

Attendance is everyone's business

Children's Commissioner's submission to the persistent
absence inquiry

February 2023

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



As Children's Commissioner it is my job to make sure that children's rights are respected and that their views and interests are heard across government. Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out that every child has the right to an education. Since becoming Children's Commissioner in March 2021, I have heard loud and clear from children across the country how important access to education is to them. School is where children prepare for their future, discover their passions both academic and extra-curricular, form friendships and develop the skills they will carry with them for the rest of their lives.

As one girl who responded to my survey, *The Big Ask*, which heard from 550,000 children making it the largest survey of its kind ever, said:

'People don't realise how much education is important for life in general. [...] if they don't learn in school, they might not be able to enjoy life to the fullest' – Girl, 14, The Big Ask.

The coronavirus pandemic had an undeniable impact on the education of children across the country, almost two years on from the first lockdown we are still trying to understand just how deep that impact runs. However, even before the pandemic, there has been a group of children who have struggled to attend school regularly and who have fallen through the gaps in the education system. While the

pandemic has influenced children's attendance through increased absence due to illness, in the autumn and spring of 2021/22, I estimate that **818,000** children were persistently absent, meaning that they missed at least 10% of possible school sessions, for reasons other than just illness.¹ In the same period, Department for Education statistics show that the number of children who missed 50% or more possible education sessions was almost double pre-pandemic levels at 110,000 compared to 57,000 in 2018/19². The Children's Commissioner is particularly concerned with children not receiving any education who are difficult to identify.

I have spent the past year relentlessly focused on these children, launching my 'Attendance Audit' in January 2022 to speak to children missing from and struggling to engage with education and find out what they need to get back into school. The audit has investigated all levels of the education system and has prioritised children's voices and experiences throughout. I have seen clearly that children aren't absent from school because they don't want to learn. On the contrary, they are desperate to learn but everyday thousands of children find themselves without the support that they need to engage in education and attend school. As one girl explained to my team recently:

'I physically could not get out of bed to get myself into school and it sucked because I love learning' – Girl, 15, attending an online alternative provision.

Children are ambitious for their futures so the systems in place to support them must be equally ambitious. My target for 100% attendance in schools is not about punishing or targeting parents if they, at present, do not have the support they need for their child to attend school. This is a challenge for the education and social care system. If government accepts even 1% of children being persistently absent, that is almost 100,000 children who are in need of support, but the system leaves them behind.

So, those responsible for this system, right across not just education and social care but health, housing, and benefits, from headteachers all the way to Secretaries of State, need to stand up and say that attendance is their business, and they will do what it takes to get children the support and care they need to access education. The road to seeing all children engaged in education also involves better information sharing, supported by the introduction of a consistent child identifier and sharing best practice.

I am extremely pleased that the Education Select Committee has launched this inquiry into children's absence from school. It will take a concerted, cross-government effort to address the barriers that children currently face to accessing education and it is right that the inquiry focuses on identifying what works to support children's attendance.

To support the inquiry, I have summarised here the key findings from my attendance audit reports: *'Where are England's Children? Interim findings from the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit'*, *'Voices of England's Missing Children'*, *'Back into school: New insights into school absence'* and *'Education history and attendance'*, alongside evidence from other investigations.

I am incredibly grateful to the children and young people who shared their experiences with me and informed the findings of the audit. Often, discussing barriers to education involved children sharing personal and very difficult circumstances with me and my team and I am always inspired by their courage and honesty. It is now up to us to listen to what they have said and take real action to give them the education that they deserve.

Why attendance is everyone's business

NATIONALLY

IN AUTUMN AND SPRING TERMS 2021/22

2 out of every 9 pupils were persistently absent

That's 1.6 million pupils who missed at least 10% of possible school sessions

EVEN WITH COVID IMPACT

818,000 children were persistently absent

for reasons other than just illness.



WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR IN CLASS?

Mental health needs

In the most recent year (2021-22) average waiting times between being referred to specialist mental health services and treatment beginning have **increased by more than a week since 2020-21: from 32 days to 40 days.**

'How far does it have to get? Sometimes you sit there and think what do I have to do to get the support, how far do I have to go?'

– Girl, 15, attending mainstream school discussing mental health provision.

Being a young carer

'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

SEND

67% of children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) worried that they would struggle more with their schoolwork post pandemic, compared to 44% of children without SEND.

'I have been under the hospital all my life going through lengthy operations with time healing wounds and medication I have to stay on for the rest of my life. It scares me that I have missed out on so much of my school life. [...] I am terrified I cannot get the job of my dreams, working with animals.'

– Girl, 16, The Big Ask.

A history of absence

Pupils who had previously been persistently absent had a rate of persistent absence over three times that of those who had no history of persistent absence (**51% persistently absent compared to 14% persistently absent in autumn and spring terms 2021/22**).

'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.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The Children's Commissioner has put together practical resources for children, parents and schools to support children who are struggling to engage in education:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/back-into-school/>

The Children's Commissioner's report, Attendance is everyone's business summarises the key interventions that children told us really worked.

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/attendance-is-everyones-business/>

Methodology

This report draws on several previous OCC research reports, published 2021 and 2022.

The Big Ask

The Big Ask is the largest ever survey of children, with over half a million responses. Launched by the Children's Commissioner in April 2021 the survey ran for 6 weeks and was open to any child in England aged 4-17. It was a publicly available survey, and children's participation was anonymous and voluntary³.

Daily attendance data analysis

The CCo collected daily attendance data for the autumn 2021 term from three Multi Academy Trusts (MATs). The MATs were geographically dispersed, including primary, secondary, and all-through schools, with a total sample size of around 32,000 children.⁴ The records were linked to the School Census⁵, absence and exclusions data⁶ and social care data⁷ to explore the relationship between education history and current absence.⁸

Administrative data analysis

The CCo linked absence data from the National Pupil Database to the School Census⁹, exclusions data¹⁰ and social care data¹¹ to explore the relationship between education history and current absence.¹²

Deep dives with 10 local authorities

To address the gaps in the nationally available data the Children's Commissioner's Office (CCo) carried out deep dives with 10 local authorities.¹³ The deep dives drew on qualitative research with both children and professionals and provided comprehensive insights into the groups of children who become persistently and severely absent from school and the unique challenges that they face. Over the course of the deep dives the CCo spoke with around 500 people including Directors of Children's Services, Attendance Officers, teachers, and children themselves.

Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) analysis

The CCo analysed just under 650 EHCPs from two local authorities. EHCPs give detailed insights into the care of children with SEND in England and this research therefore enabled comparison of the provision, services, and outcomes for children with SEND across and between LAs¹⁴.

Nationally representative survey

The CCo commissioned a nationally representative survey of 3,019 children in England aged 8-17 in March 2021, hereafter 'the 2021 survey'.¹⁵ The data was weighted to be representative by age, gender, SEND status, primary parent employment status, and region. This means that findings can be generalised to the general population of children.

Patterns of persistent absence

Overview of national data

The latest available national statistics relate to the autumn term and the spring term 2021/22¹⁶. The absence rate for both terms combined was 7.4%, in the autumn term it was 6.9%, increasing to 7.9% in the spring term. The absence rate is calculated by Department for Education (DfE) as the total number of education sessions missed due to absence for all pupils, as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions for all pupils. DfE attribute much of the increase in total absence compared to previous years (when absence was typically around 4-5%) to the increase in illness absence, including absence for positive coronavirus cases. However, an increase in illness does not account for the increase in unauthorised absence, which was 1.7%, compared to 1.2% in the same terms in 2018/19.

Absence was not evenly distributed by school type. Primary schools saw an absence rate of 6.2% in the 2021/22 autumn and spring term, compared to 8.6% in secondary schools and 13.2% in special schools.

Persistent absence, where a child missed 10% or more possible sessions, across the terms was high, 22.3% of pupils were persistently absent, equivalent to 1.6 million children. The increase on previous years was driven partly by coronavirus, with 11% of pupils missing 10% or more sessions due to illness absence alone. However, that still leaves an equivalent 11.3%, or **818,000 pupils** who were persistently absent for other reasons.¹⁷ Severe absence, measures as pupils who miss 50% or more of possible sessions, was also higher than previous years at 1.5%, equivalent to 110,000 pupils.

Again, this is not evenly distributed by school type, across the terms persistent absence was 18.2% in primary compared to 26.7% in secondary and 40.2% in special schools.

Children at risk of persistent absence

From the extensive research carried out by the Commissioner, the CCo has identified the following groups of children who are more at risk of absence from school.

Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND)

Schools should be the place where every child can find support for their needs, with routes into more specialist support where this is necessary. However, CCo research into attendance has found that often this is not the case, hindering children with SEND's attendance and ability to engage in education. The MAT daily attendance data analysis found that having an EHCP was associated with four additional days of absence per term, relative to not having any SEND support.

The CCo found that the majority of children with SEND were negatively impacted by the pandemic when it came to their education. The 2021 survey found that most children with SEND (60%) felt that their progress in school was worse than before the pandemic, compared to 50% of children without SEND. Additionally, 67% of children with SEND were worried that they would struggle more with their schoolwork post pandemic, compared to only 44% of children without SEND. Children with SEND were also found to have worse wellbeing than children without SEND. Using an internationally recognised survey tool for assessing possible depression, 37% of children with SEND were found to have possible depression compared to only 7% of children without SEND.

The research found that often a SEND need was being used as a reason to justify poor attendance. Some children with SEND can struggle to attend school regularly alongside healthcare appointments over which they have no control, as one girl who responded to *The Big Ask* explained:

'I have been under the hospital for all my life going through lengthy operations with time healing wounds to medication I have to stay on for the rest of my life and it scares me that I have missed out on so much of my school life. [...] I am terrified I cannot get the job of my dreams, working with animals. [...] I hope I can achieve my own' – Girl, 16, *The Big Ask*.

However, often instead of low attendance being the result of a child being unable to attend school, it was the result of the school being unable to deliver the required reasonable adjustments or provide a suitable learning environment respectful of the child's additional needs. As one girl who responded to *The Big Ask* said:

'I am dyslexic and I don't feel there is enough support and resources in school to help me. Teachers are not trained in dyslexia so it takes a long time to be diagnosed so you just feel stupid for a long time which makes you unhappy' – Girl, 12, *The Big Ask*.

Realistic attendance goals, which account for a child's needs and education ambitions should be part of every EHCP, with the support attached needed to make that goal a reality.

Mental health

Children spoke to the CCo during the Attendance Audit about a lack of mental health support in and outside of school. A 15-year-old girl who was a young carer, attending Alternative Provision (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.

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 properly treat their mental health and encourage their return to school and engagement in education.

'My anxiety got really bad and I couldn't go in after lockdown [...] I couldn't get into school because every time I would get panicky' – Girl, 15, attending an online AP.

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, one in nine children had a probable mental health disorder. That has now jumped to one in six.¹⁸ Inclusion managers and learning support workers interviewed as part of the deep dive said that they have noticed this increased prevalence of mental health need in their work.

While spending by the NHS on children's mental health increased by 4.4% between 2019/2020 and 2020/21 in real terms and 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.¹⁹ In the most recent year (2021-22) average waiting times between being referred to specialist mental health services and

treatment beginning have increased by more than a week since 2020-21, from 32 days to 40 days.²⁰ It is unsurprising then that one young girl asked during a focus group:

*'How far does it have to get? Sometimes to you sit there and you think what I have to actually do to get the support, how far do I have to go?' – Girl, 15, attending mainstream school.*²¹

Many schools and LAs have felt alone in having to deal with a growing crisis, with some schools 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 & Hove, for example, the local authority has funds to commission additional mental health support but faces a dearth of trained mental health practitioners.

Young carers

Young carers are children under the age of 18 who help to look after a relative with a disability, illness, mental health condition or drug or alcohol problem.²² During the Attendance Audit, the CCo met with many young carers who were persistently or severely absent due to trying to balance their responsibilities at home with their education. Even very young children in primary schools described missing school to provide care at home. Several young carers during focus groups across England 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.

Their situations could be exacerbated by school attendance policies. For instance, some schools give an after-school detention to children who are persistently late. For a young carer, this creates a strong disincentive to attend school, as they cannot help being late and can't afford to stay after school as they are required to provide care, so they make the decision to not attend school at all.

Children with a history of exclusion & absence

The education history analysis found that children's previous absence history is key to understanding their likelihood of being absent in a new term. Variance in previous absence explained more about variation in autumn and spring 2021/22 absence than any other observable pupil characteristic. Among pupils who had previously been persistently absent, the rate of persistent absence in the autumn and spring terms was 51%, over three times higher than the rate of persistent absence among pupils with no history of persistent absence (14%). Among pupils who had previously been persistently unauthorised absent, the rate of persistent unauthorised absence was 33% compared to just 2% of those who hadn't.

Additionally, having previously been suspended was associated with increased absence. Having been suspended was associated with two additional days of absence and having ever been permanently excluded was associated with one additional day or absence in a term. Children interviewed as part of the Attendance Audit explained that exclusion often didn't lead to additional support, meaning that the root cause of the behaviour was never properly addressed, nor appropriate support provided. 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.

Addressing the data gaps

The Attendance Audit found that multi-agency approach is needed to provide successful attendance interventions where support is brought together around a child, designed to meet their specific need or vulnerability. However, to do this effectively, different agencies need to be aware when a child becomes persistently absent from school. The current system, where local authorities find out what a child's attendance has been well after the end of a term through the School Census records, is not sufficient. When the CCo surveyed local authorities, only half were able to provide estimates for persistent and severe absence as they had set up bespoke data sharing arrangements with some or all their schools to allow them to receive more frequent attendance data. Further, the publication of attendance data is delayed up to 8 months after the end of term (for example, the full-year attendance data for the year ending in July is published in March of the following year).

The Commissioner has welcomed the DfE's introduction of a daily attendance data collection which allows data to be collected directly from all schools' electronic registers in a secure way without the need for manual input.²³ The Commissioner additionally supports extending access to the data to local authorities. This is essential to support truly joined-up approaches to attendance as the local authority is a key partner able to bring together multiple services around a school, a family and/or a child.

As recommended in the Independent Family Review, The Children's Commissioner wants to see the NHS number adopted as the consistent unique identifier and that this be rolled out across education and child protection services.²⁴

What works for improving attendance: child-centred solutions

The Attendance Audit identified a range of child-centred solutions for supporting children to improve their attendance and re-engage in education. These solutions are discussed in-depth in the report: *Voices of England's Missing Children*. This section provides an overview of some of the solutions identified by the Commissioner.

Teacher training

To achieve inclusive mainstream provision, every school should be a school for children with SEND and every teacher should be considered a teacher of children with SEND. As one 15-year-old girl explained during a focus group, when thinking about what could be improved in the school system:

'I think just teachers and people who work in schools being more trained on how to deal with people with asd/adhd/anxiety and things like that because they don't know enough about it so going to a mainstream school with things like that is very lonely' – Girl, 15, attending online Alternative Provision.

Young people also talked specifically about teachers having mental health training, as one 13-year-old girl described during a focus group:

'Especially like head of years and stuff should be trained for like panic attacks and stuff' – Girl, 13, attending online Alternative Provision.

In one focus group the young people assumed that teachers 'only' received 'one to two weeks' of mental health training and were shocked to learn that mental health first aid skills were not part of teacher training at all.

It is vital that schools have access to a range of professionals with the skills to support their pupils with their emotional and developmental needs, as well as their learning needs. This may mean teachers or pastoral staff receiving additional training in mental health first aid and SEND, or families of schools

employing additional specialist professionals such as mental health counsellors or educational psychologists.

Children who feel that their needs, whether SEND or mental health are being looked after are children who feel able to learn in school environments:

'[Alternative Provision] helped me get into a better place mentally while still learning and next year I'll be ok starting at a 6th form college (sic)' – Girl, 15, attending online Alternative Provision.

Getting Alternative Provision right

One of the most effective routes back into education that the CCo observed during the attendance audit was the use of Alternative Provision tailored to the needs of the pupil. The range of AP available across the country is vast and often highly localised. Types of AP include those which focus on behaviour interventions, providing medical care alongside education and offering specific sport training as a route into learning. Across all types of AP, the Commissioner heard how children's attendance had improved since they had started, as one girl said in a focus group:

'My attendance went from 25.3% in school to practically 100 in [Alternative Provision] (sic)' - Girl, 13, attending online Alternative Provision.

Alternative Provision can be full or part-time, on or off the school site. It can be extremely effective when it is run through a family of schools designed to meet the specific needs of their students. For example, a community college in Cambridgeshire recognised that COVID had impacted pupils' ability to cope with anxiety and has invested heavily in an onsite AP hub. The hub offers young people a more relaxed setting to keep them engaged in learning alongside targeted support to deal with behavioural and mental health issues. When full, the hub hosts ten 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 Alternative Provision.

Co-locating Alternative Provision 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 local authorities to support and cultivate quality AP for children that need additional support and to facilitate a smooth journey back into the classroom.

However, AP should not be a long-term solution as most children attending it do not have access to a broad and balanced curriculum, with many APs only offering a severely reduced set of GCSEs focusing on core subjects. Alternative Provision placements should be short-term interventions, for example for a maximum of six weeks, with a clear structure in place where the goal of the placement is set at the start and a review of the progress and the needs of the student takes place before a decision to extend the placement or return to mainstream schooling.

Building a team around the school

Fundamental to any model for improving attendance is improving the support available to children and their families. Support needs to be co-ordinated and meet children where they are, meaning multiple agencies working together and delivering support through local facilities familiar to the child, such as schools or family hubs.

'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 local authority provision and school-level – to have quicker access, lower threshold of access and prevention before escalation' - Schools partnership manager.

The attendance audit identified 'team around the school' models as a successful strategy for delivering joined up support. Implemented by local authorities, teams around the school gives 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.

Local authorities are crucial to building 'teams around the school'. They need to ensure they are establishing robust teams around the schools in their area. Local authorities can 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.

References

¹ Note: CCo estimates that 818,000 children were persistently absent in autumn and spring terms 2021/22 not only due to illness, given there were 7.2 million pupil enrolments, 22.3% of pupils were persistently absent and 11% of pupils were persistently absent due to illness alone.

² DfE, *Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn and spring terms, 2022*, [Link](#).

³ Children's Commissioner for England, *The Big Answer*, 2021, [Link](#).

⁴ Children's Commissioner for England, *Back into school: New insights into school absence – evidence from three multi-academy trusts*, 2022, [Link](#).

⁵ DfE, *Complete the school census, 2023*, [Link](#).

⁶ DfE, *Pupil exclusion statistics: methodology, 2022*, [Link](#).

⁷ DfE, *Children looked after in England including adoptions: methodology, 2022*, [Link](#).

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¹⁰ DfE, *Pupil exclusion statistics: methodology, 2022*, [Link](#).

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¹⁵ Children's Commissioner for England, *Experiences of children with SEND: findings from a nationally representative survey, 2022*, [Link](#).

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¹⁷ Note: CCo estimates that 818,000 children were persistently absent in autumn and spring terms 2021/22 not only due to illness, given there were 7.2 million pupil enrolments, 22.3% of pupils were persistently absent and 11% of pupils were persistently absent due to illness alone.

¹⁸ NHS Digital, *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021 – wave 2 follow up to the 2017 survey, 2021*, [Link](#). Accessed 16/01/2023.

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²¹ Children’s Commissioner for England, *A Head Start: early support for children’s mental health*, 2022, [Link](#).

²² NHS, *Being a young carer: your rights*, webpage, [Link](#).

²³ DfE, *Guidance: Share your daily school attendance data*, 2022, [Link](#).

²⁴ Children’s Commissioner, *Utilising data to improve children’s outcomes*, Annex to A positive approach to a parenting: Part 2 of the Independent Family, [Link](#).



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