no job or prospects. I apply for loads but lack experience and mostly don't even get replies. I want something I can progress in and make a career out of." – Boy, 18, The Big Future survey

"There's not enough jobs. I know people who've gone to Uni, and now they're back here, and they can't get a job." – Boy, 17, The Big Future national tour

"Make more job experience opportunities in more places. Let children aged 16 and above easily get a job." Girl, 16, The Big Future survey

Other children focused on specific barriers they saw in the job market, including the inhuman feel of many job application processes (and the implied lack of support they had received in navigating these), as well as what many perceived as an impossible circle – entry level jobs that required experience; experience that they could not obtain without first obtaining an entry level job.

"I'm 17. I've applied to loads of jobs – probably like, a hundred? And it's so hard because of my school hours, they want someone who can work more [hours]. And I've never heard back from a human being. It's all automated messages. [Not once?] No, not even once." – Boy, 17, The Big Future national tour

"It's like, they want experience for a part time job, so I can't get experience to get a job to get experience to get a job." – Boy, 17, The Big Future national tour

Children also connected wider youth services to the question of youth employment, with calls for the restoration of youth services referenced in questions around employment:

"Open the youth hubs back up. Give me somewhere to go where I can talk to people who understand me." – Girl, 17, The Big Future survey

5.2 Experiences of children who are not in education, employment or training

Responses to *The Big Future* survey from children and young people who are NEET (aged 16 to 18) show them clearly asking for help and support from the government to get back into education, to find apprenticeships and to get jobs. They want to participate, but many have faced barriers in education and entering the labour market. One child who is NEET and has special educational needs and disabilities said:

"Make schools more adaptable for children that struggle, have teachers and mentors who are trained and fully understand SEND needs, I was excluded time and time again as I felt targeted for things that were out of my control due to the long waiting list to understand my ADHD" – Boy, 16, The Big Future survey

The responses from children who are NEET show they are facing barriers to finding employment despite qualifications and following pathways. Some highlighted the crucial role of employers and businesses to address this problem, alongside the importance of early work opportunities and gaining experience. Many children recognise the value of apprenticeships and want more to be available.

"They should get more jobs available and make apprenticeships more accessible with some kind of legislation motivating private businesses to hire apprentices. Lots of young people are blocked out of work because of lack of experience, creating a vicious cycle, so it'd be good if we could get some more routes to employment." – Girl, 17, The Big Future survey

Some children's responses suggest a need for early targeted support and job opportunities for young people when they leave education. Suggestions included temporary opportunities for young people, school leavers and people with no experience. Additionally, some children raised the barriers children in care face and the need for more support.

"Provide more support systems for students fresh out of education in finding jobs around their local areas" – Girl, 17, The Big Future survey

Children who are NEET said they want the government to *"actually listen to us"*, be transparent and focus on the wide range of issues they care about that will impact their future.

"Invest in mental health/wellbeing in schools and outside of schools e.g funding it properly. Reduce the pressure on academic success at school being the only indicator of achievement. Care about young people and the world we will live in e.g. make more steps towards Net Zero, care more about the cost of living, care more about climate change, get rid of AI and stop the AI wave, stop taking away jobs from young people specifically weekend jobs or part time jobs." – Girl, 18, The Big Future survey

6. Recommendations

All children have a right to a brilliant education. That can only happen when children attend that education. At all ages attendance is too low and too many children are both persistently and severely absent from education. This report provides new reasons to be concerned about attendance in our education system.

First, attendance across the board is too low. The overall attendance rate was 84.8% for 16-year-olds and 83.4% for 17-year-olds in Spring Term of 2026, and more than half (52.2%) of children were persistently absent from their college provision. That is hugely concerning. Given what we know about school attendance and attainment and successful transitions into the labour market, these children are very likely to have poorer educational outcomes as well as an increased risk of becoming NEET.[31],[32]

Second, there is a large group of severely absent students in FE settings (5.9%) who are effectively NEET. These students have attendance that is so low that they are missing more than half of the college provision available to them – and yet they are currently being recorded as 'in education' and hidden from existing NEET statistics.

This report makes two sets of recommendations to improve attendance in college. The first group focuses on immediate and medium term policy changes that the Department for Education should implement to ensure that students attending FE settings are supported. The second set focus on work experience, as a way of bolstering engagement and understanding of the labour market.

6.1 Immediate and medium term policy changes

6.1.1 Monitoring attendance and participation in post-16 education

Large volumes of energy and funding have been expended on school attendance. It is only right that colleges receive the same level of focus from the Department for Education. While colleges are held to account for the attendance of their students by Ofsted, particularly in the 'participation and development' evaluation area, this is much more challenging without consistent and comparable data on colleges across the country. It is therefore essential that:

- **Recommendation:** The Department for Education should, in consultation with the FE sector, set ambitious targets for attendance for the FE sector.

- **Recommendation:** The Department for Education should begin statutory attendance data collection across all FE settings immediately.

- **Recommendation:** School attendance statistics should be extended to cover all 16 and 17 year olds at all educational providers paid for by the state including school sixth-forms, sixth-form colleges, further education colleges, higher education institutions, independent specialist providers, custodial institutions (juvenile offender) and other full-time education.

The Children's Commissioner called for more timely information sharing in her *School and College Survey: Colleges Report* in March 2026.

- **Recommendation:** The urgent institution of a Single Unique Identifier which applies to all children and a usable public platform, as repeatedly called for by the Children's Commissioner and set out *The Children's Plan*

- **Recommendation:** Until a Single Unique Identifier platform is implemented by the Government, schools and colleges should work together on information sharing to highlight low attendance before transition occurs.

6.1.2 Addressing children's barriers to participation

The numbers of children who are NEET across England demonstrates supporting children's participation and engagement in education is an urgent priority. For many children, they may need targeted support to overcome the specific barriers they face. Mental health is one significant barrier.

- **Recommendation:** For students in college, the enhanced roll-out of Mental Health Support Teams in post-16 settings needs to be prioritised.

The Government committed in the Post-16 White Paper to offer an automatically allocated place at a local college or FE provider.

- **Recommendation:** The automatic place at college for 16 year olds should include an offer of wrap-around support to support them as they transition to college. These students are likely to have disengaged from education; the offer of a place must come with support to ensure that they can integrate into college life and re-engage with education.

To address barriers to participation in post-16 education, the Children's Commissioner has previously recommended two key measures, addressing the pressing economic barriers to participation. These are restated here:

- **Recommendation**: Extending the Pupil Premium to include 16-19 year olds in post-16 education.
- **Recommendation**: Free bus travel for all children to reduce transport barriers.

6.2 Steps towards addressing disengagement

In addition to those steps needed to tackle poor attendance in college directly. The government should take broader steps to improve children's engagement in education – and so their transitions into the labour market.

To do that, it is important to understand as many drivers of disengagement as possible. This analysis, broader data, and the Commissioner's discussions with children point to three key drivers of disengagement.

- In some cases, disengagement is driven by an information problem. A student has realised that the course they're doing is not going to lead to the career they want, or that the career they want does not exist in the place they want to live.
- In some cases, there is poor alignment between the child and the course they are taking. The course itself will lead to their chosen career, but nevertheless the student disengages because they are not having a good time or have, simply put, made the wrong choice.
- In some cases, low attainment and in particular - as seen in the views of college leaders in the qualitative data for this report — difficulties with resits are the cause of disengagement.

The solutions to those challenges are incredibly broad and the Commissioner will play a full role in ensuring children's voices help shape newly proposed reforms to the curriculum, to funding, and to qualifications. However, a number of initial steps would help.

6.2.1 Work Experience

The Children's Commissioner has heard frequently from young people about the importance of work experience, and the lack of work experience is a factor highlighted in the recent interim Milburn Review.

Work experience is a necessary — but not sufficient — part of the solution to the three drivers of disengagement outlined above. Better work experience can help to solve the information problem, by ensuring that pupils understand what roles are out there, where those roles are based, and what they need to study in order to get there. This, in turn, reduces the chances that pupils find themselves on the wrong course – and that their attendance on that course falls away.

Engagement might also be helped by clearly tying resits and qualifications to jobs that young people are interested in – even if the sole motivation to do English and Maths is instrumental, that is far better than no motivation at all. Emerging research on white working class educational outcomes has made recommendations around making learning feel relevant to the future careers that pupils want.[33]

Currently, the state of work experience is subpar, with 2024 analysis showing that fewer than half of Year 10 pupils actually do work experience, and the proportion is even lower for pupils on free school meals and those in the north of England.[34] On average only 49% of Year 10 pupils go on any work experience at all, and for those who do, the average time spent is just under five days. Manifesto pledges and recent government announcements regarding work experience show a clear appetite to address this.[35]

This is laudable, because work experience is a solvable problem. A major driver of this issue may be the fragmentation of England's school system after the academisation reforms, which has meant that it is harder than previously for employers and third sector groups to have a clear pathway into schools – what used to be one relationship with the local authority is now dozens of individual staff at academies, free schools, maintained schools, and various sized MATs.

What is needed is a single point of contact for employers to use when wanting to work with a region's schools, and that point of contact to be heavily incentivized to ensure that employer engagement with children is as impactful as possible.

To fix this:

- **Recommendation:** Metro Mayors and Combined Authorities should be given regional responsibility for coordinating employer engagement with schools and colleges, funded by central government to create and staff this function.

- This new function should act as the default point of entry for employers and third-sector organisations who do not already have established relationships with schools or colleges in the region, and provide regional intelligence on skills needs to guide where engagement is targeted.
- Schools and colleges with existing employer relationships should not be required to route these through the Combined Authority. They should, however, be required to log them in a shared regional register, so the function has full visibility of the local landscape without displacing what already works.
- The function should primarily be a linking function, allowing schools to draw down from an established resource bank for completion of their work experience guarantee at minimum, building towards better relationships with local employers and better understanding of local labour markets.
- Access under Provider Access Legislation (PAL) should not initially be part of this, but access to quality information about vocational options and duties under PAL should be considered where regions are failing to deliver their statutory duties or achieve labour market outcome improvements.[7]

- This model should be deliverable at a fully regional level or through smaller teams in areas of high deprivation or with poor employment outcome deciles, building on proof-of-concept models such as West Yorkshire Combined Authority's employer engagement work.
- **Recommendation:** The Government should, in conjunction with business groups and sector bodies, establish what incentives would be needed to ensure that employers receive a fair deal from any proposed enhanced role in tackling the NEET crisis. At a regional level, there should be set expectations for businesses engaged civically in shaping business policy (for instance, via Chambers of Commerce) to offer work experience. Conversely, smaller businesses and SMEs going above and beyond in offering work experience should receive subsidised access to these bodies from their MCA. Work experience should be factored into the granting of contracts as

[7] All maintained schools and academies have a statutory duty to offer pupils at least six encounters with providers of technical education and apprenticeships to pupils in Years 8 to 13.

part of the social value consideration by updating the Cabinet Office's existing Social Value Model. Currently social value is broadly defined — this definition should be narrowed to reflect government priorities, specifically around addressing NEETs.

- **Recommendation**: The Department for Education should update recent statutory guidance for schools on careers as soon as possible, to both strengthen the specific requirements placed on schools, and to clarify them.[36] These should focus on the 'line of sight' outlined by the Government's proposed FE reforms, and as such focus on the Gatsby Benchmarks which cover interactions with employers, workplaces, and using information about the labour market.

- **Recommendation:** The DfE should hold MCAs accountable for employer engagement outcomes and the quality of the proposed service above. Given the DfE is currently in the process of tendering for a new national careers service, it should make a clear decision about whether to keep this function in-house, or to make it part of the new careers services' remit.[37]

These reforms should occur alongside good local information for young people at 14 about the different routes they can take in their education (academic, vocational, technical). When children make an informed choice to match their interest, ambitions and local opportunities, this is likely to increase engagement.

6.2.2 Resits

Resits are clearly an issue for student attendance and engagement, as set out in this report.

The Children's Commissioner supports recent changes to resits in Further Education. In addition, the Commissioner believes high-quality teaching and academic support which supports students to both achieve and to understand the importance of achieving Level 2 English and Maths for their future is required.

- **Recommendation:** Funding should be available for colleges to facilitate evidence-based tutoring programmes for Level 2 resits.

- **Recommendation:** Level 1 stepping stone qualifications should be introduced, but only as a true stepping stone – they should be focused on, and measured by, their ability to encourage greater passing of L2 English and Maths qualifications.

Work experience and support to pass L2 qualifications will not solve the problem wholly. But they are important steps in the right direction towards solving the deeply felt concerns that children have raised to the Commissioner.

Whatever a reformed educational pathway looks like, it must strike a new balance with technical education. It must take it far more seriously than the current system does, and be far more responsive to the needs of the FE sector. But it must not overcorrect. Technical education, while clearly desired by many children, cannot — and crucially should be not expected to — solve all the challenges of children's engagement. Asking it to will be setting it up to fail.

Vocational education, simply put, must simply be a more tangible part of the education system that the Commissioner has described for years — a fantastic education, with quality teaching, for every child, in every postcode.

Annex A – Methodology

Following the publication of the Children's Commissioner's School and College Census, the Children's Commissioner launched a data request to understand the nature and scale of attendance challenges in the FE sector. This annex sets out the population of interest, data collection, survey content, data quality checks and approach to analysis.

College groups of interest

The population of interest was identified using the Department for Education's Get Information about Schools service (GIAS). The Children's Commissioner's office primarily used information on the statutory age range (statutory lower age of under 18) and phase of education ('16 plus') recorded in GIAS to identify relevant college groups. This mostly covered 16 to 19 sponsor-led academies, 16 to 19 converter academies, 16 to 19 free schools and FE colleges as the data request was intended to focus on settings where attendance data is not centrally collected by the Department for Education. The final list of organisations to target comprised 290 college groups.

It is important to note that GIAS records data regarding FE settings at college-group level. A college group may comprise a single college operating from one campus, a college operating across multiple campuses or multiple colleges within a wider group. The data request asked respondents to report the number of colleges and sites or campuses within their group attended by at least one 16- or 17-year-old during the Spring term 2026. All analysis in this report was conducted at college-group level rather than at individual college or campus level.

Data collection

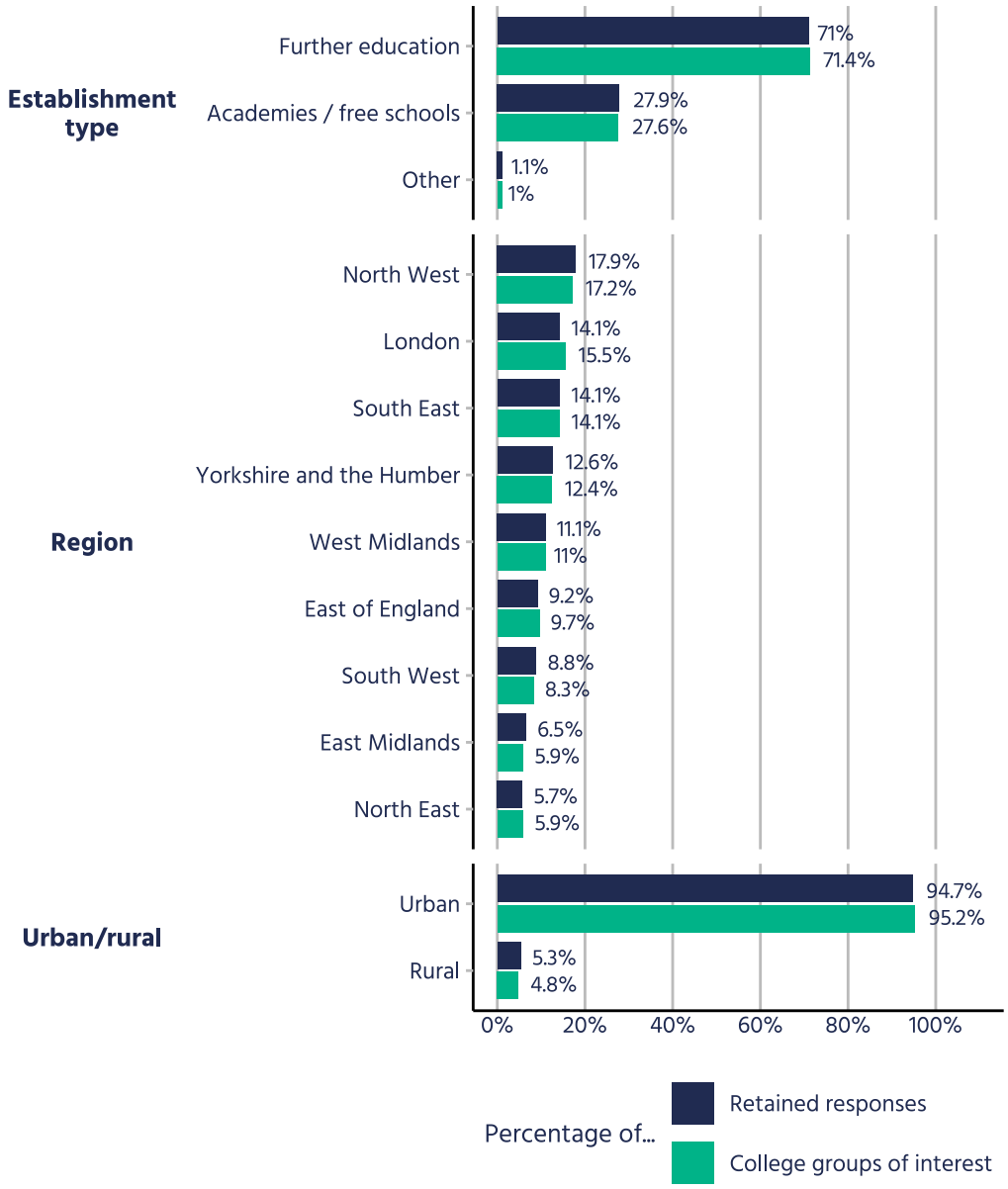
Under Section 2F of the Children Act 2004, the Children's Commissioner for England has statutory powers to collect data relating to children. All public sector organisations in England are legally required to provide data requested by the Commissioner. The questionnaire was administered using SmartSurvey, an online survey platform, and the data collection window ran from June to July 2026. College groups were followed up where responses had not been received and, where necessary, contacted to clarify ambiguous responses — although the extent of this follow-up was constrained by

the summer holiday period. The final dataset was downloaded in August 2026 for cleaning and analysis by the Children's Commissioner's office.

Eligibility for inclusion in the analysis and response rates

The Children's Commissioner's office received 283 submissions to the data request. Of these, 21 submissions were excluded because they had been superseded by another submission; were submitted at a trust rather than college-group level; did not hold the data in the required format for analysis; or did not provide sufficient contact information. This resulted in 262 college groups with responses retained for analysis, equivalent to 90.3% of the college groups targeted. Figure 16 suggests that the retained responses were broadly representative of the population targeted (the college groups of interest).

Figure 16: The characteristics of the retained college group responses compared to the college groups of interest



Note: Analysis of 262 college groups responses that were retained against the 290 college groups that were in the data request.

Survey content

The data request collected both quantitative and qualitative data to understand attendance among 16- and 17-year-olds in further education during the Spring term of academic year 2025/26. Following a period of engagement with stakeholders, the questions were co-produced with experts from across the further education sector.

The quantitative data covered enrolment numbers, attendance targets, attendance and severe absence. College groups were first asked to report the number of students enrolled on the first day of the Spring term in January 2026 who were aged 16 or 17 on 1 September 2025. They were then asked the overall attendance or absence target for these students (e.g. "Between 95.1% and 100% attendance", "Between 90.1% and 95% attendance or better" etc.); their overall attendance rate; the proportion of students falling within 12 attendance bands (ranging from 0% to 100% attendance); the average attendance rate among those undertaking GCSE English and GCSE maths resit courses; and finally, the number of students enrolled and the number and proportion who were severely absent, separately by age, gender, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) status, social care status, ethnicity, free college meal status and level of main study programme. Where relevant, the questionnaire included categories for students whose status was unknown or not recorded. For overall attendance, colleges were explicitly asked to report their standard measure; for severe absence, the questionnaire defined this as attending less than 50% of sessions. While this definition referred to 'sessions', the Children's Commissioner's office recognises that college groups underlying attendance measures may differ including, for example, whether attendance is recorded by sessions or individual lessons.

The qualitative data comprised free-text responses on the measurement of attendance, data quality and completeness, and college experiences of attendance among 16- and 17-year-olds. For the latter, college groups were invited to describe barriers to attendance and to providing support; examples of good practice; and actions that central or local government could take to improve attendance. These responses were used to provide excerpts and context for the quantitative findings and to inform the interpretation of the issues identified in the report.

Data quality

Attendance data for these FE settings are not published by the Department for Education, and the Children's Commissioner's Office was not able to independently audit the figures supplied by individual college groups. A series of data quality checks were applied before analysis. The specific data quality checks applied depended on the measure being analysed (see Table 5).

Table 5: Data quality checks used in each section of the report

Section	Key criteria
Attendance targets	None
Overall attendance	Consistent enrolment numbers
Attendance bands	Consistent enrolment numbers and valid attendance band
GCSE English and maths resits	Consistent enrolment numbers
Overall rates of severe absence	Consistent enrolment numbers and internally consistent data
Severe absence by student characteristic	Consistent enrolment numbers; characteristic totals must sum to enrolment total; and internally consistent data

As Table 5 shows, the data quality checks varied. For most analyses, the core inclusion criterion was consistent enrolment numbers. This required the numbers of 16- and 17-year-olds reported in the overall enrolment question to match the corresponding enrolment numbers reported in the severe absence section. 209 college groups provided consistent enrolment numbers. Of these, 208 also provided complete overall attendance data for both age groups and were therefore included in the overall attendance analysis. Valid attendance band data required the twelve attendance bands (e.g. 100%, 90%–99.9%, 80%–89.9% etc.) to sum to 100%; to account for rounding, the office allowed a difference of ±0.5 percentage points. 239 college groups provided valid attendance band data; 193 also provided consistent enrolment numbers and were therefore included in the attendance-band analysis. For both overall severe absence and severe absence by student characteristic, data were considered 'internally consistent' where the number of severely absent students did not exceed the number enrolled and the reported severe absence percentage agreed with the percentage calculated from the corresponding counts (again, we allowed for a difference of ±0.5 percentage points to account for rounding). For severe absence by student characteristic, characteristic totals were further required to

sum to the validated enrolment total. For example, the number of students reported across the four gender categories (male, female, non-binary/other, and not recorded/prefer not to say) was required to equal the validated 16- and 17-year-old enrolment. The relevant checks were applied separately to age, gender, SEND, social care status, ethnicity, free college meal status, and level of main study programme. 197 college groups passed all validation criteria for severe absence breakdowns by age, 175 for gender, 155 for ethnicity, 179 for Free College Meals, 172 for SEND status, 136 for care status and 147 for level of main study programme.

Rather than removing entire college groups from the dataset, college groups that did not meet the relevant validation criteria were excluded from that analysis only; this also helped minimise unnecessary data loss. Analytical sample sizes therefore vary between sections of the report (Table 6).

Table 6: Analytical sample sizes in each section of the report

Section	Number of college groups	Reported number of colleges within the college group	Reported number of sites/campuses within the college group	Reported number of 16- and 17-year-olds enrolled
Responses retained for analysis	262	362	661	624,860
Attendance targets	262	362	661	624,860
Overall attendance	208	295	536	502,731
Attendance bands	193	274	486	465,741
GCSE English and maths resits	184	263	499	475,287
Overall severe absence	197	281	519	485,790
Severe absence: Age	197	281	519	485,790
Severe absence: Gender	175	250	481	446,125

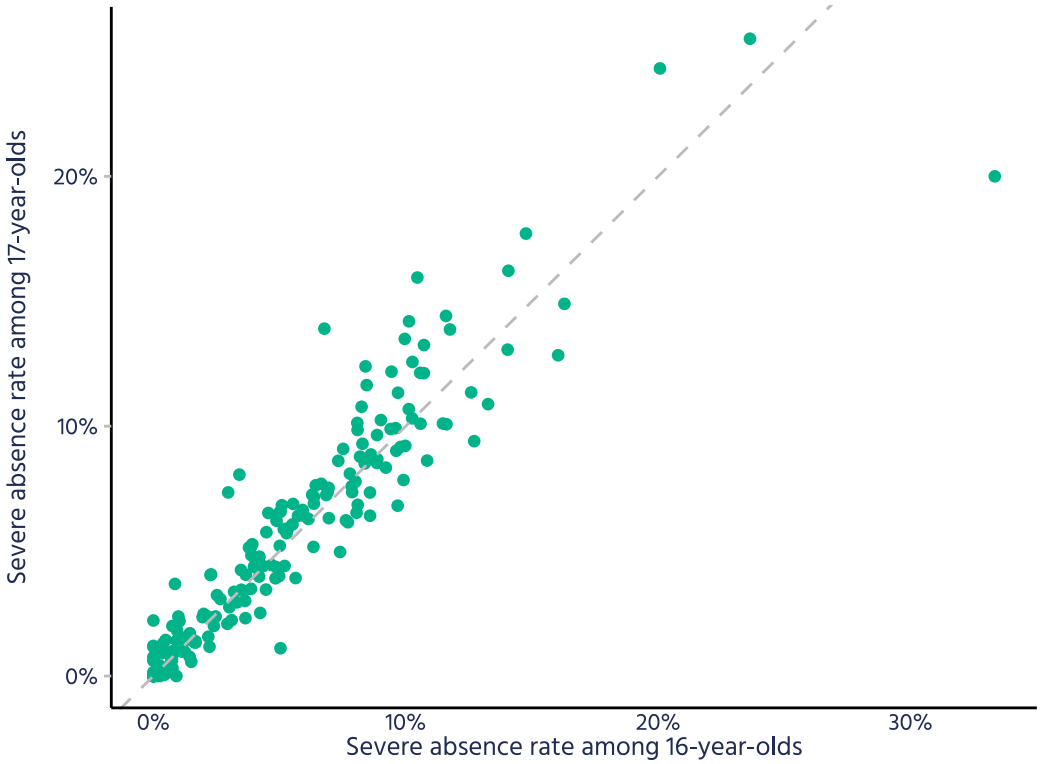
Severe absence: Ethnicity	155	223	423	372,549
Severe absence: Free college meals	179	253	486	448,430
Severe absence: SEND status	172	250	468	431,059
Severe absence: Social care status	136	196	372	352,744
Severe absence: Level of study	147	198	377	353,355

Note. Numbers of colleges, sites/campuses and 16- and 17-year-olds describe the scale represented by college groups included in each analysis and are not necessarily the denominators used to calculate estimates. Sample sizes vary because college groups were included only where they provided the data required for the analysis and passed the relevant data quality checks. For severe absence by student characteristic, the number of college groups contributing to individual categories may be lower where a category was not reported. This is because these college groups may still pass the check that characteristic totals sum to the enrolment total where the remaining categories account for the enrolment total.

The office also conducted internal and external sense checks to assess the plausibility of the resulting data. These were for data exploration purposes only and were not used as inclusion criteria. Internally, this meant checking patterns within the data. For example, we might expect that college groups struggling with one issue may struggle with another, so we would expect college groups with higher levels of severe absence among 16-year-olds to also report higher levels among 17-year-olds. This was indeed the case here where there was a strong relationship between the two measures (Pearson's r = 0.93; Figure 17). Externally, this included checking our findings against published findings from schools (see main report) and alternative data sources. For example, we compared the reported enrolment numbers with pupil numbers recorded in GIAS (Figure 18). There was a strong correlation between the two measures (Pearson's r = 0.98), although corresponding GIAS data were available for only 33 of the 262 college groups included in the analysis — a limitation which rather illustrates the dearth of centrally

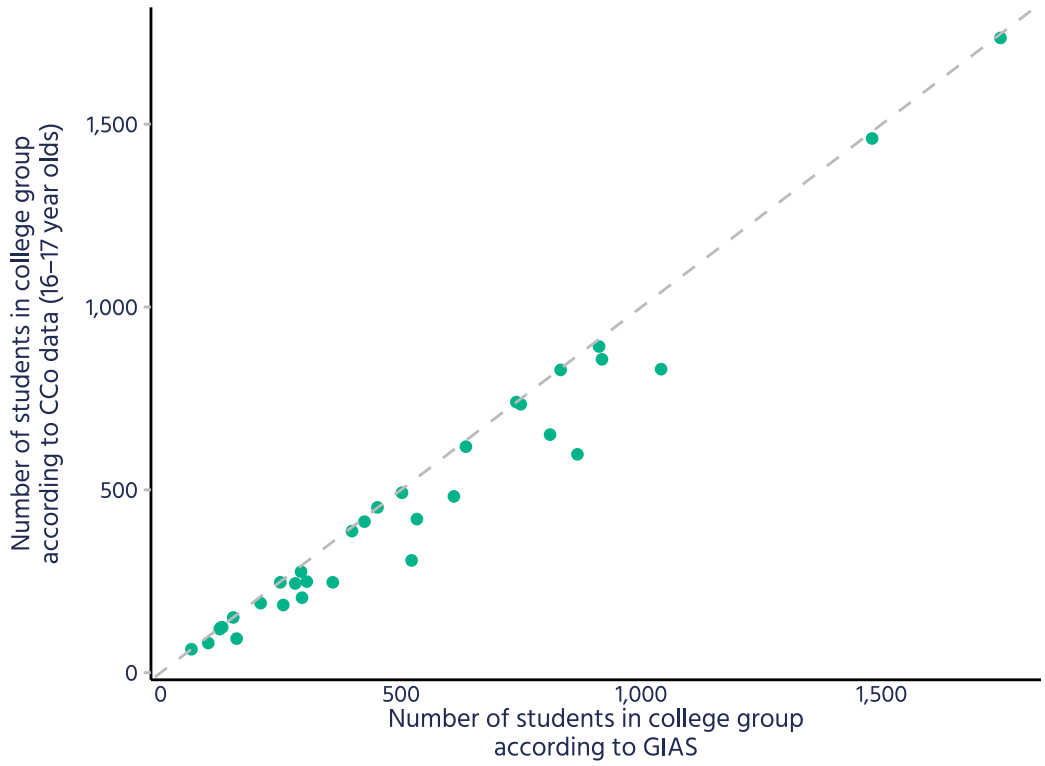
collected data about the FE sector. Given the differences in the age groups covered and the time periods to which the two measures relate, again, this comparison was solely used to provide some reassurance that the data collected were broadly consistent with the (albeit limited) external data available rather than as a validation of the reported enrolment numbers.

Figure 17: The relationship between severe absence rates among 16- and 17-year-olds within college groups, Spring term 2025/26



Notes: Each dot is a college group and represents its calculated severe absence rate for the two measures. Analysis based on 197 college groups with consistent enrolment data and data that passed the severe absence data consistency checks.

Figure 18: The relationship between reported enrolment numbers and those reported on GIAS



Notes: Each dot is a college group. Analysis based on 33 college groups.

Data processing

Before analysis, quantitative responses were cleaned and standardised where necessary. For example, numeric responses were standardised (e.g. by removing percentage signs and converting decimal commas). Quantitative responses that could not be interpreted reliably were treated as missing rather than estimated or imputed.

Nine college groups provided their attendance target as free text rather than selecting a pre-set category; these responses were manually reviewed and coded to the closest corresponding category where possible.

The exact analysis method differed according to the measure being reported. Attendance targets were reported as the proportion of college groups falling within each target category. Based on the number

of students on roll for each age group, overall attendance for 16- and 17-year-olds was calculated as a frequency weighted mean of the attendance rates reported by college groups. Breakdowns of overall attendance by the characteristics of the college group were based on information recorded in GIAS. Similarly, based on the number of 16- and 17-year-olds on roll, the attendance distribution was calculated as a frequency weighted mean of the proportion of students reported in each of the twelve attendance bands. Attendance on GCSE English and maths resit courses was calculated as the mean attendance rate reported by college groups; these estimates could not be weighted by the number of students since the data request did not collect the number taking these courses. Overall severe absence was calculated by dividing the total number of severely absent 16- and 17-year-olds by the total number on roll. The same approach was used for severe absence by student characteristic. For example, the severe absence rate for male students was calculated by dividing the total number of severely absent male students by the total number of male students enrolled. The approach is broadly consistent with that used by the Department for Education in its school absence statistics. Lastly, to estimate the total number of severely absent 16- and 17-year-olds across all 290 college groups in scope, the observed count was divided by the number of college groups contributing data and multiplied by 290.

Throughout the report, college attendance was compared with the thresholds used to measure absence in schools. In schools, pupils who miss 10% or more of their possible sessions are considered persistently absent while those who miss 50% or more are considered severely absent. Where the attendance bands collected in the data request were used for these comparisons, attendance below 90% and below 50% were used as the closest available equivalents to persistent and severe absence respectively. Leaving aside differences in how attendance is calculated, these measures are not directly equivalent to the school measures and may therefore underestimate the proportion of students meeting the persistent and severe absence thresholds.

Note on quotations

Some quotes have been lightly edited to correct grammar or spelling.

Some quotes have been taken from the Commissioner's conversations with children during the Big Future tour in 2026 (Table 7). These include visits to a range of schools and communities:

Table 7: Visits during the Big Future tour

Month	Areas
May	Carlisle, Blackburn, Preston
June	Birmingham, Nottingham, Leicester, Suffolk,
July	Southampton, Winchester, Liverpool, Bournemouth
August	Norfolk, London, Scunthorpe, Lincoln

Strengths and limitations

This data request provides new data on attendance among 16- and 17-year-olds in further education in an area where comparable national data are limited. However, there are several limitations which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Attendance is not measured consistently across the further education sector. College groups reported attendance using their existing measures and so differences between college groups may reflect (at least in part) differences in how attendance is recorded and calculated as well as genuine differences in attendance.

It is also possible that the availability and quality of the underlying data held by college groups vary. Ultimately, the figures in the report reflect information held and reported by college groups using their information management systems. While the data checks provide assurance that the data used in each analysis were internally consistent, the office could not independently verify the underlying records held by individual college groups. This limitation may particularly affect the completeness of information on some student characteristics

Finally, estimates uprated to the full population of 290 college groups assume that college groups without data are, on average, like those contributing data. If severe absence differs systematically among college groups which did not respond or whose responses did not pass the relevant data checks, the uprated estimates may over- or underestimate the true total. These estimates should therefore be treated as indicative estimates of the scale of hidden NEETs rather than precise totals.

AI transparency statement

AI tools were used to support coding tasks. All outputs were critically reviewed by members of the Children's Commissioner's office.

Annex B – Data tables

In this Annex, descriptive statistics and frequency tables of the underlying data are presented. Counts are rounded to the nearest whole number and percentages to one decimal place. Where appropriate, figures refer to unweighted means.

Table 8: Descriptive statistics of the college groups that were retained compared to the population of interest

	Retained responses		College groups of interest	
Characteristic	Number of college groups	Percentage of college groups	Number of college groups	Percentage of college groups
Government Office Region				
London	37	14.1%	45	15.5%
East Midlands	17	6.5%	17	5.9%
East of England	24	9.2%	28	9.7%
North East	15	5.7%	17	5.9%
North West	47	17.9%	50	17.2%
South East	37	14.1%	41	14.1%
South West	23	8.8%	24	8.3%
West Midlands	29	11.1%	32	11%
Yorkshire and the Humber	33	12.6%	36	12.4%
Total	**262**	**100%**	**290**	**100%**
Urbanity				
Urban	248	94.7%	276	95.2%
Rural	14	5.3%	14	4.8%
Total	**262**	**100%**	**290**	**100%**
Establishment type				
Further education	186	71%	207	71.4%

Academies / free schools	73	27.9%	80	27.6%
Other	3	1.1%	3	1%
Total	**262**	**100%**	**290**	**100%**

Table 9: Frequency table of attendance targets

Attendance target	Number of college groups	Percentage of college groups
Between 95.1% and 100% attendance	62	23.7%
Between 90.1% and 95% attendance or better	98	37.4%
Between 85.1% and 90% attendance or better	69	26.3%
Between 80.1% and 85% attendance or better	11	4.2%
Between 75.1% and 80% attendance or better	2	0.8%
Between 70.1% and 75% attendance or better	0	0.0%
70% or below attendance or better	0	0.0%
We do not have an overall target	20	7.6%
Total	**262**	**100%**

Table 10: Descriptive statistics of the overall attendance data

Outcome	Number of college groups	Weighted mean	Unweighted mean	Minimum	Maximum
Attendance rate, 16-year-olds (%)	208	84.8%	85.9%	67.2%	98.7%
Attendance rate, 17-year-olds (%)	208	83.4%	84.5%	64.9%	97.4%

Table 11: Descriptive statistics of the overall attendance data by college group characteristic

		Age 16		Age 17	
Characteristic	Number of college groups	Weighted mean attendance	Unweighted mean attendance	Weighted mean attendance	Unweighted mean attendance
College group size					
2000+ students	107	84.3%	84.7%	82.9%	83.2%
<2000 students	101	86.5%	87.2%	85.1%	85.8%
Establishment type					
Academies / free schools	59	91.7%	91.5%	89.7%	89.6%
Further education	146	83.6%	83.7%	82.2%	82.5%
Other	3	83.4%	82.1%	78.8%	80.6%
Region					
East Midlands	14	85.1%	85.7%	83.8%	84.7%
East of England	18	83.1%	83.8%	81.1%	81.3%
London	29	82.8%	85.5%	81.3%	84.0%
North East	10	88.0%	87.8%	86.5%	86.1%
North West	37	87.1%	87.8%	85.9%	86.4%
South East	33	84.7%	85.2%	83.3%	83.5%
South West	18	85.5%	85.6%	84.6%	84.9%
West Midlands	25	83.8%	84.7%	82.1%	83.3%
Yorkshire and the Humber	24	84.3%	87.0%	83.6%	85.9%
Urban/rural					
Rural	13	86.2%	85.6%	85.7%	84.7%
Urban	195	84.7%	85.9%	83.3%	84.5%

Table 12: Descriptive statistics of the attendance band distributions

Attendance band	Number of college groups	Weighted mean	Unweighted mean	Minimum	Maximum
Percentage with 100% attendance	193	8.8%	9.6%	0.0%	62.1%
Percentage with 90%–	193	39.0%	41.9%	8.0%	96.0%

99.9% attendance					
Percentage with 80%–89.9% attendance	193	23.7%	22.8%	3.2%	84.0%
Percentage with 70%–79.9% attendance	193	12.1%	11.1%	0.0%	24.0%
Percentage with 60%–69.9% attendance	193	6.7%	6.0%	0.0%	15.3%
Percentage with 50%–59.9% attendance	193	4.0%	3.5%	0.0%	11.8%
Percentage with 40%–49.9% attendance	193	2.3%	2.1%	0.0%	12.5%
Percentage with 30%–39.9% attendance	193	1.4%	1.2%	0.0%	4.6%
Percentage with 20%–29.9% attendance	193	0.9%	0.7%	0.0%	3.0%
Percentage with 10%–19.9% attendance	193	0.6%	0.6%	0.0%	12.5%
Percentage with 0.1–9.9% attendance	193	0.3%	0.2%	0.0%	2.6%

Percentage with 0% attendance	193	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	8.6%

Table 13: Descriptive statistics of the GCSE resits data

Outcome	Number of college groups	Unweighted mean	Minimum	Maximum
GCSE English resit attendance rate (%)	184	75.6%	47.5%	98.6%
GCSE Maths resit attendance rate (%)	184	74.4%	47.0%	97.6%

Table 14: Descriptive statistics of the overall severe absence data

Category	Number of college groups	Number of pupils are severely absent	Number of pupils enrolled	Percentage who are severely absent
Overall	197	28,528	485,790	5.9%

Table 15: Descriptive statistics of the severe absence data by pupil characteristic

Characteristic	Number of college groups	Number who are severely absent	Number enrolled	Percentage who are severely absent
Age				
Age 16	197	14,601	257,557	5.7%
Age 17	197	13,927	228,233	6.1%
Total		**28,528**	**485,790**	
Gender				
Girls	175	13,256	216,329	6.1%
Boys	175	13,444	223,466	6.0%
Non-binary/other	126	84	1,013	8.3%
Not recorded/prefer not to say	129	517	5,317	9.7%
Total		**27,301**	**446,125**	

Ethnicity				
Asian	155	2,454	44,460	5.5%
Black	155	1,817	29,823	6.1%
Mixed	155	1,982	22,926	8.6%
White	155	16,040	255,801	6.3%
Other	154	937	12,162	7.7%
Not recorded/prefer not to say	146	693	7,377	9.4%
Total		**23,923**	**372,549**	
Free college meals				
Free college meals	178	6,106	69,696	8.8%
Not receiving free college meals	177	20,653	373,909	5.5%
Free College Meal status not recorded	130	305	4,825	6.3%
Total		**27,064**	**448,430**	
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities				
EHCP	172	2,238	23,055	9.7%
SEND, no EHCP	167	5,394	70,604	7.6%
No SEND/EHCP	171	18,042	331,529	5.4%
EHCP status not recorded	134	361	5,871	6.1%
Total		**26,035**	**431,059**	
Social care status				
Looked after child	135	729	5,830	12.5%
Care leaver	123	172	1,596	10.8%
Other social care involvement	111	268	2,085	12.9%
No social care involvement	134	17,655	297,457	5.9%
Unknown social care status	105	2,695	45,776	5.9%
Total		**21,519**	**352,744**	
Level of main study programme				
Level 3 academic	129	888	77,871	1.1%

Level 3 vocational/mixed	145	4,736	137,621	3.4%
Level 2	145	6,125	78,012	7.9%
Level 1	144	6,106	45,711	13.4%
Entry level	142	1,898	14,140	13.4%
Total		**19,753**	**353,355**	

Note: Sample sizes differ between characteristics because analyses are limited to college groups that passed the relevant checks. Within a characteristic, the number of college groups contributing to individual categories may be lower where a category was not reported. The office infers that there are zero students in an unreported category where the other reported categories sum to the college's total 16–17 enrolment.

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