

# Voices of England's Missing Children

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The findings of the Children's Commissioner's  
Attendance Audit

June 2022

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As Children's Commissioner for England, I want all of England's children to have everything they need to thrive, to be happy and healthy. This means the ambitions of every child being matched by the support around them – by their family, schools and, where needed, being able to access brilliant mental health, social care and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support.

Last year, I launched The Big Ask survey, the largest ever survey of children in England ever with 550,000 responses, to hear from England's children about what matters most to them. I saw just how ambitious this generation of children are. What I also saw, though, was that they need support to achieve their goals. Support from their family, their schools and where they have additional needs, from specialist services like the NHS. This must mean that wherever you live, whichever school you attend, you should get the very best possible education and support – we should have no patience for "good enough".

The Big Ask was launched as we were emerging from the pandemic, and I heard loud and clear from children just how much they had missed school – they missed learning face-to-face with their teachers, they missed spending time with their friends – and they missed the sports, the clubs and the trips that can bring joy and excitement into their lives. They missed their school lunches! I have spoken to hundreds of children since the pandemic who are overjoyed to be back in school and getting back to normal.

The children I heard from in The Big Ask, those I've spoken to in my first year as Children's Commissioner, as well as those I worked with in my career as a teacher and headteacher, confirmed what I believe to be true, that school is the right place for children to be.



They are safe and fun places where they can get a great education, unlocking the doors to their future, and access enriching opportunities and make lasting friendships. School is absolutely central to children's lives.

And yet, even before the pandemic, there is a group of children who struggle to attend school regularly and who have fallen through the gaps in our education system. Coming out of the pandemic, this group has only gotten bigger, with even more children not attending school regularly or dropping out altogether. I predicted that around 1.8 million were regularly absent from school in Autumn 2021 and so when the school census confirmed the number was 1.7 million, I wasn't shocked, but I was surprised. In Autumn 2021, the number of children persistently absent more than doubled compared to 2018/19, almost 1 in 4 children were persistently absent from school compared to around 1 in 9 in 2018/19. My hypothesis was right. This was exacerbated as there was no national picture of where children were and if they were attending school. Local Authorities instead relied on time lagged and fragmented data, and in some cases, no data at all.

And so, this is why I launched my Attendance Audit which started with a survey of every council in the country to identify the children missing from education. I was shocked but not surprised to find out that it is hard for some local authorities to know how many children they have in their area – let alone how many are out of school. And it convinced me that we need a national effort to really shift the dial. A national blueprint to get all children back where they want to be.

I conducted deep dives with 10 local authorities to find these groups of children and understand their experiences in more detail. I wanted to speak to the children missing from education directly, to get beyond the labels, and listen to their experiences and what they need to get back into school.



What I heard was inspiring. I have spoken to children who feel that their school has saved their lives and children whose school has given them the skills and direction to look forward to the future with confidence. Yet, some children we spoke with did not have a positive experience with their education or felt let down by a fractured system. A system that wasn't designed around them.

Until we have a system that is designed for and around children, using their, and their families', voices as the catalyst for making things better we cannot be confident that every child is happy, healthy and safe. We need everyone who has a role in children's lives to design and implement systems and services with this same vision at their heart.

This report details the findings of my Audit and the solutions and practical ideas the young people and my team have identified that can make a real difference. I have also set out an ambitious programme of work which my office will undertake to keep supporting children and young people. This includes making it my mission to see every child in school and ready to learn on the first day of the September term. I want attendance to be 100%. Not to return to pre-pandemic levels, but to be even better. If we settle for anything less, then that means being will accept that some children will fall through the cracks.

To do this, we need to act now. I have picked up the mantle and will be leading a campaign of engagement over the summer to ensure that children are confident to return to school in September.

I am making it my mission to see 100% attendance on the first day of the September term, and to make this reality will take all of us. A national mission, for every child.

I need all you to join me in that mission.



# Executive Summary

**The Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit set out with an overarching goal that every child should be in school every day, supported and ready to learn. Every child has the right to a fantastic education.**

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To achieve this, every child needs to be identified and supported, no child should be unknown to the system.


In January 2022, the Children's Commissioner's team conducted a survey of all local authorities (LAs) in England to understand the cohort of children who were not attending school regularly, and those who were missing from education altogether. In March, the Commissioner published her interim findings which found that we do not have an accurate real time figure of how many children there are in England, nor where they are – let alone the number of children not receiving education. Our deep-dive confirmed this hypothesis. To find out more about these groups of children, and to understand the barriers that stop children from attending school regularly, the team spoke to nearly 500 people, including Directors of Children's Services, family support workers, parents, and health workers, across 10 LAs throughout February and March 2022. The findings from these deep dives are included in this report.

This work has provided a national picture, which didn't exist before, of where the children missing from education are and the barriers they face. In Autumn 2021, 1 in 4 children were persistently absent compared to 1 in 9 in 2018/19 – that's more than double<sup>1</sup>.

Led by what children told us, the Children's Commissioner has set out six key ambitions to ensure that every child supported to be in school every day, ready to learn, is receiving a fantastic education, and, critically, that we know where they are and that they are safe.

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<sup>1</sup> DfE, *01-Absence rates by school and geographic level from Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term, 2022*. Available at: ['01 - Absence rates by school and geographic level' from 'Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term', Permanent data table – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#) Accessed on 01/06/2022.



The following is a high-level summary of these ambitions, the findings of the Audit and policy solutions to help reach this goal.

### **Six Ambitions to Account for Every Child:**

#### **Ambition 1. Ask, Listen, Communicate: decisions about children's education need to be made with children, their families and other adults in their lives.**

Children said that they often feel that things are done *to* them rather than *with* them, which can lead to a breakdown of trust and disengagement from their education. Where children do feel listened to, they are able to build relationships with teachers and school staff which they really value. These relationships are often key to making sure children stay engaged in their education, and so many teachers and other staff in school do a wonderful job. We are indebted to them.

To make sure all children and families benefit from this, we recommend that:

- All schools create a culture which prioritises and obsesses about attendance and promotes this message amongst children and parents.
- Schools and wider services build trusted and supportive relationships with children, and their families, who are persistently or severely absent.
- All attendance and behaviour policy documents have a version that is accessible and in child friendly language.
- Attendance should be prioritised in the Parent Pledge, announced in the Schools White Paper alongside current proposed topics, such as the quality of teaching, and the focus on reading and writing.



**Ambition 2. Meet children where they are: all children receive support in school, through families of schools.**

Children have told us that they want to receive support in school, be it for mental health, SEND, bullying or safeguarding needs. This is because they value schools as part of their community and life. They trust their teachers. And where support is provided in schools, those children are happier than the overall cohort.

We saw some great examples of schools that had developed their own on-site Alternative Provision (AP), so that children who cannot attend mainstream school have somewhere they can continue to learn, to bring together different kinds of targeted support including mental health and behaviour management for children struggling in their mainstream classes.

To make sure all children's needs are met locally, where they are, we recommend that:


- Schools provide, and are supported to provide, a range of early support services, such as in-house counselling. It is easiest to do this through strong families of schools where resources can be used flexibly across the whole family to meet the needs of their whole cohort.
- The SEND Green Paper is implemented fully and in a child-centred way so that we have a SEND system that provides the right support, in the right place, at the right time and is easier to navigate<sup>2</sup>.

Children's voices need to be at the heart of these reviews and our response to the Government's SEND Green Paper will do just that.

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<sup>2</sup> DfE, *SEND review: right support, right place, right time*, 2022. Available at: [SEND review: right support, right place, right time - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/send-review-right-support-right-place-right-time) Accessed on 01/06/2022






**Ambition 3. Exclusion as a trigger for intervention: children should receive a fantastic education, regardless of setting, always and receive targeted support following exclusion or suspension.**

Exclusions need to be a last resort. However, when they do occur, whether this is an internal exclusion, a fixed-term suspension or permanent exclusion, too often the children we spoke with had not received any intervention or support to prevent further exclusions happening in the future or to make sure that exclusion from school didn't mean exclusion from education altogether. This can lead to a cycle of continued exclusions and children falling out of school. Where schools saw an exclusion as a moment for intervention and the reasoning behind decisions was explained to the young person and parents, children felt more supported and able to reflect on their behaviour and reengage with their education.

We recommend that:

- When a child is removed from the classroom, whether through internal exclusion, suspension, permanent exclusion, a managed move, or implementation of a 'part time timetable', an assessment of what support or intervention might be needed is undertaken and that support be implemented quickly to limit the time out of education.
- AP needs to be consistently be an integral part of the wider education system so that children can transition smoothly into and out of this provision. All AP should be high quality with a focus on outcomes – we need a race to the top rather than minimum standards, building on some of the great practice already out there.
- The Department for Education (DfE) should consider issuing further guidance on support for children post exclusion, setting out the duties on schools and local authorities to assess their needs and provide appropriate support.

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- Where a child with a social worker is excluded, be it temporarily or permanently, they should be in AP from the first day, so that no child where there is a safeguarding vulnerability is not in school. We should consider naming schools within CiN plans.

**Ambition 4. Letting children be children: no child should feel that they need to miss school to support or care for their family.**

Children with additional responsibilities at home, such as young carers, can find it particularly difficult to attend school regularly. Young carers attending schools who understood their needs and put in place additional support such as a young carers champion felt more positive about their education and found it easier to balance their home and school lives.

So that every child receives this same support, we recommend that:

- All services identify young carers consistently and share data effectively to provide these children and their families with support, particularly between phases.
- Young carers should be provided with targeted support, including priority in school admissions and support from the Virtual School Head (VSH).
- All schools should implement a young carers policy, co-written with the young carers at the school to set expectations and ensure there is a codified offer for support for young carers within the school.



**Ambition 5. Attendance is everyone’s business: school leaders have a relentless focus on attendance and work together with LAs to ensure children are supported to be in school and to attend regularly.**

We need better join up between services that support children, especially those at risk of becoming missing from education or who are otherwise vulnerable. Attendance needs to be everyone’s business, with all services responsible for safeguarding children taking ownership and contributing to solutions. Multi-agency panels which convene schools, the LA, health, police and others on a regular basis help to ensure that children are known to services and introduce accountability across areas of responsibility.

To make this a reality we recommend that:

- Schools and colleges should become full statutory members of Local Safeguarding Partnerships alongside the LA, police, and the NHS.
- LAs should form cross-cutting partnership panels, or include in existing multi-agency arrangements, to discuss individual children’s attendance and progress.
- Ofsted should make attendance a top priority in its inspection framework.
- LAs should convene partnerships working across schools and wider support services in their local area to create a ‘team around the school’ – this needs to include support from children’s services, supporting family’s teams, family hubs, SEND services, mental health teams, youth offending teams and police.



**Ambition 6. No more ‘known unknowns’: lack of information should no longer be the reason why children are not receiving a suitable education.**

We need to address the lack of data collected about children in school and find more effective ways of doing this. Children sometimes fall through the gaps in the system and out of sight simply because the LA is not even aware that they are living in the area. The lack of information collected on children, coupled with complicated data sharing practices means that children become ‘known unknowns’ and therefore cannot be provided with support.

To make sure no child is lost in the system, we recommend that:

- A consistent unique identifier for children should be implemented to facilitate better data matching between organisations responsible for safeguarding and supporting children to ensure children do not fall through the cracks between information systems.
- The Office for National Statistics (ONS) should prioritise developing an accurate assessment of the child population as part of its new population estimates.
- There should be clear expectations regarding data sharing between organisations responsible for safeguarding children – the legislation exists to make sure all data can be shared where it is in the best interests of children and we need practice to support that aim.
- A census of independent and unregistered schools should be introduced to match the school census completed by most education providers.
- The plethora of Management Information Systems (MIS) used to support attendance needs to be rationalised to facilitate and support data sharing across agencies and services.



## The way forward:

These ambitions outline my long-term blueprint for getting all children back into school. In the immediate future, we must start looking forward to September and have a plan in place for every child who has not yet returned to school or is attending inconsistently. If a child doesn't attend on the first day of term it is much harder for them to re-engage. We need to start acting now to ensure that children have what they need to feel confident and prepared for their new year. We also need to make sure that professionals working with children know what they can do to help, from supporting families to identify a suitable school place, to using available funds to purchase uniforms.

Now, after the pandemic, there is a unique opportunity to listen to children and families, to remove barriers to attending school, and to make school a place where each child consistently attends and thrives.

The Children's Commissioner will be running a campaign of engagement over the summer to ensure that children are confident to return to school in September.

It is paramount that we work together as an alliance to ensure that the whole system is working at pace to prepare for the start of autumn term so that every child is supported to start, and stay in, school.

Following our research and methodology, this report outlines these six key ambitions to make this goal a reality – and the steps children, families and professionals have recommended to help get there.





# Research aims and methodology

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The Children’s Commissioner’s Attendance Audit set out to identify which groups of children are out of school and find out more about the groups of children who are missing a significant proportion of their lessons. The research sought to identify the reasons why children had fallen out of education or stopped attending regularly. It also explored the barriers children face to reengaging in education and what support they need to get back to school.

To address this aim, the team first conducted a survey of all 151 LAs.

The findings revealed a surprising picture: LAs do not have an accurate, real-time figure of how many children there are in England – let alone the number of children not receiving an education.

This means that there could be thousands of children that public services have no contact with, and who may not be in any type of education provision. Without contact with a school, LA or other type of state service, children can fall under the radar when it comes to safeguarding or may be unable to access mental health or other support when they need it. They may also miss out on high-quality education and enrichment opportunities, which could prevent them thriving in adulthood.

To understand more about these children not in school, the team conducted a ‘deep dive’ Audit of 10 LA areas. These were: Brent, Brighton & Hove, Cambridgeshire, Coventry, Darlington, Doncaster, Lewisham, Plymouth, Sheffield and

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Wakefield. Over the course of six weeks in February and March, the team spoke to nearly 500 people including over 300 children, over 40 parents and carers and around 100 professionals in LAs, health, schools and family hubs. The Audit also explored the experiences of children out of school who were accessing support through the Children’s Commissioner’s advocacy helpline, Help at Hand.

The researchers prioritised speaking with children from a range of backgrounds and with a wide range of experiences including: children who were persistently or severely absent from school; children who were educated in different types of education setting including mainstream schools, independent schools, AP or in special schools; children who were not on a school roll at all, including those missing from education, those waiting for a school place and those being home educated; children in care or with a social worker; children with SEND; and young carers.

Children were asked:

- what they liked about going to school,
- what made it difficult for them to attend school regularly,
- what help and support they need to attend school more regularly or get back into school altogether.

All quotes in this report are drawn from the focus groups and interviews with these groups of children and young people.

Figure 1 illustrates the breadth of settings that the Audit team visited and the groups of children that they spoke to.



**Figure 1. Distribution of settings visited, and characteristics of children spoken to.**



A key theme throughout the interviews with children and young people was the vital importance of schools and teachers in their lives. As one 15-year-old girl said, when asked how she felt about her school:

*‘I don’t believe I would have been here [alive], if I’m honest, I think I would have acted on my thoughts.’*

As was clear from The Big Ask, and in our focus groups the vast majority of children view school as a positive space, and a place to learn and grow.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, the team also spoke to some children who have not had a positive experience in education or who felt let down by a fractured system.

The Audit has provided a wealth of insight about the experiences of these children, and what can be done to support them into education. But as the interim findings suggested – system change is needed to systematically track every child who is missing from school and to get them the support they need.

<sup>3</sup> The Children’s Commissioner for England, *The Big Answer*, 2021. Available at: [The Big Answer | Children’s Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-answer/)





# Six ambitions to account for every child

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**Ambition 1. Ask, listen, communicate: decisions about children’s education need to be made with children, their families and other adults in their lives.**

The Children’s Commissioner believes that every child and family should feel included and involved in decision making about their education. Children want to understand their progress in school, and what changes to their education provision will mean for them. Children described how they want to be involved in creating attendance policies for their school, and in overcoming any barriers to attendance. They want to speak to schools, professionals, and authorities, to be listened to and to see that their views are being heard. Children’s reasons for missing school are often highly individual and complex, and so it is vital that these reasons are explored fully with proper engagement with children and their families.

This Ambition envisions a reality where every school prioritises attendance and education provision for every child no matter their circumstance, and where children and parents are listened to when they tell those who are responsible for their education what they need from school to thrive and be successful. It envisions a system where every child that experiences changes to their education journey (through suspension, a managed move or exclusion) is communicated with and understands what this means for them.

In our 10 deep dive areas, children told us that they did not always feel listened to by the adults and professionals in their lives. This was particularly true for children who were out of school and for children attending AP (a type of alternative setting for children who cannot attend mainstream school). As one 14-year-old girl attending an AP three times a week said:



*“What I really would have loved [...] is if they had an assembly asking the kids how do you think we can help more [...] instead of talking among themselves [...] you are not actually asking the kids how we can help” – Girl, 14, attending AP three times a week.*

Many parents and carers also described feeling that they were not listened to or felt in the dark when it came to their child’s attendance. This especially applied to parents and carers of children who had been permanently excluded, been moved to a part-time timetable, or had been placed on a managed move. Some parents of children with SEND or anxiety issues also described a feeling of not being fully listened to. A parent of a 9-year-old said that:

*“Teachers need to listen to parents as they know their child best. There should be more communication, more meetings, help with parents [...] They brushed me away. Listening is such a huge part in this difficult situation” – Parent of a 9-year-old child.*

In the interviews and focus groups, it was clear that many children who had experienced an exclusion, suspension, managed move or move to a part-time timetable or AP did not understand the reason behind the school’s decisions. As one boy who was known to the Youth Justice system said:

*“Some schools don’t exactly explain why they exclude you, ..., so you are gonna get triggered...but if they sat down with me...they said they were gonna send a package so I could do work at home but that never happened...(sic)” – Boy, known to Youth Justice system.*

Schools used a variety of different rules and rewards to deal with attendance. Children (at an outstanding secondary) for example, told us that their school would reward children with 100% attendance with being able to jump the lunch queue, and with an iPad at the end of the year.



Sometimes, children felt these school attendance policies didn't fully reflect factors that should be taken into consideration, e.g., when they had been ill. Some also questioned the usefulness of rewards and fines. Children want to be included in developing attendance policies – children and young people know what they need to succeed.

### **Child-centred solutions:**

#### Schools

Children found it very important to feel heard at their schools and there were many examples of where they did. One 13-year-old girl attending a medical AP, who was happy with her current school said:

*"Here they were never angry about it, they would always just ask me what they could do to help with my attendance...it's not a hard thing to do"* – Girl, 13, attending a medical AP.

Within a school setting, every child should have the opportunity to develop at least one trusted relationship with an adult such as a teacher or social worker. For children who have experienced challenges at home, or in education previously, it is even more important that teachers and support staff are able to be patient and show children that they care about them. Where children have experienced this, it made a huge impact on their engagement in school. One girl, aged 18, who had improved attendance at mainstream secondary said:

*"I have problems with depression and anxiety. The most help I had in this country was the school. They care about me, all the time talking to me"* – Girl, 18, in mainstream secondary.

Multiple primary schools had implemented a 'worry-box' where students could write down their worries and the teachers would provide them time to talk through their worries and address them. For one 10-year-old boy in a primary school in Plymouth the ability to talk and receive advice was helping him prepare for the move to secondary school.




North Shore Academy is acting as a pilot ‘attendance hub’ sharing materials and will be providing training to partner schools to build self-sustaining attendance partnerships. A website, ‘Every Minute Counts’, has been created and will soon be launched, to demonstrate the concept of a national attendance resource. The website will offer case studies written by schools, and other stakeholders, who are particularly effective in managing attendance in challenging circumstances. Through the site, it will also be possible to link with schools who are prepared to act as attendance hubs offering resources and practical support to the sector. The aim is to reach as many schools as possible to share strategies that are working in some of the most challenging circumstances with hard-to-reach groups.

#### LAs

LA professionals, who work directly with vulnerable young people, shared that the key factor for dealing with attendance is to understand the roots of the problem and try to develop and sustain productive relationships with the families to find meaningful solutions. A County Alternative Education Provision Manager said:

*“The biggest thing is that everything is based on relationships – professional respect. As professionals we need to have genuine discussion and agree that the approach we are taking is in the best interest of the young person. The needs of the young person are the key good and driving purpose to our approach”* – County Alternative Education Provision Manager.

The secret to building trusting relationships with children and families was clearly reliant on the professional discretion and commitment of the individual staff members. For example, even during the pandemic, many inclusion managers worked with families to pick up and drive children to and from school.



Successful schools also engage more proactively with families. For example, one primary school in Brent developed a new role for a ‘professional attendance officer’ who would focus on attendance and engagement at different levels, while also working collaboratively with school staff, therapists, and families to identify, support and resolve issues. The centrality of this role helped the school improve the previous problems it had with attendance and behavioural management, as it really invested in developing trusting relationships, genuine communication, and tailored solutions with families.

### How can we make this happen?

- **Children and their families need to be able to understand the attendance guidance which is currently only aimed at LAs and school staff<sup>4</sup>.** The Children’s Commissioner has committed to working with the DfE to produce a child-friendly version of this guidance, so that children are equally able to access this information. A child-friendly version will also support greater access to parents with additional needs.
- **Schools need to develop trusted relationships with children who are persistently or severely absent, and with their families.** All children need to feel that they have a good relationship with the school and with their teachers to discuss their attendance and any barriers they might be facing. Schools can develop their student pastoral offer by, for instance, employing full time attendance officers, creating a ‘nurture room’ offer (where students can drop in and speak to a designated adult and take part in wellbeing activities). The DfE should consider whether school pastoral support could be restructured in a way that one adult knows each pupil and their strengths and their interests<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> DfE, *Guidance: School attendance: guidance for schools*, 2022. Available at: [School attendance: guidance for schools - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/104222/school-attendance-guidance-for-schools.pdf) Accessed on 01/06/2022.


<sup>5</sup> Education Endowment Foundation, *Improving behaviour in schools*, 2019. Available at: [Improving behaviour in schools \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](https://www.eef.org.uk/publications/improving-behaviour-in-schools) Accessed on 01/06/2022.



- **All professionals should communicate clearly with children and their families about any decisions relating to their education, such as a suspension, exclusion or managed move.** Children should be able to understand fully to all decisions regarding their education in a way that is accessible. Parents and guardians should be involved from the earliest possible opportunity.
- **Make all attendance policy documents child friendly.** Schools should produce their own tailored children’s version of key attendance policies that families, children and young people agree with and understand. This can include video content as well as written policies. Policies could be co-created and updated with students and their families. DfE should also produce accessible parent and children’s versions of attendance guidance documents.
- **Attendance should be prioritised in the ‘Parent Pledge’, announced in the Schools White Paper** alongside current proposed topics, such as the quality of teaching, and the focus on reading and writing.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> DfE, *Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child*, 2022. Available at: [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/opportunity-for-all-strong-schools-with-great-teachers-for-your-child) Accessed on 01/06/2022.



## **Ambition 2. Meet children where they are: all children receive support in school, through families of schools.**

As the Children’s Commissioner set out in her vision for the school system, *Ambition for All*, where additional support is needed, it needs to be provided easily and quickly to every child, every time.<sup>7</sup> The Big Ask demonstrated, and this Audit confirmed, that too many children are missing school because of unmet SEND or mental health needs, bullying that has not been addressed or problems at home.

Schools should be the place where every child can find support for their needs, with routes into more specialist support where this is necessary. This means that every school should be able to support children with SEND, with mental health needs, children who have problems at home, or who are experiencing bullying. A 15-year-old boy with autism attending a special school said:

*“Teachers should have training for SEND whether they are in mainstream or special”* - Boy, 15, attending special school.

A boy, aged 15 attending an independent special school said:

*“It would be nice if staff looked for signs of someone needing help. People like me would like to be confronted if they need help”* - Boy, 15, attending an independent special school.

Schools must also have a plan of action for when a child needs more specialist help. That means there needs to be a team around the school for this to be provided. Attendance is everyone’s business, and the problem is not solved until the student is attending and making good progress in their education.

Many children felt that there wasn’t always good understanding of their individual needs within schools; and many parents and carers told us about a lack of provision and services in their local areas and their struggle to access the right support for their children.

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<sup>7</sup> Children’s Commissioner, *Ambition for all – our vision for a school system that works for all children*, 2022. Available at: [Ambition for all – our vision for a school system that works for all children | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/ambition-for-all-our-vision-for-a-school-system-that-works-for-all-children/) Accessed on 01/06/2022.



For example, some children spoke about a lack of mental health support in and outside of school. A 15-year-old girl who was a young carer, attending an AP to support children with low attendance, said:

*“It just felt I was alone with my mental health [...] I wasn’t getting any help [...] and I had already missed a lot of year 7 and [...] I just didn’t know where I was going with my work” – Girl, 15, young carer attending AP.*

In interviews in schools in lower-income communities, school staff described how they were needing to provide support not only to children but also to their family to keep the children attending school regularly. A 10-year-old girl, with low attendance at primary school, said:

*“My attendance has been quite low, my mum had to talk to a welfare officer. My sister keeps running away from home, it makes me really upset, I really do like coming into school” - Girl, 10, attending mainstream primary school.*


For some children with these underlying needs such as anxiety, learning at home during lockdowns provided a respite from these problems, which has meant that they have been reluctant to return. These children need additional and timely support to alleviate their anxieties and encourage their return to school and engagement in education.

The pandemic has also exacerbated some children’s underlying problems – such as mental health needs and difficult family circumstances, which means it is more important than ever to get children the right support. Over the last two years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of children experiencing mental health problems. NHS surveys show that before the pandemic, in 2017, 1 in 9 children had a probable mental health disorder. That has now jumped to 1 in 6.<sup>8</sup> Inclusion managers and learning support

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<sup>8</sup> NHS Digital, *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021 – wave 2 follow up to the 2017 survey*, 2021. Available at: [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021 - wave 2 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS Digital](#). Accessed on 01/06/2022.





workers interviewed as part of the deep dive said that they have noticed this increased prevalence of mental health need in their work.

Looking at the figures for 2020/21 spending by the NHS on children's mental health has increased by 4.4% since 2019/2020 in real terms and whilst this investment is making a difference, many children are still waiting a long time for their treatment to begin, and many are still not accepted onto waiting lists. There is still wide variation between local areas on what is being achieved.<sup>9</sup>

Due to the growing demand, many schools have started to commission early help services using their own budgets, to provide support where a child does not meet the threshold for specialist services. In one school however, they have seen a 200% increase in fuel costs, which has scuppered their plans for commissioning their own mental health support. Many schools and LAs have felt alone in having to deal with a growing crisis, in some cases experiencing multiple suicide attempts per week and have called for more investment in NHS mental health care, both in terms of early help, specialist children's mental health provision and Tier 4 mental health beds. Investment alone is not sufficient, however, and a wider workforce strategy is also needed. In Brighton for example, the LA has funds to commission additional mental health support but there is a dearth of trained mental health practitioners.

### **Child-centred Solutions**

The Audit has seen examples of schools going above and beyond to support children in their attendance by using devolved budgets and partnership working to fund immediate health and wellbeing support. A secondary school in Brighton had recently opened a provision for children who struggled with their attendance to support them through their GCSEs. The two girls who spoke with the Children's Commissioner's Office, who had other pressures in their lives and had

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<sup>9</sup> Children's Commissioner, *Children's Mental Health Services 2020/21, 2022* [PDF]. Available at: [cco-briefing-mental-health-services-2021-22.pdf](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/cco-briefing-mental-health-services-2021-22.pdf) ([childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)) Accessed on 01/06/2022.



previously attended for about 30% of the time, had attended this provision every day so far. They appreciated the smaller groups, the one to one teaching and mental health support they were now receiving; and said if it wasn't for this provision, they wouldn't attend. One of them said:

*"You probably wouldn't be seeing me here [without the house]. It's so different now"* - Girl, 15, young carer, attending AP.


A community college in Cambridgeshire recognises that COVID has impacted pupils' ability to cope with anxiety. It has invested heavily in an onsite AP hub which offers young people a more relaxed setting to keep them engaged in learning and targeted support to deal with behavioural and mental health issues. When full, the AP hub hosts 10 students, from a range of year groups, and with a variety of needs. It offers an alternative model to manage certain anxieties, behaviour and worries for children, by offering the same curriculum options across different arrangements of classes, half days and provides targeted support from mentors with mental health training. One young person from the hub said:

*"I haven't missed a day.... 1:1 is better and have learned a lot more than my previous school. AP teachers talk to you, about why, help you a lot more than mainstream school. They have different training maybe as they listen more and can deal with different students"* – Young person attending AP.

Another 15-year-old boy attending the same provision said:

*"This is how a school should be – different bits for different classrooms. They speak to you like normal people, not like some dumb kid. More practical stuff, like the kids with ADHD get to do more practical stuff"* - Boy 15, on a managed move.

To provide these early help interventions, some schools have relied on their devolved budget to commission external counselling and used the virtual schools to provide trauma-related training and mental health training to inhouse staff.



In the visits, a number of schools talked about getting support through a ‘family of schools’, either through academy trusts or through their LA. Being part of a family of schools means that schools can pool their resources to meet the needs of every child. One partnership manager spoke about the need to find ways to finance early help in-house to prevent escalation and a move to AP. A Plymouth schools partnerships manager said:

*“I wish to reassure teachers are doing all they can do to support the children in their care and are using their existing funding and toolkit to do what they can. But there's a recognition once the toolkits been exhausted, we need another layer and we're saying instead of that layer going straight to the LA, could we create something where we keep the children with us in some way as a trust? And when that doesn't work, then we turn to an alternative and an external provider in some way, but it might give us more options and more opportunity to try and work with these children and then redirect them back into mainstream, not going off to alternative provision and never coming back” – Plymouth schools partnership manager.*

Another school partnership manager in a different LA argued that:

*“There is a need for improved professional services – better quality professionals – which could be assured if the schools trust had oversight and selection criteria. There needs to be something in between the LA provision and school-level – to have quicker access, lower threshold of access and prevention before escalation” - Schools partnership manager.*

When interviewing school leaders in some LAs they described ‘team around the school’ models implemented by the council, which gave them access to local services such as mental health support, family hubs and the police.

In one school, the ‘team around the school’ enabled them to allocate a family worker to support a family where the child’s attendance had dropped, and they worked on a plan of support together. The ‘team around the school’ enabled the school to respond proactively and arrange help as soon as they identified a family in difficulty.




The 'team around the school' model brings support to where children are, rather than requiring children and families to navigate multiple different systems to receive support.

### How can we make this happen?

- **School as a nexus of support.** In The Big Ask children told us that they want to receive support in school, be it mental health support, SEND support, bullying support or safeguarding. We have seen that children thrive at schools that provide holistic support that is built around genuine understanding of children's individual needs.
- **Every school should have a coordinated pastoral strategy which pulls together safeguarding, mental health, SEND and behaviour into an integrated approach with a focus on attendance.** This can include 'professional attendance officers', a new role within schools that focuses on attendance and engagement at different levels, while also working collaboratively with school staff, therapists, and families to identify, support and resolve issues. This is an approach that really works and puts children at the heart.
- **Early support through all schools adopting a 'Whole School Approach to Mental Health'.<sup>10</sup>** This would provide leadership from the centre and ensuring a focus on mental health across all aspects of school life, from the school ethos, policies and procedures, curriculum, and assemblies. As part of this, schools can provide a range of early support services, such as in-house counselling. Support should be an integrated strand alongside school behaviour and attendance policies so that poor attendance or behaviour is a signal for further investigation and support to be provided.

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<sup>10</sup> CYPMHC, *Promoting a whole school or college approach to mental health and wellbeing*, 2021. Available at: [Promoting a whole school or college approach to mental health and wellbeing | CYPMHC](#) Accessed on 01/06/2022.

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- **Schools cannot do this alone we also need a ‘team around the school’.** On mental health, for example, the Children’s Commissioner has called for the roll-out of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) for every school by 2026/27, to provide an enhanced level of support and more connections between schools and NHS specialist services. The Commissioner has also called for a reimagining of existing NHS mental health services, with greater access to support online and drop-in, self-referral support in the community.<sup>11</sup> The Commissioner will continue to research what children need, to inform the open consultation on the Mental Health and wellbeing plan.
  - **LAs are crucial to building ‘teams around the school’.** LAs need to ensure they are establishing robust teams around the schools in their area. LAs are able to bring the right people together to support children, they need to ensure this service deals with more than just managed moves but looks at how to provide early help and support. There needs to be a robust framework for delivery of a team around the school model, and implementation and evaluation should be under the purview of Ofsted inspections of children’s services.
  - **Supporting staff to support students.** School staff can only support vulnerable children if they too are supported. This is more than training teachers in behaviour management or wellbeing. It is ensuring every adult working with children feels supported and resourced well enough to do what is right for the child.
  - **Supporting staff to support SEND students.** All teachers are teachers of children with additional needs and it is vital that they receive the support and training to do this effectively. By locating professionals such as Education Psychologists, Emotional Learning Support Assistants, and Speech and Language Therapists within schools or a family of schools, this increases teachers’ and pupils’ access to this support in an


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<sup>11</sup> Children’s Commissioner, *Children’s Commissioner Proposals to Support Children’s Health*, 2021. Available at: [Childrens-Health-Policy-Briefing.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Childrens-Health-Policy-Briefing.pdf) Accessed on 01/06/2022.



immediate way that embeds this additional professional expertise within the school's existing education offer.

- **A SEND system which provides the right support in the right place at the right time and is easier to navigate.** The SEND system needs to be as ambitious as the children it serves to support. The Children's Commissioner welcomes the review of SEND system and the ongoing consultation on the proposed measures, many of which the Commissioner has called for, such as introducing a standardised and digitised EHCP process and template and improving the provision for children with SEND in mainstream education. The Commissioner will bring the voices of children to the heart of the SEND reforms, by carrying out further research with children and young people to seek their views on the consultation and the proposed measures.
- **Working together as a strong family of schools increases the ability of schools to offer a wider range of services.** Schools operating in strong families of schools are more able to provide additional support by sharing resources and expertise. For example:
  - Many families of schools already operate 'family hubs', and families of schools are well placed to support the Government's expansion of this model.
  - Working together in families helps schools develop the capacity to access available funding streams – such as the Holiday Activities Fund or to use existing funding such as the pupil premium to offer services like Breakfast clubs. It also means they have more capacity to access services funded by other partners such as the MHSTs.

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- Co-locating AP within families of schools can allow for a smooth process of transition in and out of AP to ensure children are supported back into mainstream schooling as soon as possible. Where a school is not yet in a family of schools with an AP, there must be a concerted effort by schools and LAs to support and cultivate quality AP for children that need additional support and to facilitate a smooth journey back into the classroom.



**Ambition 3. Exclusion as a trigger for intervention: children should receive a fantastic education, regardless of setting, always and receive targeted support following exclusion or suspension.**

All children deserve access to high quality educational provision that meets their needs. Everything possible should be done to keep exclusions to a minimum. The reality is, however, that some children will need to be suspended, removed from the classroom, or excluded, for example to keep other children safe. In that instance, headteachers should feel supported and able to make the right choice for the child but everything should be done to ensure a smooth return to the classroom, as quickly as possible.

No child should be able to fall through a gap in our education system after having been excluded or suspended. Exclusion from a school should never mean exclusion from education. Any form of exclusion, including internal exclusion, is an urgent signal that further intervention is needed. All children who are excluded or suspended should have their needs assessed, and a plan should be put in place for those needs to be met.


Studies suggest that only 1% of students who complete their GCSEs in AP achieve five 'good' GCSEs including English and maths, compared to the national average of 64.5 percent.<sup>12</sup> Life outcomes for excluded children are poorer – 35 percent of excluded students who finish education in AP become NEET (not in education, employment or training). Additionally, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) estimates that the cost of exclusion is around £370,000 per young person in lifetime education, benefits, healthcare and criminal justice costs<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> RSA, *Pinball kids: preventing school exclusions*, 2020 [PDF]. Available at: [the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf \(thersa.org\)](https://www.thersa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf) Accessed on 01/06/2022.

<sup>13</sup> IPPR, *Making the Difference*, 2017. [PDF] Available at: [www.ippr.org/files/2017-10/making-the-difference-report-october-2017.pdf](https://www.ippr.org/files/2017-10/making-the-difference-report-october-2017.pdf) Accessed on 01/06/2022.





Children interviewed as part of the Attendance Audit explained that exclusion often didn't lead to additional support, one boy, aged 15, attending AP for excluded children said:

*“When they kick you out of school, they just leave you for ages [...] and then, they just expect you to get back into that routine [...] and it's not that easy”* – Boy, 15, attending AP.

Children talked about the negative impact on their wellbeing of being out of the classroom, whether in isolation or through suspension or exclusion. One boy, aged 16, attending an unregistered AP school said:

*“For me, being on your own, it's just not good for you. For your mental health and stuff. It's a bit like a prison. You feel quite claustrophobic. It's just not good”* - Boy, 16, attending part-time AP.

A young person in a special school said:

*“It was horrible. We had this thing called isolation. I think most mainstream schools have it. I would just be stuck in that room with the door locked. They wouldn't even let you go to the toilet [...] I wasn't going to any lessons. There was one teacher who challenged me with work but if he wasn't in that day, I was just sitting there”* – Young person attending a special school.

### **Child-centred Solutions**

When children were excluded, it was important that they were informed about the reasons for their exclusion and the next arrangements for their education. One boy in a Secure Training Centre (STC), for example, had come to terms with his exclusion as it was properly explained to him why he had been excluded, how his education would be delivered in AP, and how he would return to mainstream. He said this ultimately helped him change:

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*“They explained to me why, it’s not just that they send me without saying anything [...] they told me everything I need to know [...] So basically, I was in the PRU, and then you slowly think to yourself, is this what I wanna keep doing and doing and doing, where is this gonna get me. Cause it led to me having arguments with family. So then just decided to change for the better [...] I don’t think there would have been anything that would have prevented me from getting excluded [...] because I was someone who would not put up with anything [...] I think once you get older you think about stuff(sic)” - Boy, resident in a STC.*


Children do well where schools view exclusions, or behaviour that could lead to exclusion, as a sign that a child needs additional support.

When AP was done well it made a huge difference to the children who were referred there. As one 14-year-old girl attending AP explained:

*“They’ll take you into a quiet room, they’re good with you, talk to you try and calm you down ask what the situation is [...] they’ll take you back when you’re ready, they’re very reasonable with you here, they’ll try their best to do what you need [...] makes you feel better, you could never get that in a mainstream because there’s so many people” - Girl, 14, attending AP.*

Many schools shared an AP setting between a family of schools. This means that children who need extra support can receive it on site, and on roll, without the risk of falling off the radar. AP was most effective for children where there was a clear plan for re-integration with mainstream school.

For example, in some areas, there was a clear strategy that AP referrals were for fixed six-week periods, with the placement reviewed every six weeks and the expectation that children would be able to return to mainstream education as soon as possible, with the right support in place.



Building AP as part of a wider family of schools facilitates a smooth transition back into mainstream schooling and better communication between settings.

### How can we make this happen?

- **Exclusions should always lead to an intervention.** When a child is removed from the classroom, whether through internal exclusion, suspension, permanent exclusion, a managed move or implementation of a ‘part time timetable’, this should be an opportunity to learn about the child’s underlying needs. A child’s needs should be assessed and a plan to regulate that behaviour should be implemented, jointly agreed with the child and the school. Guidance issued to schools and services needs to take a holistic view of the child rather than focusing on a single issue. DfE should consult on further guidance for the assessment of children’s needs who have been excluded to be included in the Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance.<sup>14</sup> This would help ensure exclusion becomes a trigger for a package of support around the child.
- **Taking safeguarding seriously.** When a child is excluding for a safeguarding reason, such as carrying a defensive weapon, this needs to trigger a referral to the local multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) team.
- **AP and part-time timetables should be used only where necessary.** Moves to a need to be carefully considered, engaging children throughout. Schools and LAs need to ensure that AP will meet the child’s needs and that the child doesn’t lose the support network of their school.

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<sup>14</sup> DfE, ‘Statutory guidance: Keeping children safe in education’, 2021. Available at: [Keeping children safe in education - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92142/keeping-children-safe-in-education-2021.pdf)



Finally, there must be a plan in place for how the child will be supported to access their learning and transition back into the classroom. No part-time timetable or AP placement should be considered a permanent solution. They should always be strictly time-limited with set time periods for review of progress. If an AP placement isn't working to support positive change for the child, then that placement needs to be reviewed and alternatives considered.

- **A stronger focus is needed on quality and accountability in the AP sector.** This reform has been signalled in the recent SEND consultation through the development of a bespoke performance framework for AP. The Children's Commissioner supports this framework with its focus on ensuring children make progress, re-integration into mainstream education and sustainable post-16 destinations for those who remain in AP.<sup>15</sup> To meet the objectives of a new framework and the needs of children, AP needs to be properly resourced, with teachers and staff trained in managing the additional needs of the children and held fully accountable for the quality of provision and student attainment.
- **DfE should explore further guidance on the assessment of needs of children who have been excluded.** This would help ensure exclusion becomes a trigger for a package of support around the child.

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<sup>15</sup> DfE, *SEND Review: Right support, right place, right time*, 2022 [PDF]. Available at: [SEND Review - right support, right place, right time \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) Accessed on 01/06/2022.



#### **Ambition 4. Let children be children: no child should feel that they need to miss school to support their family**

The Attendance Audit heard from children whose attendance at school was impacted by caring responsibilities or other family pressures. While these children need understanding from their schools, they also need to be identified and supported so that they can be in school full time, and progress in their education.

The team spoke with children who felt that their responsibilities at home were taking priority over their education – whether providing care for a family member, caring for their own child, or providing financial support for their parents. These responsibilities can mean that children miss lessons, cannot always find the time to complete homework, are more likely to experience bullying and that extra-curricular activities are not an option.<sup>16</sup> Some of these children felt that their low levels of attendance were out of their control and that there was little understanding for their situation. Even children in primary school told us about needing to stay home to care for siblings or their parents. Several young carers described how challenging their situations were:

*“At school I’m 3 years behind - I feel like I’m not getting the right amount of support with my work. I’m really scared of going to secondary school because I feel like I’m not going to get the support and I’m worried I’m going to get picked on for it” – Girl, 11, young carer.*

*“My mum gets sick quite a lot, if my dad has to go to work to earn some money then I need to stay home and look after my mum and little brother” – Boy, 9, young carer, persistently absent from school.*

*“I didn’t balance it, I didn’t go in, I just gave up on school, stay home and help mum, she needs it, she needs it more than anything” – Girl, 15, young carer now in a provision that supports children with low attendance through their GCSEs.*

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis et al, *The first cross-national study of adolescent young carers aged 15-17 in six European countries*, International Journal of Care and Caring, 2022. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/239788222X16455943560342> Accessed on 01/06/2022.



Additionally, young carers described struggling to explain to teachers how their home situation was impacting on their school life and attendance. Often, they didn't have an adult within the school who could champion their needs. One girl, aged 12 who was a young carer said:


*"Although I tell them about being a young carer I don't think every teacher necessarily understands that... I can try my best to explain to them what I'm going through but ultimately they're never going to fully be able to relate to me or know what pressures I have on me"* – Girl, 12, young carer.

### **Child-centred Solutions**

Young carers said that it is important that teachers and staff understand what it means to be a young carer, and that they face pressures which make it difficult for them to attend 100% of the time. They welcomed staff members who adopted an understanding approach to their situation. A girl, aged 12, a young carer described how being supported by the attendance manager at her school helped her with the challenges she faces balancing her responsibilities as a young carer and her attendance in school:

*"With my school [...] the lady who supports me is the lady who does attendance [...] If I ever have a problem with being late, I can go to her"* – Girl, 12, young carer.

In one school, they had a young carers champion who was able to advocate for the young carers in the school and ensure they were able to receive support.



Having a young carers champion made a huge difference for the young carers in the school, though the champion felt that there needed to be more support provided nationally so that the school could allocate more resources to the young carers. A teacher and young carers champion said:

*“Young carers don’t automatically get considered for FSM or Pupil Premium however those situations are often tight because there’s only one parent working in the home – the threshold should look different for young carers” – Teacher & young carers champion.*

Young carers, and young people supporting their families also spoke about how reasonable adjustments would support them. One girl said she was now allowed to bring in her phone, so she was able to make sure that her mum was okay. This helped her to focus on her classes, because she did not have to worry about what was going on at home. Some young carers spoke about how they benefitted from in school mental health provision. Receiving support, even if it was just a safe space to sit and talk through what was going on, had a huge influence on supporting these young people to feel confident in attending school. A girl, aged 15, and a young carer described how good support in school can transform children’s approach to school:

*“Although I have been finding it difficult, I’m actually finally getting somewhere because I am finally getting some support at school. Even if it’s just an hour a week which is what I’m currently getting it’s helping because it gives me someone to talk to about everything that’s happened [...] anything that stresses me I’ll be able to talk about next week” – Girl, 15, young carer.*

In Cambridgeshire, a school employed a social emotional mental health manager, running a support service within the school for students who struggle with their attendance. The manager works full time at the school and is a champion for young carers. The school works with an open-door policy where every day looks different, depending on what the children's needs are.



## How can we make this happen?


- **Improve research on the impact of caring on young people to inform policy.** The Children's Commissioner's Independent Family Review will enhance the research and information available on the needs of young carers and their families to inform policy decisions.<sup>17</sup>
- **Identifying young carers and sharing information.** Schools and LAs need to work together with other local professionals, such as health services and family hubs, to identify children facing additional responsibilities at home. Young carers in primary school should be identified and supported on their move to secondary school and their status needs to be recorded on their pupil record. The Children's Commissioner welcomes DfE's decision to add a young carer flag to the School Census from Spring 2023 as this will ensure that young carers can be supported throughout their school career, without the need to redisclose their status after every school transition. Schools need to prepare for the addition of the young carers flag by identifying the young carers in their school, for example by using the Multi-dimensional Activity of Caring Activities (MACA) assessment, a short, standardised questionnaire.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Children's Commissioner, *Family Review*, 2022. Available at: [Family Review | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://childrenscommissioner.gov.uk) Accessed on 01/06/2022.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph et al, *Manual for Measures of Caring Activities and Outcomes for Children and Young People*, 2012. [PDF] Available at: <https://carers.org/downloads/resources-pdfs/young-carer-assessment-tools/manual-for-measures-of-caring-activities-and-outcomes-for-children-and-young-people.pdf> Accessed on 01/06/2022.



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- **Children with additional family responsibilities should be provided with targeted support, including priority in school admissions and support from the VSH.** Young carers also need to be eligible for pupil premium funding so that schools have additional resource to provide this support.
  - **Implementation of attendance policies should be informed by an understanding of the child's individual situation.** Attendance policies need to be implemented flexibly where a child is a young carer or has additional responsibilities. Receiving detentions for being late due to caring responsibilities doesn't support young carers to attend school more promptly but rather creates barriers between the school and the child.
  - **All schools should implement a young carers policy and a young carers champion.** Young carers have additional responsibilities and school policies should reflect these and not punish children who are simply trying to do their best. All schools should implement a young carers policy, co-written with the young carers at the school to set expectations and ensure there is a codified offer for support for young carers within the school. The policy should also address the school's response to the bullying of young carers. Additionally, a young carers champion should be established, so that children have an adult who understands their situation to support them when they experience challenges and relay their needs to the wider school team.



**Ambition 5. Attendance is everyone’s business: school leaders have a relentless focus on attendance and work together with LAs to ensure children are supported to be in school and to attend regularly**

Attendance is everyone’s business, and everyone involved with the care of children is equally responsible for ensuring children’s attendance. This means schools, LAs, social care, NHS workers and community partners all have a responsibility to see the child in school every day, and to wrap support around that child. All partners should make children’s attendance a top priority.


Now, after the pandemic, there is an opportunity to come together and join up systems for our young people, so they don’t fall through the cracks when it comes to their school attendance, safeguarding, their mental health, and wider support needs. No child should be pushed between services, waiting for the right treatment, or having to repeatedly explain any difficulties they have to different adults. A mum of a 13-year-old, out of school, explained the difficulties faced when dealing with multiple children’s professionals:

*“What would have helped would be one person taking responsibility and saying I make sure all these things come together quickly [...] we were waiting and it got worse and worse and worse until we reached crisis point because we were hanging off” - Mum of 13-year-old girl out of school.*

**Child-centred Solutions**

The survey and deep dives have identified a need for a clearer demarcation between the responsibility of the LA, of the school, and of other partners in the system.

The majority of the LAs visited have worked hard to overcome the difficulties posed by siloed working and to create joined-up platforms that bring together a cross-professional team from the police, social care, NHS and



schools to update each other on the status and wellbeing of each individual child marked as ‘missing from education’ or at risk of becoming missing. The Cambridgeshire Chair Safeguarding partnership said:

*“What we’ve decided to do locally is to bring [together] the governance of both our safeguarding partnerships but also our community safety partnerships as well. So, we’ve kind of brought that enforcement and safeguarding world together really to try and align that”* - Cambridgeshire Safeguarding partnership chair.

In Sheffield, safeguarding responsibility has been expanded to include other professionals involved in children’s lives. For example, professionals working in fire services and the housing team have been trained in ‘whole family working’, so that they can escalate any issues they identify to local safeguarding teams. The council transport service similarly has a process in place to report the case of any child who isn’t collected back to the LA, which then feeds back to the school, which requests reasons for non-attendance. For many years, the council has worked with the licensing team in the city to make safeguarding training a requirement for practitioners like taxi drivers, something which has recently become a national requirement. This cross-professional commitment and oversight has improved services and increased their rate of anonymous safeguarding referrals.

All these mechanisms for integrated working are built on a shared sense of responsibility, professional commitment and proactive dialogue between the professionals involved. Designing child-centred strategies that focus on shared values and goals of improving attendance within learning trusts, has encouraged schools and other local professionals to take joint responsibility to act in the best interests of the child.




In Worcestershire, the LA hosts a weekly multi-agency forum, dubbed 'Missing Mondays' to encourage cross-service collaboration that enables practitioners from different agencies to share information about missing children, deploy staff to visit children's homes and register them on their databases.

Cambridgeshire has developed a unique partnership and commitment between schools in their learning trusts, which calls for a shared responsibility for children who are at the risk of exclusion. To discourage permanent exclusions, the learning trusts sign an agreement around exclusions policy which is part of the devolved budget they receive from the LA. A Cambridge County Manager said:

*"It is headteacher's right to make decisions around exclusion policy but in the LA we need to have a shared responsibility and relationship to reduce/discourage permanent exclusions. It is difficult for Headteachers – if you're signing into a local agreement but also have to be part of a Trust. For our trust, we've never permanently excluded a child, it doesn't serve the purpose, maybe outside of mainstream schools but we need to take responsibility for this person. If you sign this agreement and you take the money then you cannot quibble"*  
- Cambridge County Manager.

#### The value of relationships: A thread that goes all the way through

In Brighton & Hove, the LA invests in collective partnership working across the city to maintain strategic oversight of issues and discuss support for individual children. They host Fair Access Panel (FAP) meetings fortnightly, which discuss placement of pupils in school. The meetings are also used to discuss managed moves, suspension and attendance data and to share good practice between schools, as well as to build positive school relationships. The Panel consists of representatives from all secondary schools in the city, the Principal Educational Psychologist, a representative from the



Extended Adolescent Service (Social Care), Sussex Police Youth Team and the Head of the PRU. School nurses also sit on a 'Children Missing education' panel – which helps identify children who are falling through the cracks in the system.

### How can we make this happen?

- **All schools should aim to be as good as the best when it comes to their attendance culture.** Schools need to create a culture which prioritises attendance across the school and promotes this message amongst children and parents.
- **Increasing partnership working.** LAs should develop collaborative and effective cross-professional meetings that record and discuss individual children's cases covering their needs, the support offered and their progress. This model requires the attendance of all partners working with children, including the NHS and the police. This model of working may need to be supported by a national framework or guidance to be fully effective. The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) should consider further work to share best practice in this area.
- **Schools and colleges should become full statutory members of Local Safeguarding Partnerships alongside the LA, police and the NHS.** This would give schools a seat at the table, designing and implementing safeguarding systems and policies to protect children and promote their welfare. It would also provide a statutory framework for a more open exchange of data between schools and key partners that have a duty of care to children.
- **Ofsted inspection framework prioritising attendance.** While attendance is already covered under the 'behaviour and attitudes' Ofsted criteria, this could be a higher priority within the overall judgement and a stronger focus is needed on the strength of partnership working between the school and LA. This should include exploring Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAs) on attendance to support multi-agency working.



**Ambition 6. No more ‘known unknowns’: lack of information should never be a barrier to keeping children safe and ensuring they receive a high-quality education.**

LAs and schools should have clear data which enables them to identify any children who are not attending regularly or who are missing from education altogether so that these children can be identified and receive the right support to get back into school.

Indeed, LAs have a statutory duty under section 436A of the Education Act 1996 to make arrangements to establish the identities of children in their area who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving a suitable education.<sup>19</sup> The Children’s Commissioner’s initial survey and following deep dive research found that LAs struggle to deliver on this statutory duty because of a lack of information.<sup>20</sup> As one Director of Education said:

*“We don’t know what we don’t know”* – LA Director of Education.

To identify the missing children from education, LAs need to first know the total number of children living in their area. They would then need to identify all the children on a school roll, in the mainstream, specialist, alternative or independent sectors, the number of 17-18-year-olds in employment or training, and any children being home educated. This would allow LAs to have oversight of all these children, and any children not accounted for in these groups could be identified as missing from education altogether.

The gaps in what we know

The survey to all LAs at the start of the Audit found that it is not currently possible for LAs to identify all children missing from education in their area, as they do not have an

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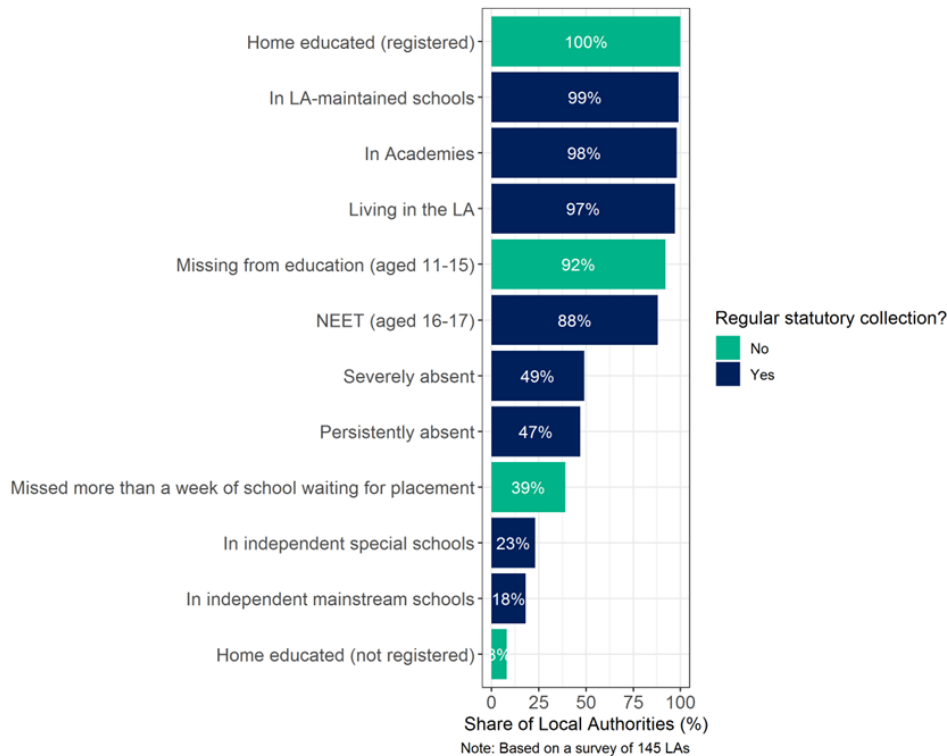
<sup>19</sup> DfE, *Elective home education, departmental guidance for local authorities*, 2019 [PDF]. Available at: [Elective home education: departmental guidance for local authorities \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/428242/elective-home-education-departmental-guidance-for-local-authorities.pdf) Accessed on 01/06/2022.

<sup>20</sup> Children’s Commissioner, *Where are England’s Missing Children? Interim findings from the Children’s Commissioner’s Attendance Audit*, 2022 [PDF] Available: [cco-where-are-englands-children-interim-findings-mar-2022.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Where-are-England-s-missing-children-interim-findings-mar-2022.pdf) Accessed on 01/06/2022.



accurate real time figure of how many children there are in their area – let alone the number of children not receiving education. Figure 2 shows the share of LAs able to provide an estimate on the number of children in each school environment.

**Figure 2: Share of LAs able to provide an estimate on the number of children in each school environment.**



Independent schools are not legally required to complete a termly pupil level school census, but they are required to submit data on the total number of pupils at a school via an annual school census to the DfE. All other schools must share individual pupil attendance records with the Government every term. In our survey, whilst all LAs knew how many pupils were registered in LA maintained and academy schools in Autumn 2021, just 18% of LAs provided an estimate of the number of children in mainstream independent schools.



In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of children in elective home education (EHE), from 60,544 registered home educated children in England in 2019 to 81,200 in October 2021.<sup>21</sup>

When a family chooses to educate their child at home, they do not have to notify their LA. We support the recent commitment by the Government to legislate for a statutory EHE register and encourage them to introduce it as soon as possible. Our interim report found that LAs had very low levels of children in their areas officially registered as EHE (less than 1% on average). All LAs could provide an estimate of the number of EHE children based on families who had notified them of their decision however only 8% of LAs could provide estimates on the number of EHE children who were not registered with the LA.


92% of LAs provided an estimate of the number of Children Missing Education (CME) aged 11-15. When a child fails to attend school, the school is responsible for attempting to locate the child. From the LAs we interviewed, once a child has not attended school from anywhere between 3 and 20 days, and the school has not been able to contact the family, the LA CME team would then be notified. In areas with high migration, they reported often they will find children have moved abroad or returned to their home country, though it can take several months of investigative work by the team to confirm this. The estimates of CME provided by LAs therefore capture primarily children who had been on a school roll at some point and are much less likely to include children who have never been on a school roll.

Half of LAs provided estimates for persistent absence and severe absence. Many LAs did not have up to date attendance information from schools and relied on the school census, which had not been returned when we requested this data, hence the low number able to estimate the attendance figures for the autumn term. The average rate of estimated persistent absence (missing over 10% of sessions) was 22%

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<sup>21</sup> Long & Danechi, 2022, *Home education in England*, House of Commons Library [PDF]. Available at: [SN05108.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#) Accessed on 01/06/2022.





and the average rate of severe absence (missing over 50% of sessions) was one point five percent. In total, we estimated that there were 1,782,000 pupils persistently absent and 124,000 pupils severely absent in the autumn 2021 term.

Some LAs have made great efforts to get a clearer picture of the number of children in their area, and the number missing from education. However, the approach is inconsistent, with some LAs able to access higher quality data, such as local patient registers, and others relying on inaccurate and out of date national population estimates.

Compounding this issue is that information is held on multiple, disparate systems, across which data is not easily shared nor matched. In an average LA in our deep dive, data would be held by:

- schools using two or three different management information systems,
- the LA child services team
- the LA education service
- Other external data owners, such as GP surgeries, NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), charities and voluntary organisations, etc.
- If the LA is not a unitary authority, housing information such as council tax data required to identify if a family is still living in the area, is held by the district council, whereas the county council retains responsibility for identifying missing children.

Schools use a range of management information systems (MIS) to log and manage attendance and performance data. Schools select from a number of private MIS suppliers to find the best fit for their school. As all MIS systems have different capabilities, they are not all compatible, and data may not be easily transferrable from one MIS to the next. School leaders have told us that incompatibility between MIS systems can affect how well a school can support a child who needs help. For example, children who are new to a school may arrive without background data on their past attendance, medical or safeguarding needs.

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This incompatibility can make it difficult for schools and LAs to track children who ‘move around the system’. Additionally, this means that children need to keep explaining their situation and risk losing out on support when they move between schools.

Additionally, the inconsistency in MIS providers creates challenges for LAs who wish to set up automatic transfers of school registers to track pupil absence. In one LA for example, they are able to receive data automatically from schools using one MIS however other schools in the area using a different system are required to extract the data themselves manually and send it across to the LA team at the end of the week. Rather than a single, streamlined system enabling data to be used in real time, we see a piecemeal approach beset by delays in data provision and onerous data cleaning processes. This ineffective approach to data gathering cannot be the reason that children fall through the gap and needs to change.

#### A national problem

This problem of identifying children who need support exists at a national as well as local level. There are many national data collection systems that use different identifying numbers, such as the NHS number, the Unique Pupil Number (UPN) used by DfE, a National Insurance Number (NINO) assigned at age 16 and a passport number. LAs then assign children who are in contact with social services with an ‘LA-ID’. This means it is difficult to identify the same child across multiple data sources. This national complexity makes it harder for LAs to identify children who need support, because they rely on these national systems to track children. A consistent identifier number would help to share and match information across these systems and prevent children falling through the gaps.

The ONS is developing better estimates of population at a national and local level, which will mean it is possible to get more accurate and up to date measures of the population in the future. A consistent unique identifier would dramatically improve the ability of ONS to produce these estimates and reduce the volume of personal data being shared.



Of course, relying on existing data systems does nothing to find the children who are missing from the data all together. These children are often the most vulnerable, such as those who have been trafficked into the country, those in families who have migrated illegally, children in families who are classed as ‘no recourse to public funds’, and those living with families who do not want their children known to the system. No LA within the Audit had identified a solution to finding these children.

### Attendance codes

As reported in our interim findings, there are inconsistencies in how and when schools are using register attendance codes which means that LAs may not receive an accurate picture of who is in school.

There are several codes used by schools in school registers to indicate reasons for pupil absence. ‘Code B’, for example, is meant to be used when pupils are present at an off-site educational activity that has been approved by the school. This code is not to be used to represent children who are doing schoolwork at home. Inconsistency in the use of the code means that some children could be ‘B’ coded when they are not attending education provision.

Another attendance code, ‘Code X’ was introduced in September 2020 to indicate Covid related absence. During Covid restrictions, the code did not count as an absence in school attendance records (to avoid penalising children who followed the guidance to self-isolate following a positive lateral flow test). If a child took a confirmatory positive PCR test, they were to be marked with ‘Code I’, which categorised them as a ‘school absence’.


With any changes to attendance coding, there is a risk that schools or trusts could interpret the guidance differently which could lead to a number of problems. For example, a child who has a concerning attendance record and who may need additional support may be marked with an ‘Code X’– which could mask any underlying barriers the child faces in attending school and prevent them from receiving help.



Conversely, we have heard from school leaders that children with 100% attendance who become ill with Covid and were required to stay away from school, and who had been 'I' coded, felt as though they have been penalised for doing the right thing.


### How can we make this happen?

- **Establishing a consistent unique identifier for children.** Using a consistent unique identifier (either a new identifier, or agreement to use an existing identifying number more widely) across systems and age groups would enable records to be brought together more readily and reduce the number of children falling between the gaps when they drop off one data collection system. This will require an urgent review of existing restrictions on data sharing and greater collaboration across government. The Children's Commissioner will publish a further paper exploring the technical and organisational challenges which will need to be addressed.
- **Making children a priority in new population estimates.** The ONS must provide timely, reliable estimates of the total population of children at the LA level. This will require increased sharing of data, in particular between the DfE and ONS, bringing in data sources such as the Looked After Children Census and the Early Years Census rather than relying solely on the School Census, which does not capture early years, nor all looked after children. ONS is the right organisation to produce and make this data accessible in a safe and secure way. Central government organisations must re-double their efforts to share data with ONS to facilitate improved population estimates.

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- **New guidance and/or legislation is needed to set direction and expectations regarding data sharing between organisations responsible for safeguarding children.** The Children’s Commissioner’s Office is pleased to be working with the DfE, the Information Commissioner’s Office and a range of different services to consider the current legislation on data sharing and how consistently it is understood and applied. Our hope is to support the creation of new guidance and toolkits to support greater utilisation of data to support children. However, it may also be that changes to primary legislation are needed, in particular the limitations on LA data-sharing within the Children Act 1989 (a pre-digital piece of legislation) which are more restrictive than the partnership-wide data sharing powers introduced by the 2017 Children and Social Work Act.
  - **A national register of home educated children.** The measures in the Schools Bill to introduce LA registers of children not in school are very welcome, and something the Children’s Commissioner has called for. This will support LAs to carry out their statutory duty to identify children out of school, and to know where children are being home educated and check that families have the support they need. The Schools Bill measure will place a duty on LAs in England to establish and maintain Children Not In School (CNIS) register, and to provide support to home educators. The registers will record eligible children of compulsory school age that are: EHE, flexi-schooled, or receive AP in an unregistered setting (unless an exception applies, to be set out in regulations, such as where the proprietor of a school has made such arrangements). The registers will help ensure LAs are aware of the children not in school in their area so that they can undertake their existing responsibilities more effectively, which include trying to identify CME.



- **Independent and unregistered schools:** To ensure that LAs have a complete record of children attending suitable education provision, all schools, including independent and unregistered schools, should be required to complete a census every term to match the regular school census and as with the mainstream school census. Data could then be shared with LAs at the pupil level. Overcoming these data collection and sharing problems is essential if LAs are ever to be able to meet their statutory duty to identify every child not receiving a suitable education. The measures in the Schools Bill, to give Ofsted further powers to register schools, are very welcome and will support this work.
- **A culture of sharing between organisations responsible for safeguarding children.** In addition to the national guidance mentioned above, all organisations responsible for feeding into the safeguarding process, including schools LAs, CCGs and family support services need to adopt a culture of data sharing for safeguarding. Children must not fall through the gaps and out of education because they cannot be identified in data systems. Organisational culture and willingness to explore solutions for data sharing in compliance with the Data Protection Act and UK-GDPR is essential and must be fostered by all Directors of Children's Services and senior leads.
- **Investment in technical solutions.** Throughout the deep dive research it was clear that technical solutions can both help and hinder data and information sharing. As set out above, data is held on multiple systems, and sharing information between systems is not always possible.

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- What this means in practice is that data sharing still relies on time-intensive manual processes with frontline staff such as teachers and social workers needing to manually create data files to share with another organisation. Investment is needed in technical solutions and when commissioning new technological solutions, a clear requirement should be that they are compatible with the most commonly used systems.
  - **Rationalising MISs to support attendance.** Rationalising the systems with requirements for easy sharing of information would result in significant cost savings to education services and LAs.
  - **Monitoring attendance data.** The DfE is trialling collecting daily attendance data from schools through a system which extracts data automatically, at no cost to the school.<sup>22</sup> As our interim report identified, the lag in attendance data reporting severely limits the ability of services to be proactive with falling attendance, rather they are only reacting to trends several months after the fact. The Children’s Commissioner supports the DfE trial and encourages all schools to sign-up. The DfE crucially is also making data available back to the sector, schools, Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and LAs will be able to view the data and use this essential insight to respond swiftly to drops in attendance and ensure support is in place as soon as possible.
  - **Addressing attendance codes.** The DfE should conduct a review of the application of attendance codes at a school level, with a view to providing further guidance to schools on how these should be used.

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<sup>22</sup> DfE, *Share your daily school attendance data*, 2022. Available at: [Share your daily school attendance data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/share-your-daily-school-attendance-data) Accessed on 01/06/2022.



# Conclusion and the way forward

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This report sets out an ambitious programme of work across these six ambitions where all arms of government, national and local need to work together to ensure that every child is accounted for and receiving a high-quality education and the right support.


As a first step, this is the moment to start looking forward to September and have a plan in place for every child who has not yet returned to school or is attending inconsistently. If a child doesn't attend on the first day of term it is much harder for them to re-engage.

LAs describe September as a turbulent time for school placements, with parents keeping their children home if they don't get their preferred school placement and children who were late applicants having to wait for school places to be assigned. Children need to be at school on the first day of term and we need to start acting now to ensure that children have what they need to feel confident and prepared for their new year. We also need to make sure that professionals working with children know what they can do to help, from supporting families to identify a suitable school place, to using available funds to purchase uniforms.

The Children's Commissioner will be running a campaign of engagement over the summer to ensure that children are confident to return to school in September. This will include:

- Guides for children and parents in different transition stages to help them to feel confident and know what to expect from their school.
- Information for professionals who support children with the actions they can take to support the children they are working with.



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- The Children’s Commissioner will work with DfE to produce a child-friendly version of the attendance guidance which is currently only aimed at LAs and schools.
  - An example of a child-friendly attendance policy, co-designed with children and young people.

The Children’s Commissioner will also be requesting data from all LAs on the education placements for their looked after cohort – to understand further the thousands of children in care where there is no clear information on whether they are receiving suitable education.

Finally, the Children’s Commissioner will publish a paper setting out the need for a consistent unique identifier for children and examining the technical and organisational challenges which will need to be addressed.

It is paramount that we work together as an alliance to ensure that the whole system is working at pace to prepare for the start of autumn term so that every child is supported to start, and stay in, school.

All agencies working with children should ensure that all children in their care have a plan to ensure attendance in September. Actions could include:

- Multi-agency meetings: each LA should convene all bodies with a duty of care to hold multi agency meetings, starting as soon as possible to prepare for the next academic year. The purpose of these meetings would be to establish joint attendance strategies, track children at risk of persistent absence, and to identify persistently absent children in other areas of the system to get them back into school (NHS, social care, school).
- Schools should identify where they can improve their approach to attendance in preparation for September. This could be through improving family engagement over the summer appointing an attendance worker or improving their



relationships with the LA and other community services in preparation for September.

- Social workers should be considering good school attendance as a key outcome metric and working to identify potential barriers to attendance for children in their care.

# Acknowledgements

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The Children's Commissioner is grateful to the local authorities who participated in the deep dive research for sharing their insights on anything attendance related and their huge support in organising our visits to different schools, organisations and community services. Thank you to the professionals working in these settings who shared their own experiences, connected us with young people and made the visits possible.

The team would also like to acknowledge a few organisations outside of these local authorities who helped in connecting with children whose voices mattered for this work. These are Team Square Peg; The Ladder School; Kingsgate School; Oakhill Secure Training Centre; Centre 33; Sheffield Young Carers and Caring Together. Most importantly, thank you to all the children and young people, as well as their parents, carers and guardians, who made the time to speak with us, and were willing to share their open and honest views and experiences. Without them, this work wouldn't have been possible.



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