

## Briefing on school attendance in England

Improving school attendance is an absolute priority for the Children's Commissioner. Children are offered the best start to further their ambitions, relationships and learning when they are in school.

However, despite the importance of being in school, following the pandemic school absence rates have become stuck at crisis levels. Last year, over 1 in 5 children were persistently absent, meaning they missed on average at least a day a fortnight in school.

In the Attendance Audit, the Children's Commissioner talked to hundreds of children who are regularly absent from school. Children aren't absent from school because they don't want to learn. They are desperate to learn yet everyday thousands of children find themselves without the support that they need to engage in education.

Attendance needs to be everybody's business – all agencies involved in supporting children must make tackling school absences their priority.

### Attendance figures for 2022/23:

- In 2022/23, the overall absence rate was 7.5%.
  - Before the pandemic, in 2018/19, the overall absence rate was 4.7%.
- 22.3% of all pupils were persistently absent in 2022/23, meaning that they missed on average at least one day a fortnight.
  - This equates to 1.8 million children who were regularly missing education.
  - In 2018/19, this figure stood at 10.9%.
  - Children with additional vulnerabilities are more likely to be absent from school. In 2022/23, 37.9% of children eligible for free school meals, 37.8% of those with an Education, Health and Care Plan, and 33.4% of children with special educational needs support were persistently absent.
- Over 140,000 children were severely absent in Spring 2022, meaning that they missed at least half of their education.

### The drivers of school absence:

- The Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit found that the reasons for school absences are complex:
  - For some, the pandemic has led to disengagement. Schools and families have said that they feel like the social contract between parents and schools has been broken.

- Many children detailed their wait for specialist support such as mental health support or an Education, Health, and Care Plan.
- In some instances, children are struggling with issues in their home environment. In the Attendance Audit, the Children's Commissioner heard from young carers who struggled to attend school regularly.

### **The costs of school absence:**

- It is vital that we tackle school absences jointly as regular non-attendance carries considerable short and long-term costs to both the individual and to society.
- New research from the Children's Commissioner, published last week, has shown the link between post-pandemic absenteeism and poor academic attainment.
  - School attendance data from 2020/21 and 2021/22 and 2022 GCSE results data shows that in 2022, only 5% of children who were severely absent in both Years 10 and 11 achieved at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths.
  - This is compared to 78% of children who were rarely absent in both years who achieved at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths and 36% of children who were persistently absent.
- Children who are persistently absent are also more likely to end up Not in Education, Employment, or Training, according to research from the Department for Education.
- Children who end up in the criminal justice system have some of the highest rates of school absences.
  - In 2019/20, 81% of children who committed any offence and 85% of those who committed a serious violence offence had a history of persistent absenteeism.

### **The way forward:**

- The Kings Speech did not include any legislation which would tackle the school absence crisis. I continue to want to see the children not in school register and the statutory guidance on attendance put on a statutory footing at the earliest opportunity.
- The government should introduce legislation to make the new guidance on working together to improve attendance statutory and to introduce a unique data identifier for every child, to facilitate better data matching between health, education and social care to ensure that no child falls through the gaps.