Children Missing Education: The Unrolled Story

September 2024

Table of contents

Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza

Every child has a fundamental right to an education, yet more than 100,000 children each year are being denied this basic right. These children, many of whom have slipped through the cracks of our education system, are not just numbers—they are young lives at risk of being forgotten. I am deeply concerned about this situation, as it reflects a troubling gap in our ability to protect and support some of the most vulnerable members of our society. Local authorities, despite their best efforts, are struggling with insufficient resources and inadequate powers to track and support these children.

This concern drove me to conduct a detailed investigation, and my report sheds light on the experiences of children missing from education. It reveals that these children are particularly vulnerable, yet the response from some local authorities is not urgent enough. Far too often, children fall off the radar.

This is why I have dedicated myself to uncovering the truth about the journeys of children missing from education. My report lays bare the harsh realities: these children are some of the most vulnerable in our society, yet there is insufficient support available to return them to school. In too many instances, there is a lack of urgency in starting investigations, and the importance of safeguarding is not always given the attention it deserves.

I am committed to using my role as Children's Commissioner to make sure every child's right to education is protected. Many local authority teams are working hard to locate these children, but they are limited

by a lack of resources and access to essential information. Some do not even have basic data, like council tax records, which hampers their efforts. My report clearly highlights the need for a unique ID and nationwide data sharing to make sure that no child falls off the radar.

We must do much more to help these children to reengage with education. The way we currently handle long-term cases of children missing from education is not working. In too many areas, there seems to be a lack of curiosity about what has happened to these children, many of whom have already faced significant disruptions in their education. The current system is more focused on legal sanctions and process rather than the academic and pastoral support needed to help children to reengage with education. These are some of the most vulnerable children, and they deserve our full attention and support.

As Children's Commissioner, I am determined to bring about the changes needed to address this issue. This report outlines practical steps to prevent children from going missing in the education system and to help those who have already fallen through the cracks. By reforming our education system with a focus on inclusion, we can ensure that every child has the chance to reach their full potential.

Executive summary

"I've been out of school for a year… I want an education and not to have to fight to obtain this." – Boy not in school, age 9.

In March 2022, the Children's Commissioner launched her Attendance Audit, a national investigation to understand the educational experiences of children not regularly attending school and those without a school place. Its initial report provided the first ever national picture of where children were missing education in England. The report found that many local authorities were not confident in their estimated figures of children missing education. As part of the investigation, local authorities told the office that they lacked the powers they needed to track vulnerable children who were missing education.

The office followed this initial investigation with a further report on the destinations of children who leave school rolls. 'Lost in Transition', published in February 2024, estimated that between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23, 2,868 children left the state education system in England and became a child missing education (CME). The total number of children who are missing education at any time in an academic year is much higher – this figure was 117,100 in 2022/23.

This report builds on these previous investigations. It provides the first in-depth analysis of the procedures local authorities follow to support children missing education. This report provides new evidence about the pupil characteristics, educational histories, and educational destinations of children known or suspected to be missing education.

This report's findings show:

- **There are significant inconsistencies in the use of the term "children missing education" between local authorities, which can lead to children falling through the gaps.** Different local definitions of this term hamper any attempts to collect reliable data on children missing education and make it more difficult for local authorities to work cross-border to identify and support children missing education. In some areas, a child must have been missing for as much as two months before the local authority opens a child missing education case.

- **Few local authorities take proactive steps to prevent children from going missing from education.** In the office's desk-based review of children missing education policies, only 33 local authorities out of 129 listed specific actions they took to prevent children missing education.

- **Children who left the state education system and became a child missing education were more likely than other children in state-funded schools to live in deprived neighbourhoods, have a special educational need, have a social, emotional or mental health need, or be known to social care.** Children identified as CME were 1.5 times more likely to live in the most deprived neighbourhoods, 1.4 times as likely to have an identified special educational need, and 2.7 times more likely to be a child in need, relative to the cohort of children in state-funded education.

- **Children who leave state education and become a child missing education were more likely than other children in state-funded schools to have attended a school rated 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' by Ofsted.** They are more likely than other pupils to have had poor school attendance or have been previously excluded from school.

- **After a period of missing education, the most common destination of children was outside England.** Over a third (36%) of children previously missing education had left England, while 24% remained a child missing education, 24% entered registered education, and 6% home education. Most (75%) of those who returned to registered education returned to the same school they had left.

- **Local authorities lack consistent access to the information they need to support their search for children missing education.** Local authority Children Missing Education teams must rely on goodwill and relationships with other services to try to find children when they go missing. They do not have the power to see school rolls. Long waits after requests or lack of access to other data sources can impede attempts to investigate children missing education. They may even struggle to access data like council tax records from within their own local authority.

- **It is common for children to be missing education for long periods.** Published Department for Education data shows that, while 29% of open CME cases had been open for up to 4 weeks, over

39% had been open for over 12 weeks (a whole school term), including 13% which had been missing for over a year.

- **There is very little one-to-one support available to support children missing education to reintegrate into school after a period of missing education**. Only three local authorities' policies stated that they had a key worker or equivalent to assist children who had been missing education to reintegrate into education if they needed additional support.

- **Where support is available to support children to reintegrate, it is inefficient and difficult to use**. Local authorities told the office that the legal mechanisms that were available to compel children missing education to return to school, such as School Attendance Orders, were often inefficient and difficult to use.

- **Often, when a child could not easily be located through initial checks or conversations with other agencies, local authorities said they stopped actively searching for the child.** If there were known safeguarding risks, a case would be referred to social services, but if not, the case would be archived. Only a small minority of local authorities would escalate the case to other forums and continue to actively search for the child to investigate the educational destinations of children who stopped attending school.

This report calls for the government, local authorities and schools to take a more robust and consistent approach to preventing, investigating and supporting children missing education. The office's policy recommendations include:

- **Improving the understanding of children missing education**

  o Adopting a consistent national definition of children missing education for all local authorities.

  o Issuing guidance on children missing out on suitable education through unsuitable unregistered alternative provision placements or inappropriate part-time timetables.

- **Preventing children from missing education**

  o Using data to identify children at risk of missing education.

- o Improving practices around off-rolling children.

- o Proactively supporting children at risk of missing education.

- o Tracing children missing education.

- **Developing a coherent approach to trace children who go missing from education**

  - o Creating a reliable database for children missing education cases.

  - o Adopting a consistent approach to data sharing, ultimately through adopting a unique child ID shared across public services.

  - o Establishing a consistent risk-based approach to triaging untraced children missing education cases.

- **Supporting children to return to education**

  - o Ensuring there are sufficient suitable school places.

  - o Speeding up the process to return children to education.

  - o Removing barriers to returning to education.

The Children's Commissioner hopes that these recommendations, if implemented, would significantly reduce the number of children missing education, improve access to suitable school places, and protect children's right to an education.

Key terms

The following list provides definitions of key terms and acronyms used in this report. Where possible, the definitions have been taken directly from government guidance which is cited in the references.

- **Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS):** These services assess and treat children and young people with emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties. They range from basic pastoral care, such as identifying mental health problems, to specialist in-patient care for those who are severely mentally ill.[1]

- **Children in need:** an umbrella term referring to a child with a social worker, usually because they are looked after, on a child protection plan, or on a child in need plan. In legislation, a child in need is a child who is unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health or development will be significantly impaired without the provision of children's social care services, or the child is disabled.[2]

- **Children missing education (CME):** Department for Education guidance defines children missing education as children of compulsory school age who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school.[3]

- **Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs):** a local authority may issue an EHCP for a pupil who needs more support than is available through SEN Support. This will follow a statutory assessment process whereby the local authority considers the child's SEN and any relevant health and social care needs; sets out long term outcomes; and specifies provision which will deliver additional support to meet those needs.[4]

- **Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI):** the IDACI is a measure of income deprivation affecting families with children aged 0 to 15. The definition of low income used includes both those people that are out-of-work, and those that are in work but who have low earnings.[5]

- **Independent school:** Independent schools (also known as private schools) charge fees to attend instead of being funded by the government. They are not maintained by the government, and do not have to follow the national curriculum.[6]

- **Looked after children:** a child is looked after by their local authority if they are: provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours; subject to a care order (a court order placing a child in the care or supervision of a local authority); or subject to a placement order (a court order allowing a local authority to place a child for adoption).[7]

- **Persistently absent:** a school pupil is persistently absent if they are absent for 10% or more, but less than 50%, of possible sessions in school. A session is a morning or afternoon at school. So a persistently absent full-time pupil would be absent for at least one day per fortnight on average.[8]

- **Rarely absent:** a pupil is rarely absent if they are absent for less than 10% of possible sessions at school. A session is a morning or afternoon at school.

- **School2School database:** the School2School system is a piece of software hosted by the Department for Education which allows schools and local authorities to securely share information about pupils.[9]

- **SEN Support:** SEN Support means support in a school that is additional to, or different from, the support generally made for other children of the same age. It is provided for pupils who are identified as having a learning difficulty or a disability that requires extra or different help to that normally provided as part of the school's usual curriculum offer. A pupil on SEN Support will not have an Education, Health and Care Plan.[10]

- **Severely absent:** a pupil is severely absent if they are absent for 50% or more of possible sessions in school. A session is a morning or afternoon at school.

- **Special educational needs (SEN):** a child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.

  A child of compulsory school age or a young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she:

- o has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or

- o has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions.[11]

- **State education:** in the context of this report, 'state education' collectively refers to state-funded schools and local authority commissioned alternative provision. These are the settings within the coverage of the data collection and the analysis conducted for this report.

- **The Fair Access Protocol (FAP):** the FAP is a mechanism developed by each local authority to place vulnerable children who are unable to find a school place through in-year admissions.[12]

- **Unique Pupil Number:** a unique pupil number (UPN) identifies each pupil attending a state-funded school in England.[13]

- **Unregistered alternative provision:** Local authorities and schools can arrange alternative provision and special educational provision in settings which are not schools or colleges. This is commonly known as unregistered alternative provision because, unlike schools or colleges, this type of provision is not subject to a national registration scheme or inspection framework.[14]

- **Virtual School Heads:** the role of the Virtual School Head is to promote the educational achievement of children with a social worker through the provision of information and advice to their parents, educators and others.[15] Each local authority has a Virtual School Head.

1.   Background

1.1   What is a child missing education?

Under 436A of the Education Act 1996,[16] local authorities have a duty to make arrangements to establish the identities of children in their area who are of compulsory school age but who are:

- not registered pupils at school; and

- are not receiving suitable education otherwise.

Children who meet both conditions are commonly referred to as 'children missing education' (CME).[17]

While this report uses the same term as the government throughout, it is worth noting that local authorities themselves sometimes use a different concept of 'missing education' in their CME policies. The office's desk-based review found that 40% of all local authorities had a different definition of CME.

Many local authorities stipulated that children had to be missing education for a significant period of time before they would view them as a CME. In two local authorities, children had to be missing for two months before the local authority would pick up the case and treat the child as a CME. This was the longest time period identified by this study.

Others were more inclusive in their definition: local authorities commonly referred to children who were in education with a known address but regularly absent or those on part-time timetables as CME. In several instances, local authorities cited Ofsted's 2013 research on Pupils Missing Out on Education[18] as the basis for their extended definition.

The office heard that these inconsistencies in definition could create confusion and sometimes led to vulnerable children who moved from one area to another slipping through the net. Local authorities said that if a neighbouring local authority had a more limited definition of a child missing education, it could be very difficult to persuade a receiving local authority to investigate a CME case that had become their responsibility. This was especially challenging when the local authority stipulated that there had to be evidence that the child was definitely living in a registered address in their area.

1.2 How many children are missing education?

The Department for Education does not gather national child-level data on children missing education (CME) and it is difficult to estimate the true number of CME because of these inconsistencies in definitions. The Children's Commissioner's report 'Voices of England's missing children'[19] found that not all local authorities were able to provide an estimate of their number of CME aged 11 to 15.

Given the lack of confidence in estimates, it is difficult to gain an accurate number of the overall CME population, motivating the data request conducted for this study. Previous sources of estimates, described below, are the Department for Education's 'Lost Pupil Database', and the Department's aggregate statistics collected from local authorities.

The Lost Pupil Database

The Lost Pupil Database is an area of the School2School system, a piece of software hosted by the Department for Education. It allows schools and local authorities to securely share information about pupils and should provide a comprehensive view of the total number of children missing education in England. According to the guidance, schools and local authorities should update the School2School database each time they identify a CME and data on the children who are identified as CME should be added to each local authority's Lost Pupil Database.

However, throughout the office's research, local authorities told us that the School2School software, which sits behind the Lost Pupil Database, was often not used correctly. Local authorities told the office that schools and local authorities sometimes failed to update the database with new information, stating that they found it difficult to use and sometimes saw it as an unreliable source of information. Therefore, any figures derived from this data source should be treated with a degree of caution.

While the Department for Education does not release regular statistics from the Lost Pupil Database, a Freedom of Information request revealed that on 22 May 2023 there were 94,869 Common Transfer Files stored in the area of School2School commonly known as the 'Lost Pupils Database'. Of these, there were 87,183 unique pupil records.[20]

Department for Education figures

In 2022, the Department for Education first began collecting voluntary data from local authorities about their children missing education populations. These figures suggest that an estimated 117,100 children were CME at any time in 2022/23, and 33,000 children were estimated to be CME on Autumn 2023/24 term census date.[21]

Both figures reflect an increase when compared to the previous year, which was the first year of national data collection by the Department. In 2021/22, 94,900 children were estimated to be CME at any time in the year and 24,700 children were estimated to be CME on Autumn 2022/23 term census date.

While this increase may in part be related to improved data quality and recording practices from this new data collection, local authorities told the office that they had started to witness an increase in their CME population in recent years. Since the Department for Education's national data collection only started in Autumn 2022 and there is no other comparable national data source, it is difficult to make any inferences about wider trends in the CME population.

The Children's Commissioner's data request

In Summer 2023, the Children's Commissioner's office issued a statutory data request to all local authorities in England. The office had identified a cohort of 81,940 children who, according to the Department for Education's administrative data, had dropped off schools rolls sometime in the period between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23. The data request asked local authorities to tell the Children's Commissioner these children's last-known destination, and whether each child had been known or suspected to be a CME prior to that destination.[i]

Through this, the Children's Commissioner learned that 2,868 children were last known to be a child missing education. A further 8,708 children had been children missing education at some point during the year, but their last-known destination was other than missing education. This gives a total of 11,576

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[i] Additional details can be found in the methodology at the end of this report.

children who had been missing education at some point during the academic year, regardless of their last-known destination.

2.   Understanding the children missing education

2.1   The pupil characteristics of children missing education

Published local authority CME policies list several at-risk vulnerable groups who are more likely to become a CME.

The at-risk groups listed in the local authority policies reviewed included:

- children known to social care, including children in need, those on a child protection plan, and looked after children;

- young carers;

- homeless children;

- children who had newly arrived from abroad;

- refugee children, especially unaccompanied children seeking asylum;

- children living in refuge placements following domestic abuse;

- traveller children; and

- children in highly mobile families.

In the Children's Commissioner's November 2023 report, 'Lost in Transition',[22] the office found that children who left state education and became CME were more likely to come from deprived neighbourhoods, have a special educational need, or be known to social care.

2.1.1   Age

Children in the sample whose last-known destination was missing education were more likely than others to be age 10 at the start of the academic year, meaning they were transitioning to secondary school. Local authorities told the office that the transition to secondary school was a common time for

children to become a child missing education as sometimes children did not receive the secondary school placement they wanted, and this could lead to children missing out on suitable education.

2.1.2 Ethnicity

In the report 'Lost in Transition', the office identified that CME were disproportionately likely to be black, mixed or other, and disproportionately unlikely to be white. However, the office's conversations with local authorities found that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children were commonly seen as groups at risk of becoming CME.

The further analysis below shows that, of children with a white ethnicity, those who were Gypsy/Roma, Irish, travellers of Irish heritage, or from other white ethnic groups, were disproportionately likely to become a child missing education, compared to white British children (Figure 1). The office's analysis also shows that among black children, those with an African ethnic background were disproportionately likely to become CME (Figure 2); as were Asian children with an Indian or other Asian ethnic background (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Ethnic background of white children whose last-known destination was to be known or suspected to be missing education.
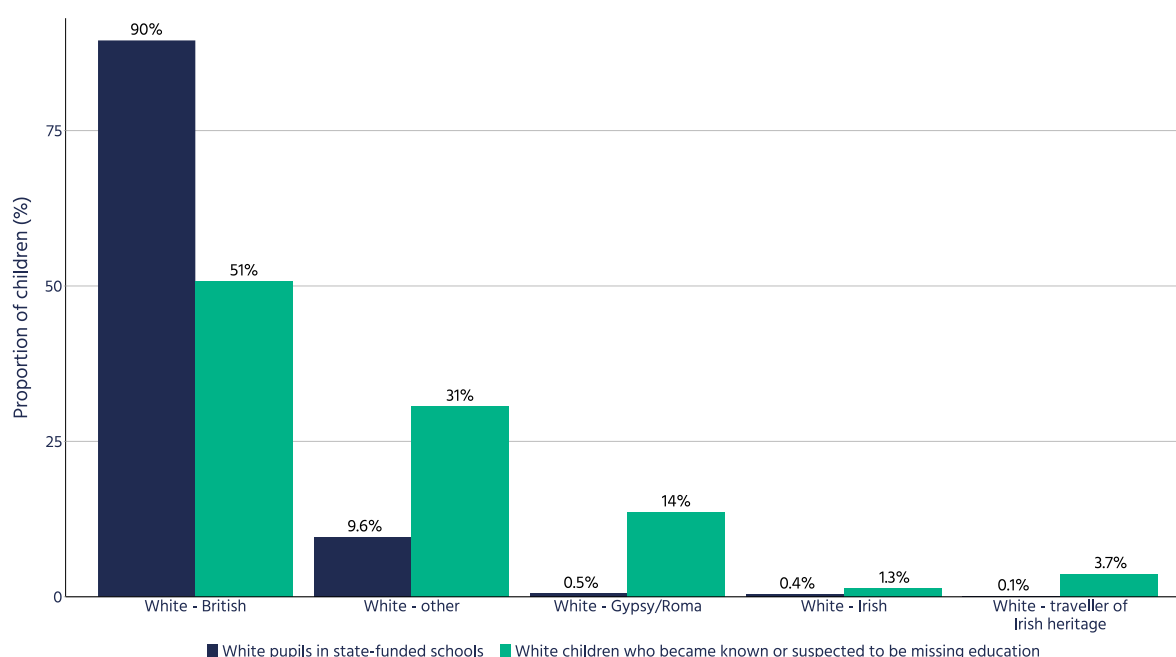
Figure 2: Ethnic background of black children whose last-known destination was to be known or suspected to be missing education.
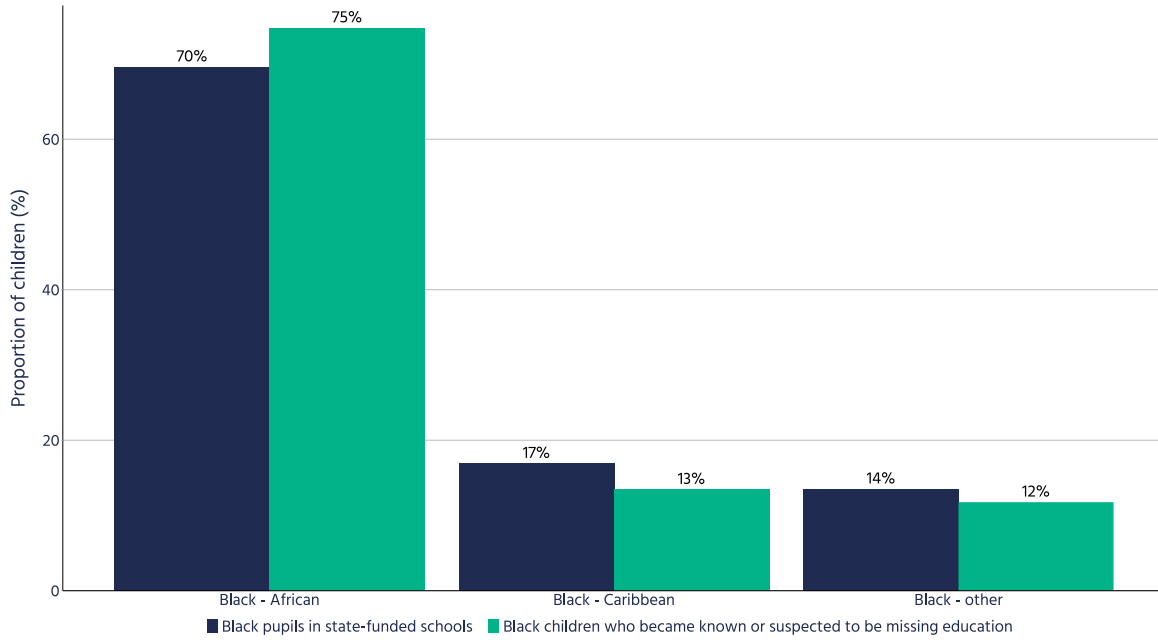

Figure 3: Ethnic background of Asian children whose last-known destination was to be known or suspected to be missing education.
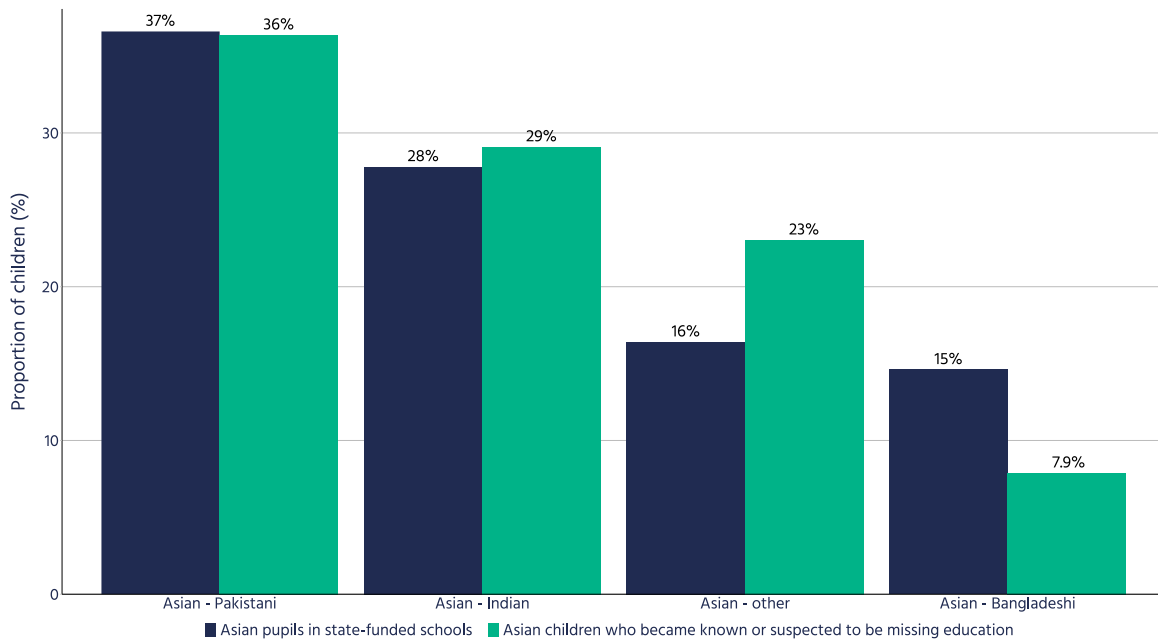
Note: due to the small number of children missing education with a Chinese ethnicity, that ethnic group has been excluded to protect confidentiality.

2.1.3   Deprivation

The office's analysis in 'Lost in Transition' showed that children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods were overrepresented in the cohort of children identified as CME. Further analysis of this cohort reveals just how disadvantaged these children are. Children who left state education and became CME were overwhelmingly from the lowest deciles of the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI).

They were 1.5 times as likely as other children to be in the most deprived neighbourhoods: 20% of all children in the sample whose last-known destination was missing education came from the bottom decile of IDACI (Figure 4). This means these children lived in neighbourhoods more deprived than at least 90% of all other neighbourhoods.

Figure 4: Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index of children whose last-known destination was known or suspected to be missing education.
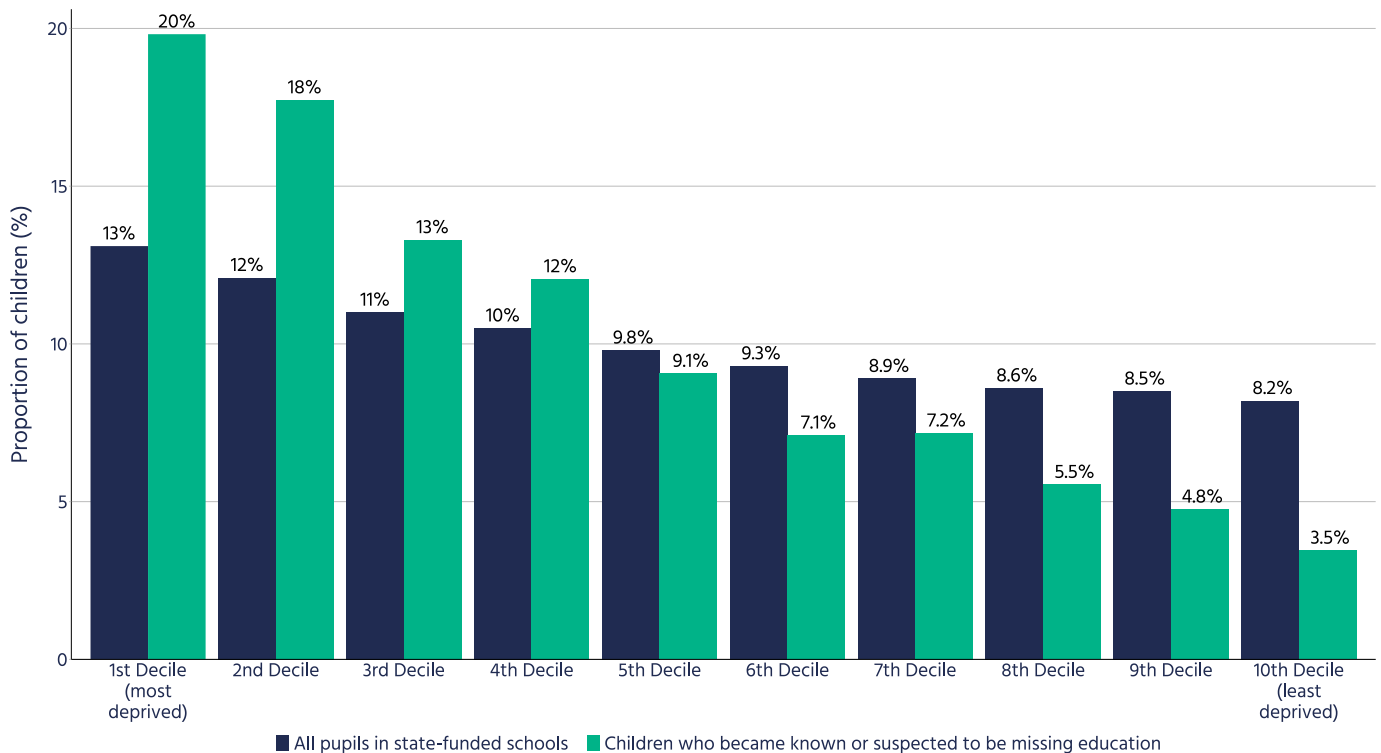
2.1.4   Special educational needs

The office's analysis in 'Lost in Transition' showed that children with special educational needs (SEN) were disproportionately likely to become a child missing education. 22% of all children whose last-known destination was missing education had some form of SEN, compared to 16% of the population in state-funded schools.

Further analysis of this cohort for this report shows that this overall picture conceals differences within the group of children with SEN, with some more likely and others less likely to become CME (Figure 5). Children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties, and children with moderate learning difficulties, were overrepresented in the cohort of CME. Of all children with SEN in the sample whose last-known destination was missing education, 29% had a primary need of social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH), compared to 19% of the population of children with SEN in state-funded schools who had a primary need of SEMH.

Figure 5: Primary need of children with SEN whose last-known destination was known or suspected to be missing education.

Legend: ■ Pupils with SEN in state-funded schools ■ Children with SEN who became known or suspected to be missing education
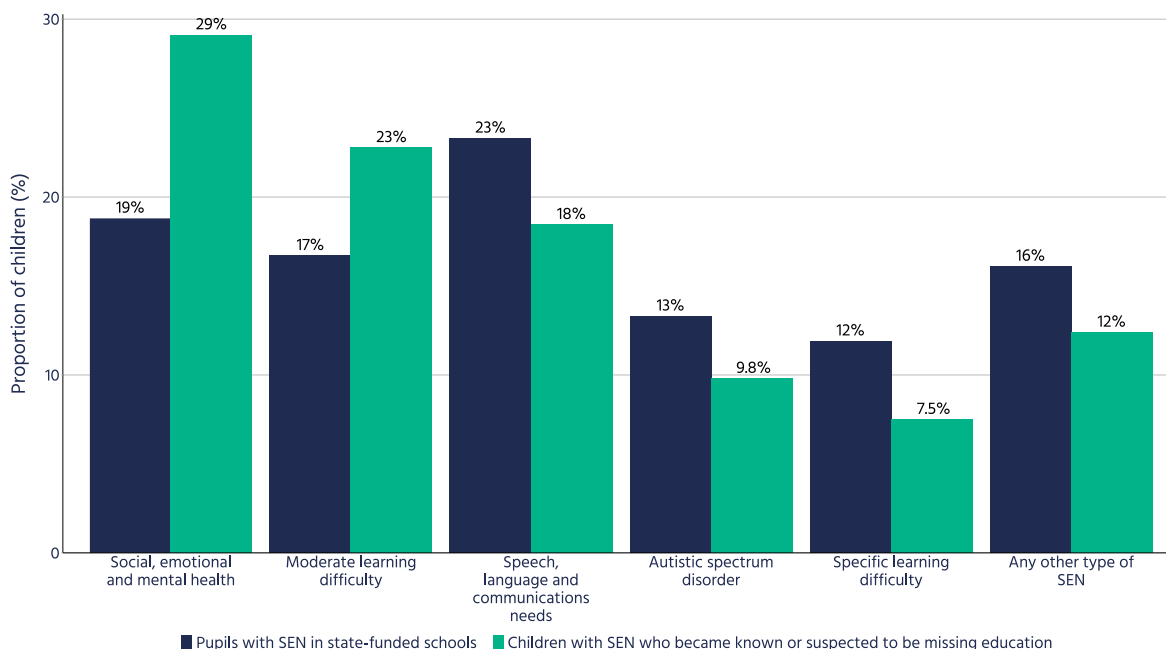
2.1.5   Social care involvement

The office's analysis for 'Lost in Transition' showed that children known to social care were much more likely to become a child missing education, compared to their peers. The proportion of CME recorded as a child in need was 2.7 times higher than the proportion of children recorded as a child in need in state-funded schools.

Specifically, 7.1% of all children whose last-known destination was missing education were recorded as a child in need on 31 March 2022. This compares to 2.6% of all state-funded pupils.

Further, the proportion of children known or suspected to be a CME who were looked after children was about double the proportion of pupils in state-funded education who were looked after. Of the children in the sample whose last-known destination was missing education, 1.4% were looked after on 31 March 2022, compared to 0.6% of pupils in state-funded education who were looked after.

2.2   The educational histories of children missing education

In this report's analysis, the office only captured information on children who were previously on the rolls of a state-funded school or local authority commissioned alternative provision who left and became a CME, collectively referred to as 'state education' within this report. However, there are other routes to becoming a child missing education, where the child did not start in the state education system.

In some cases, children become a child missing education after leaving an independent school. Local authorities told the office that these schools do not always follow local authority procedures for referring a child missing education.

Local authorities also told us that they get CME referrals from children who arrive new to the area or new to the country who do not secure suitable education, or from children whose home education was deemed unsuitable. Local authorities told us that where their populations are more transient these pathways into becoming a CME were more common than the state education to CME route.

Within each pathway, there were a range of different reasons why a child had become a CME. Through a desk-based review of local authority policies, the office identified the following reasons listed by local authorities.

Examples of how children became CME included situations where children:

Were not previously in a school setting

- **Did not enrol in suitable education at age 5, the compulsory school age.** Sometimes parents did not get the primary school place that they had wanted, which may lead to children not enrolling in a school at age 5.

- **Moved to England from another country and did not find a suitable school.** Local authorities told the office that in some areas there was a growing immigrant community and that they had been unable to plan for their arrival, which meant that they were suffering from a shortage of school places. In some cases, they had managed to get schools to increase their published admission number to accommodate this. The office also heard of instances of refugees arriving and not being given the support needed to navigate the education system and enrol in school. Local authorities said that they did not get information on children who arrived in their area and so children arriving from abroad sometimes flew under the radar and consequently did not receive a suitable education.

- **Were in receipt of unsuitable home education.** Where local authorities have conducted checks on home education and do not believe that the home education provided is full-time, efficient, and suitable as required in the Home Education guidance,[23] a child in receipt of said education would become a child missing education. Local authorities said that this was becoming a more common referral route due to the increasing numbers of children moving into home education because of dissatisfaction with schools in their area. Local authorities stated that sometimes these families were not always well equipped to home educate.

Were previously in a school setting

- **Did not successfully transition between primary and secondary school.** The office heard from local authorities that this might happen when a child did not receive their preferred place through school admissions or changed their mind about their school preference.

- **Moved from one local authority to another and did not find a suitable school.** Local authorities said that this was becoming a bigger problem as some schools such as secondaries

were increasingly at capacity. The office was also told that this could be a problem in cases where children were moved into temporary accommodation, in this scenario sometimes children were not enrolled in school because parents thought their move would be short term. When children move from one local authority to another at non-standard transition points, their families sometimes have trouble applying to schools. Local authorities said that children who arrived new to an area would have limited choice about which school to go to. Sometimes a suitable school could not be found, this was especially likely in instances where a child had special educational needs and needed extra support. In other cases, the parents did not want to send their child to the school they were offered.

- **Returned from extended leave.** The office heard that when families took children out of school for an extended leave they could sometimes lose their school place. Schools can deregister children if they have been continuously absent for 20 days where the absence has not been authorised,[24] the school does not have grounds to think the child is ill or missing school for an unavoidable cause, and where both the school and local authority have made reasonable enquiries and have been unable to locate the child. Local authorities told us that sometimes children who had family abroad would go for an extended visit and then return to the local authority to find that they no longer had a place at their previous school. Some local authorities told us they had started to run awareness raising initiatives to encourage parents to not take extended leave while children were of compulsory school age.

- **Returned to education from the secure estate.** These children return to school sometimes with additional needs and often at non-standard transition points. Schools may be reluctant to take a child who has been in custody.

- **Stopped attending school altogether.** While severe absence is not the same as being a child missing education, the office did hear instances where severe absenteeism had led to a withdrawal from school. In some areas, local authorities were clear that children could only be classified as a CME if the child had been continuously absent for twenty days and the school could not locate the child at their home address. Children who were identifiable at home but had a long spell of absence had to follow the procedures around school attendance, rather than the CME procedures.

- **Had experienced a breakdown in SEN arrangements.** The office heard that when one or more parties did not comply with arrangements in EHCPs or were unable to meet a child's needs through their provision, sometimes children would go without suitable education.

- **Were on the point of exclusion and were persuaded to withdraw from school.** When schools encourage parents to withdraw their child for reasons not in the best interest of the child, this is known as off-rolling. The office heard that sometimes parents are encouraged to withdraw their children under the threat that if they did not then their child would be permanently excluded instead. Local authorities told the office that parents wanted to avoid their children experiencing the stigma or stress of being excluded from school.

- **Had become a missing person.** These could be instances where a child had run away or where a family had gone missing.

It is not known how many CME faced each of the situations described above; this is a potential avenue for future research.

2.2.1   Characteristics of previous school

The office's previous report found that CME were more likely than other children to have histories of poor attendance or to have attended a school which was rated 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' by Ofsted.[25]

The office's analysis in 'Lost in Transition' showed that children who became a child missing education were more likely than all pupils to have come from schools with lower Ofsted ratings.

This pattern was particularly pronounced in schools where multiple children left the school roll and became a CME. Of the 14,139 schools in the office's data collection, less than 0.5% had 8 or more pupils who were CME at any time between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23.[ii] Of these schools, all were state-funded mainstream schools, and they were less likely than all inspected schools to have been

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[ii] The exact number of schools in the office's data with 8 or more pupils who became a CME will be an undercount, as the office sampled approximately half of all in-scope children, to reduce the burden of the data collection on local authorities.

rated 'Good' by Ofsted, and more likely to have been rated 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' (Figure 6). They had a suspension rate of 9.68 per 100 pupils, notably higher than the national average of 6.91.[26]

Figure 6: Ofsted ratings of schools where 8 or more pupils were CME at any time between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23.

Legend: ■ All schools inspected by Ofsted   ■ Inspected schools with 8 or more pupils who became a CME
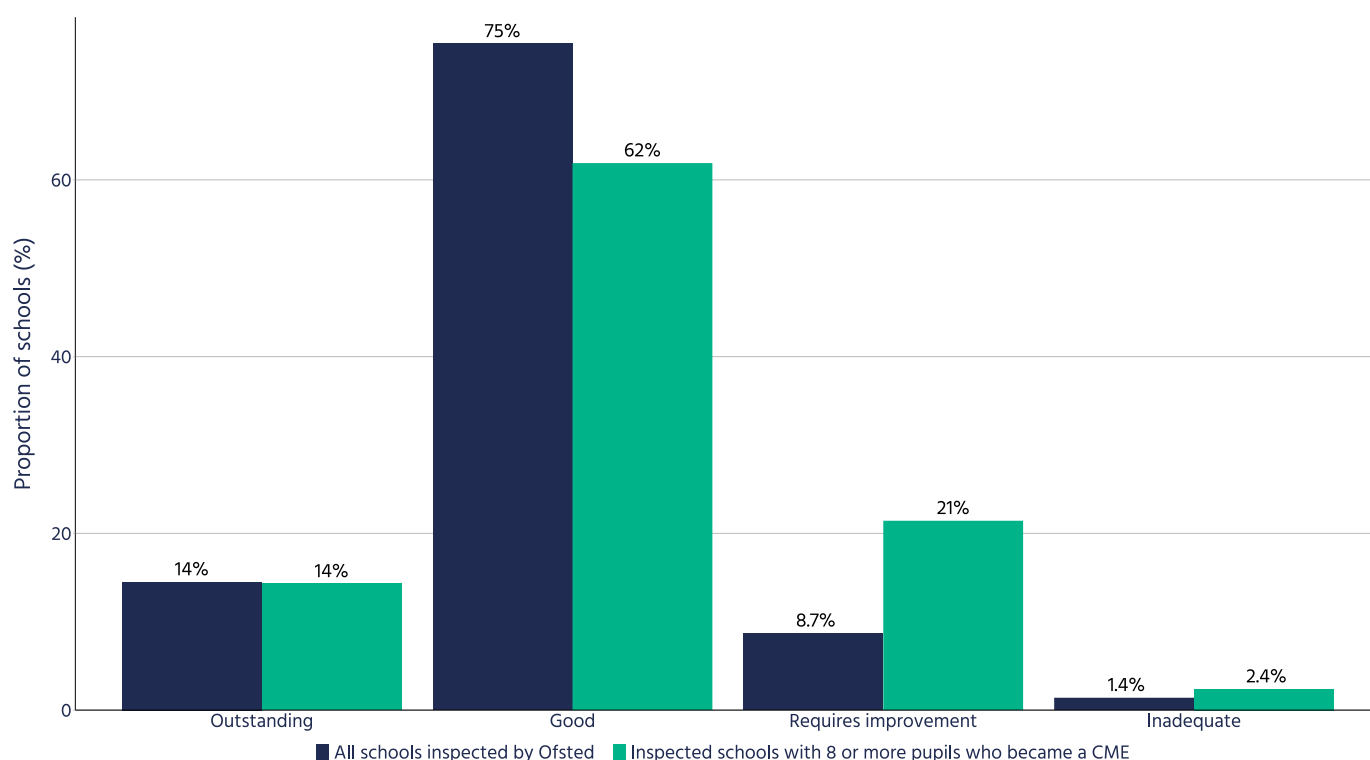
2.2.2   Attendance pattern

Local authorities told the office that absenteeism was one of the main risk factors behind becoming a child missing education. The data analysis bears this out: 62% of children whose last-known destination was missing education were either persistently absent or severely absent in the 2021/22 academic year. For comparison, 24% of children in state-funded education were persistently or severely absent over the same period.

The persistent absence rate for children known or suspected to be a CME in the sample was double the rate of persistent absenteeism in state-funded education. 44% of children whose last-known

destination was missing education were persistently absent in 2021/22. This compares with 22% of children in state-funded education who were persistently absent over the same period.

The rate of severe absenteeism was almost eleven times higher in the known or suspected CME sample compared to the rate of severe absence among state-funded pupils in general. 18% of children whose last-known destination was missing education were severely absent. This compares with 1.7% of children in state-funded education who had been severely absent over the same period.

Further analysis shows that school absence rates worsen substantially in the lead up to a child withdrawing from school and becoming CME (Figure 7). Children who become CME typically had a worse absence rate throughout their school career, compared to their peers. For the pupils in the sample whose last-known destination was missing education, their absence rate was on average 4.3 percentage points higher than the average for all pupils over the course of 2012/13 to 2018/19. However, in the years immediately prior to leaving the school roll, between 2018/19 and 2020/21, their average absence rate more than doubled, from 9.5% to 19.5%.

Figure 7: Average absence rates of children who went missing from education in the years leading up to leaving the state education system, compared to all pupils in state-funded education.
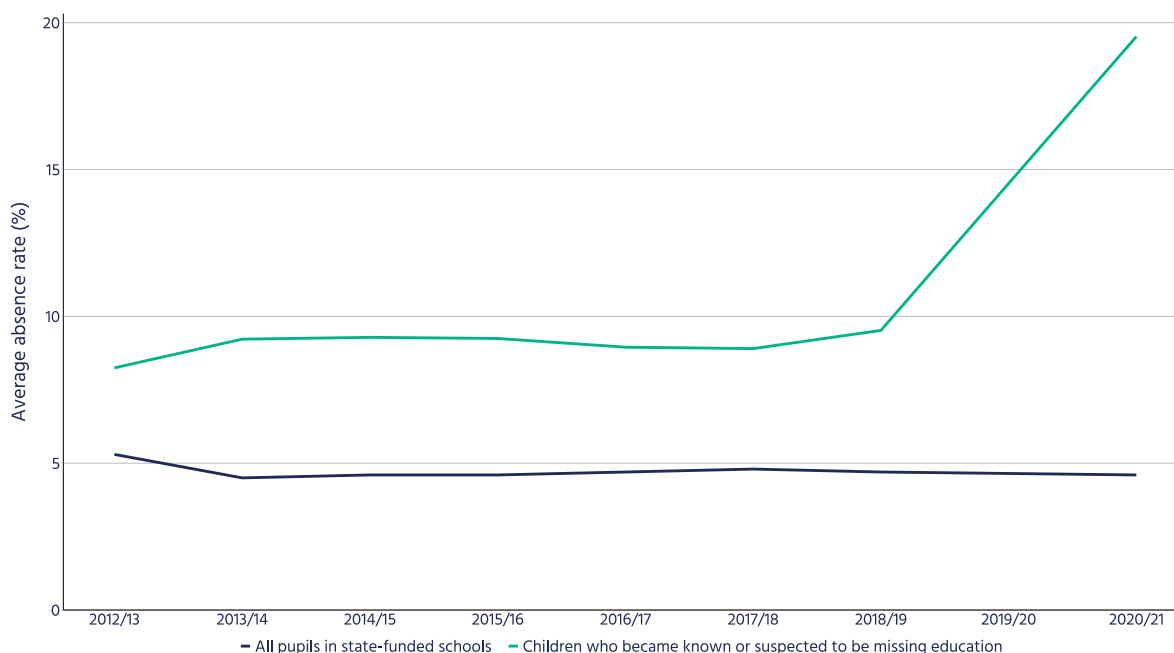
Notes: Data was not collected for 2019/20 due to the pandemic, so lines continue directly from 2018/19 to 2020/21. Data for

all pupils uses the average absence rate of the whole pupil population in state-funded education in that year, published by the Department for Education.[27] Data for CME uses the average absence rate of all CME who were in a state-funded school in that year – due to younger children falling out of the sample in more historic years, the sample size in e.g. 2012/13 is 95.

2.2.3   Exclusions history

CME children in this analysis were more likely than pupils in general to have experienced a permanent exclusion from school. Of the 11,576 children who were known or suspected to be a CME at any point during the year, including those whose last-known destination was other than CME, there were 60 permanent exclusions in 2021/22, for a rate of 0.52 permanent exclusions per 100 children. For comparison, in the general pupil population, there were only 0.08 permanent exclusions per 100 pupils[28] – more than 6 times lower than the rate among children who had been known or suspected to be CME.

3.   Preventing children missing education

3.1   How do local authorities prevent children from becoming a child missing education?

While the government guidance on CME emphasises the importance of early intervention, it does not list clear expectations about the steps local authorities must follow to minimise the risk of children becoming a CME.[29]

Consequently, some local authorities told us that they did not see prevention as their responsibility. They stated that preventing CME was the duty of schools and that if schools were more inclusive or of better quality, issues around CME would be reduced.

Many local authorities the office spoke to stated that it was difficult to resource preventative activities due to the small size of their CME teams. Local authorities said that previously they would have had Education Welfare Officers to carry out family liaison work with children who were missing school, but this service had reduced significantly over the last ten years. With smaller teams, local authorities said that they had to prioritise tracing children who were already CME.

In the office's desk-based review of policies, only 33 local authorities out of 129 listed specific actions they took to prevent CME. A further 24 said that they wanted to prevent children from becoming CME but did not explain what they should do to achieve this aim.

3.2   Focusing on at-risk groups

Where local authorities did see prevention as their responsibility, the activities they undertook often centred around school attendance. A minority of local authorities that the office spoke to said that they ran a multi-agency panel for severely absent children. These children were viewed as particularly at risk of becoming a CME and often needed additional support to reengage in education. These panels both gave schools advice on specific cases and were also a forum for creating cross-local authority campaigns on attendance. The office's desk-based review of published policies identified 13 local authorities which ran similar panels, often focusing on attendance as a key risk factor.

Anxiety and mental health came up as risk factors for both absenteeism and becoming a CME. In response to rising demand post-pandemic, one local authority had started to host parental advice sessions at their Family Hubs. These sessions aimed to provide practical advice to parents whose children were struggling to attend regularly.

3.3   Managing the transition to a new school

Some of the local authorities the office spoke to said that their biggest challenge around CME was not about children leaving school at an unexpected juncture, but instead about children who did not receive a school place when they reached compulsory school age or where the transition between primary and secondary school broke down.

However, in the office's interviews local authorities did not mention proactive work they were doing around transitions. In the desk-based analysis, the office identified only one local authority which detailed preventative work it was doing around CME related to managing successful transitions.

3.4   Training schools around how to off-roll

In interviews with the office, some local authorities voiced concerns that they were not being told when some children left school rolls. In the Children's Commissioner's data collection, 10,181 children who had left the state education system between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23 had destinations which were unknown to local authorities.

Local authorities stressed that they rely upon schools reporting every instance of a child moving off-roll to monitor the whereabouts of CME and to fulfil their statutory duties. They stressed that there was no single pupil database at a local authority level to track pupil moves, and so when schools failed to abide by their duty to share information, children could fall through the net.

A couple of local authorities the office spoke to said that they ran regular training sessions with their schools about how to off-roll children and when to notify the CME team. Other local authorities told the office that this was an impossible task in their area because there were hundreds of schools that they would have to train.

4. Identifying children missing education

4.1 Who can refer a child missing education?

Local authorities are expected to take referrals from schools and other local partners to identify CME. The guidance on CME stresses that local authorities should make clear the notification routes to all schools and local agencies working with children and families, including GPs, health, police, housing, children's homes, voluntary youth services, and Youth Offending Teams.[30]

The importance of information sharing is further emphasised in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'.[31] This statutory guidance states that no single practitioner who works with children can have a full picture of a child and so it is important for agencies to proactively share information they hold about the safety or welfare of children. The guidance says that all agencies working with children and families should share information on children at risk of going missing or suspected to be missing, including CME.

4.2 Referrals from schools

Every local authority that the office spoke to relied upon referrals from schools to identify CME. Often, schools were asked to fill in a local authority form for children who came off-roll at non-standard transition points. The form asked schools to provide the reason for the removal from the school roll, any known destination, the pupil's address, and any known contact details.

Local authorities stated that they were heavily dependent on these referrals because they did not have the power to see school rolls and therefore were unable to independently monitor pupil movement. In some cases, local authorities had developed their own pupil movement database. This was set up through data sharing agreements with schools and academies. While this was seen as incredibly useful for tracking CME, such comprehensive data sharing was rare.

The team heard that local authorities experienced mixed success with referrals from schools. One local authority told us that they had very strong relationships with all schools in their area, including independent schools. They regularly received information from both state-funded and independent schools (despite independent schools not having a duty to inform the local authority about moves off

roll). In these areas, schools were aware of their duty to report children moving off-roll and were well acquainted with the lead CME Officer. When school staff moved on, the CME team would have a meeting with the new point of contact in the school, as part of the handover. These areas stated that schools and the local authority understood the importance of working together to improve educational outcomes. They stated that the recent drive on attendance had further improved relationships between the local authority and schools, as it had led to schools reaching out to the local authority for further support.

One local authority described the system they had established, where schools were only allowed to remove children from the school roll once the case had been reviewed by the local authority (Figure 8). Schools were expected to evidence the reasonable inquiries they had made to establish the whereabouts of a child and to evidence that the child was missing from school, not severely absent. The local authority stated that the system helped to minimise disruption caused by children being unexpectedly taken off the school roll.

Figure 8: Decision process for removing CME from school rolls in one local authority.

School tells the local authority about a CME
↓
Local authority reviews the evidence presented by the school
↓
Local authority writes to the school
↓ ↓
Local authority agrees with school's grounds for removal of child from school roll, and grants permission for removal | Local authority recommends what additional steps the school would have to take before removal
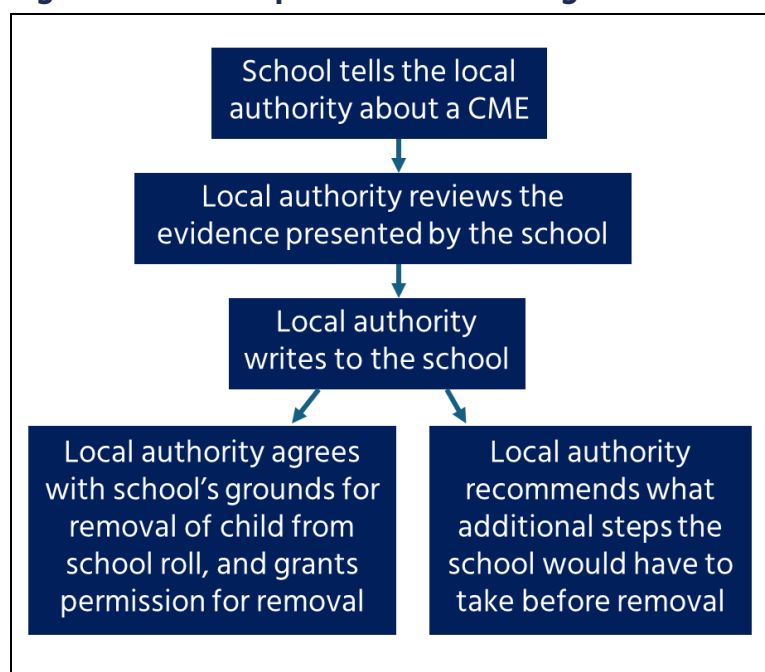
However, strong relationships and tight processes around removals from the school roll tended to be the exception rather than the norm. Often children fell through the gaps because of poor communication. Several local authorities that the office spoke to said that schools would often not

report when a child left their rolls. They stated that a large proportion of children in the office's data collection were unknown to the local authority because they had not received a referral from the school which had removed the child.

Local authorities said that schools viewed reporting roll changes to their local authority as an additional administrative burden and that it was common for reports to be forgotten. Sometimes schools assumed that the local authority CME team would know about a child leaving the school roll because the school had informed another local authority team member, such as someone working in SEND or social care. Local authorities that the office spoke to actively tried to build positive relationships with their schools to combat this issue, however, this was seen to be a more difficult task in large local authorities with high levels of academisation.

4.3   Referrals from others

Some local authorities said that their referral form was accessible to other agencies and individuals, as well as schools. They said that neighbours, health, police, social care, and other services could make a referral.

When referrals did not come from someone working in education, local authorities said they were sometimes inaccurate. Local authorities told the office that the CME team often received external referrals from children who still had a school place but were severely absent.

4.4   Proactive identification

Very few of the local authorities the office spoke to proactively identified CME. Often, they would respond to a case if there was a referral, but they would not run checks on existing local authority data to identify if a child had slipped through the cracks.

One local authority had attempted to run a proactive check on CME by cross-referencing the live birth data with the school admissions for children in Reception. However, they stated that these kinds of exercises were difficult and relied upon having data analysts to work with the CME team.

Several local authorities stated that they wanted to work more proactively but would struggle to resource it. They stated the Children's Commissioner's data collection for this report had helped them

to see how many children had not been referred to the local authority. They suggested that this data check should be repeated on an annual basis, to provide a check on referrals to the local authority.

5. Actions taken to find children

5.1 How can partners find children missing education?

The Department for Education's CME guidance makes clear that both schools and local authorities have a role to play in searching for CME. Both schools and local authorities are expected to conduct 'reasonable enquiries' to locate children who are CME. The guidance suggests that the term 'reasonable' shows that there is a limit to what both parties are expected to do.[32]

The guidance says that schools and local authorities may contact relatives, neighbours, landlords and other agencies the child or family is known to in their attempts to find CME. It is expected that the steps followed would depend on the specifics of each case and that schools and local authorities should use their judgement to decide the best course of action.

If there is a reason to believe that the child is at risk of harm, the case should be referred to children's social care or police, where appropriate. The thresholds for referrals to social care assessment should be set out in the Local Safeguarding Children Board's threshold document.

Where there is evidence that the child may have moved to a different local authority, the local authority should try to make contact with the new authority and hand over the case.

The CME guidance states that a pupil's name can only be removed from the admission register after the school and the local authority have failed to establish the pupil's whereabouts after jointly making reasonable enquiries to find a child missing education.

5.2 Initial checks by schools

Schools have a key role to play in searching for CME. Depending on the circumstances of the child, local authorities told the office that they would expect schools to call home and to have conducted a home visit, before referring children to the CME team.

Some local authorities that the office spoke to said that they would not pick up a CME referral from schools unless they have seen evidence that the school has taken these initial checks.

5.3 Initial checks by local authorities

All the local authorities that the office interviewed said that following a referral they would repeat a set of steps, though the precise course of action was decided on a case-by-case basis. Local authorities often repeated checks that the school should have done including phoning contacts and conducting home visits. When they visited the home, they might also seek to speak to neighbours, where possible.

Local authorities stated that sometimes they received a different reception from families than schools received. In instances where the relationship between school and families had broken down, local authorities sometimes found that parents were more willing to engage with the local authority because they were seen as separate.

Some local authorities the office spoke to said that if a child was referred as CME they would attempt to make contact with other individuals who knew the child. This could involve social media searches, speaking to neighbours, or calling known emergency contacts.

It was common for local authorities to speak to other agencies who were known to be supporting the child at the time of deregistration from school. Some local authorities the office spoke to checked every case with social care. If children were already known to social care prior to being referred to the CME team, the referral was escalated as high-risk and treated as a safeguarding matter. Other local authorities told the office that they only made referrals to safeguarding partners if there was a known safeguarding concern.

Local authorities would only contact the police if there was a known safety concern such as a risk of domestic abuse or female genital mutilation. It was generally believed that missing education was not enough of a risk in and of itself to involve the police and other safeguarding partners in searches.

5.4 Accessing information through database checks

Every local authority the office spoke to said that they would search available databases to try to track a CME. However, access to information differed significantly from one local authority to the next. Often, access to databases was contingent on personal relationships or individual data sharing arrangements.

Most local authorities relied heavily on education data and the School2School network. Often, local authorities would search for children on the School2School system as their first port of call. Sometimes, they would be able to identify children who had been admitted to another school and incorrectly referred as a CME using this database. Just one local authority the office spoke to did not make extensive use of this database, they said they found the site confusing and had not been provided with training on how to use it. They also stated that schools rarely used the School2School system and so it was not always a helpful source of information.

Local authorities made extensive use of the School Census data. While the team heard that the School Census was a helpful data source, local authorities expressed their frustration that the data was not captured in real time. Some local authorities reported their concerns around independent schools not being captured on the School Census. They said that when a child went into the independent sector, it could be difficult to trace their whereabouts. This work could be time consuming, involving contacting individual schools, without a single place to check.

Local authorities told the office that when CME officers tried to access information from other sources, beyond education data, they would have to make individual requests to named contacts in external agencies. They did not have the power to search their databases for a child who they were tracing. Therefore, any data check relied upon having relationships with the right person, existing data sharing agreements being in place and the other services having the capacity to do the checks. The office heard that CME were not always prioritised by other services, and so CME officers could face lengthy delays.

Local authority CME officers could normally put in data requests to local services including social care, housing, and council tax. It was generally seen as easier to access databases which were owned by the local authority education team, than other sources external to the education team. One local authority explained that they struggled to access council tax records because their boundaries stretched across several district councils. They had to broker data sharing arrangements with different councils if they wanted to access council tax records.

Most local authorities the team spoke to had a contact at HM Revenue & Customs who would check revenue and benefits claims. This check was often a lengthy process as HMRC would have to contact the family to verify if they were still living at the same address. Local authorities said that this was only helpful for non-communicative families.

Many local authorities said that they wanted to have access to the NHS Spine so they could see national data on GP registrations and health appointments. A couple of local authorities had started to access this health data, but this was rare. The office was told that access to the NHS Spine was hard to establish in areas where there were multiple Integrated Care Boards, as brokering access relied upon the agreement of many more stakeholders.

5.5   Looking for children who had moved out of area

Sometimes, local authorities would contact neighbouring local authorities to check whether a child they were tracing had moved home. This was particularly important for children who were in temporary accommodation or children with a social worker who were more likely to move home unexpectedly. Local authorities stated that it was often difficult to find the right neighbouring local authority to contact. Local authorities do not have automatic access to other local authority educational databases and had to ask to view their records. Local authorities told the office that it would help if they could easily search the Lost Pupil Database at a national level so they could see if cases they were working on had been picked up by other local authorities.

Policies on CME often differed significantly from one area to the next, so even if a CME Officer was relatively certain that a child they were tracking had moved to another area, this would not mean that the local authority they had moved to would always pick up the case.

Moves abroad came up regularly in the office's conversations with local authorities. CME Officers said that it was common for families to move abroad and not to tell the school that they were doing so or to provide a forwarding address. Tracking these families was a lot harder because they did not reappear on other databases. Some local authorities told the office that they were concerned that some of their long-term CME cases related to children who had moved abroad. They said that it made it difficult to distinguish live cases requiring continued searching from cases where a child was safe and well but living abroad.

Local authorities said that having access to Border Force data would be very helpful, as it would enable them to search for children who had left the UK. Historically, Border Force would only search for a child leaving the country as part of a CME case if there was a safeguarding concern. This meant that there was a large number of children who moved abroad who were not tracked. In recent months, local

authorities told us Border Force has started to work with some local authorities to track children without safeguarding concerns, however, this was happening on an ad-hoc basis. Local authorities stated that Border Force did not have the capacity to offer this information to all local authorities and so several stated that they were on waiting lists following a request for access.

One local authority said that they would also like to receive information from Border Force about children arriving in the country. They said that this would enable them to identify children who newly arrived in their area and prevent them from becoming a CME.

They said that most CME children in their local authority were new to area and had never been to school in England. Often newly arrived families are unfamiliar with the education system, and some do not know how to register for school. This was seen as a particular challenge for refugee children. The local authority had to rely on awareness raising campaigns to encourage parents and carers to apply for a school place. They stated that if Border Force could provide information on new arrivals, it would help to reduce their CME population.

6. The destinations of children known or suspected to be a child missing education

6.1 How long are children missing education for?

In conversations with local authorities, the office heard that the length of time children might be missing for could vary significantly depending on their circumstances and the availability of school places suited to their individual needs. Local authorities told the office that some groups of children were more difficult to trace, such as those who moved to a new address.

Published Department for Education data shows that 29% of open CME cases at the census date in the Autumn 2023/24 term had been open for up to 4 weeks (Figure 9) and over 39% had been open for over 12 weeks (a whole school term). 13% of all children recorded as CME had been missing for over a year. [33]

Figure 9: Length of time missing education for children missing education at census date.
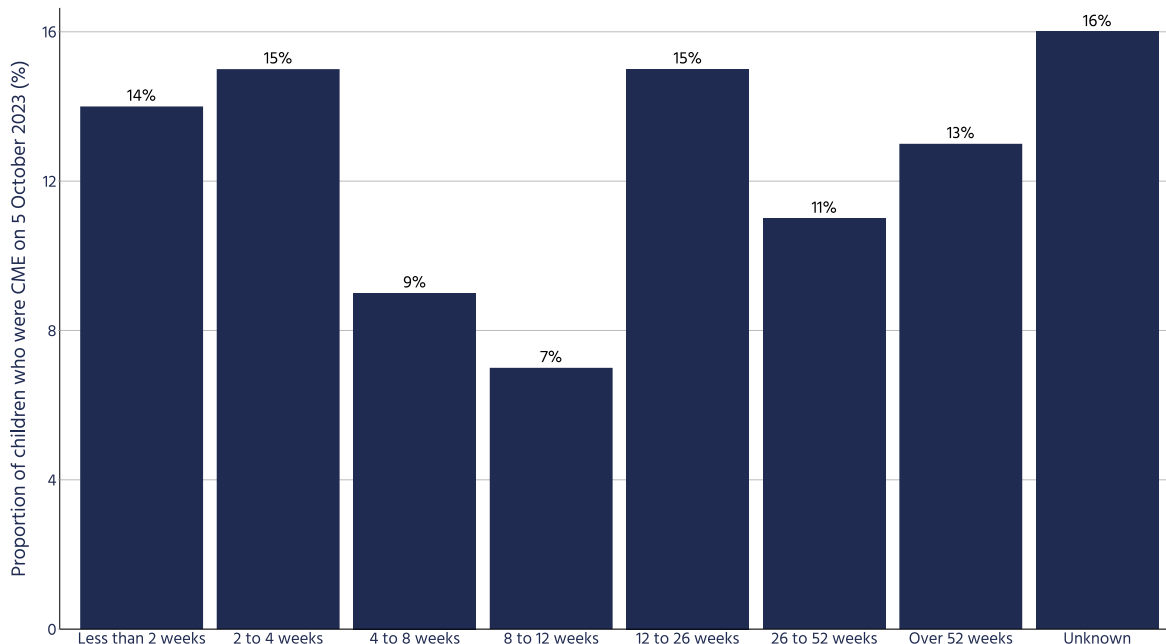
6.2 Where do children missing education end up?

There is no single central database recording the destination or experience in education of all children who have an episode of missing education. However, using the data collected by the Children's Commissioner's office, the office can examine the last-known destinations of children who left the state education system and become a child missing education between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23.

Most often, the last-known destination of children who had been known or suspected to be missing education between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23 was 'left England' (36%) (Figure 10). It was also common for children to still be known or suspected CME, or to have been supported back into registered education (both 24%). Less often, for 5.8%, their last-known destination was elective home education, while 9.2% of children had unknown destinations.

Figure 10: Last-known destination of children identified as known or suspected to be missing education between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23.
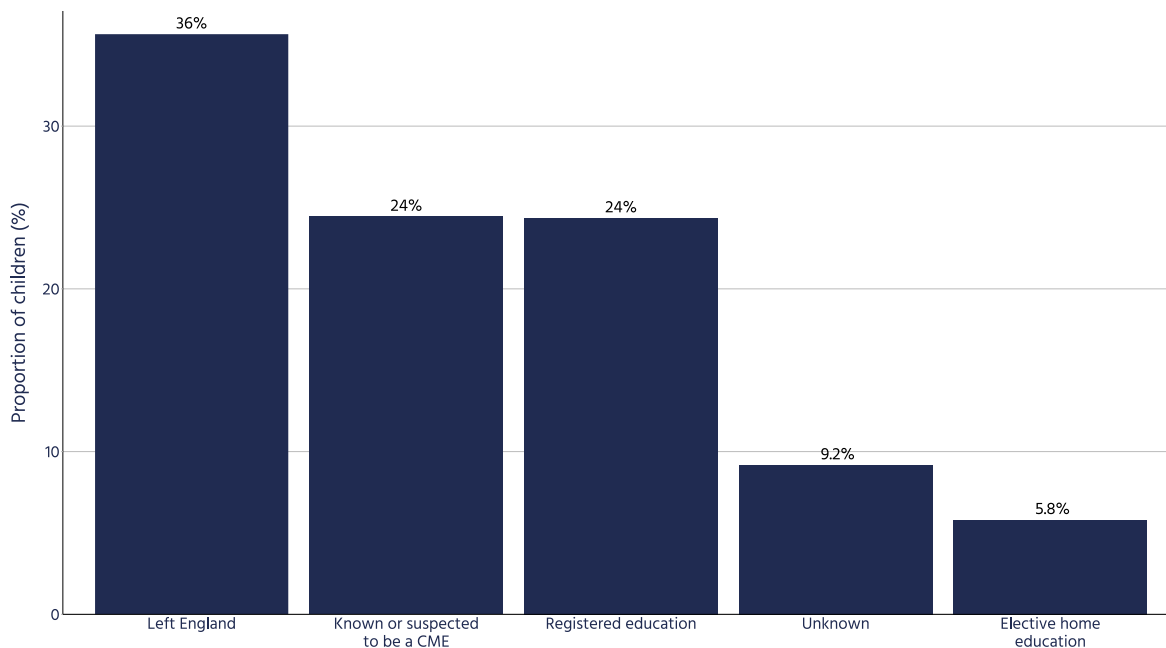
6.2.1   Those who leave England

The most common destination for children who were suspected or known to be a CME was 'Left England'. Over a third of all children (36%) known or suspected to be a CME between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23 had moved to another country. Local authorities told us that many children who had left England were wrongly classified as CME for the period between the move happening and becoming known about.

6.2.2   Those who remain children missing education

Of the 11,576 children known or suspected to be a CME between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23, 2,868 (24%) were most recently still known or suspected to have been a CME, and a further 1,063 (9.2%) were in unknown destinations. Of the 2,868, about half (49%) or 1,405 were known to be a child missing education, 1,018 (36%) were suspected to be a child missing education, and 445 (16%) were known to be a CME but were awaiting a move into education provision.

Children who became and remained a child missing education were more likely to be older, live in more deprived neighbourhoods or have histories of poor attendance, relative to the children who became a CME but returned to registered education.

The older a child is, the less likely they are to return to registered education after a period of CME (Figure 11). 37% of all children who became and remained a CME were aged between 11 to 14, compared to 30% of children who became a CME but returned to registered education. Local authorities told the office that it was harder to find a school that would accept a Year 11 child with a stint out of education.

Figure 11: Age of children who became and remained a CME, and of children who became a CME but returned to registered education.
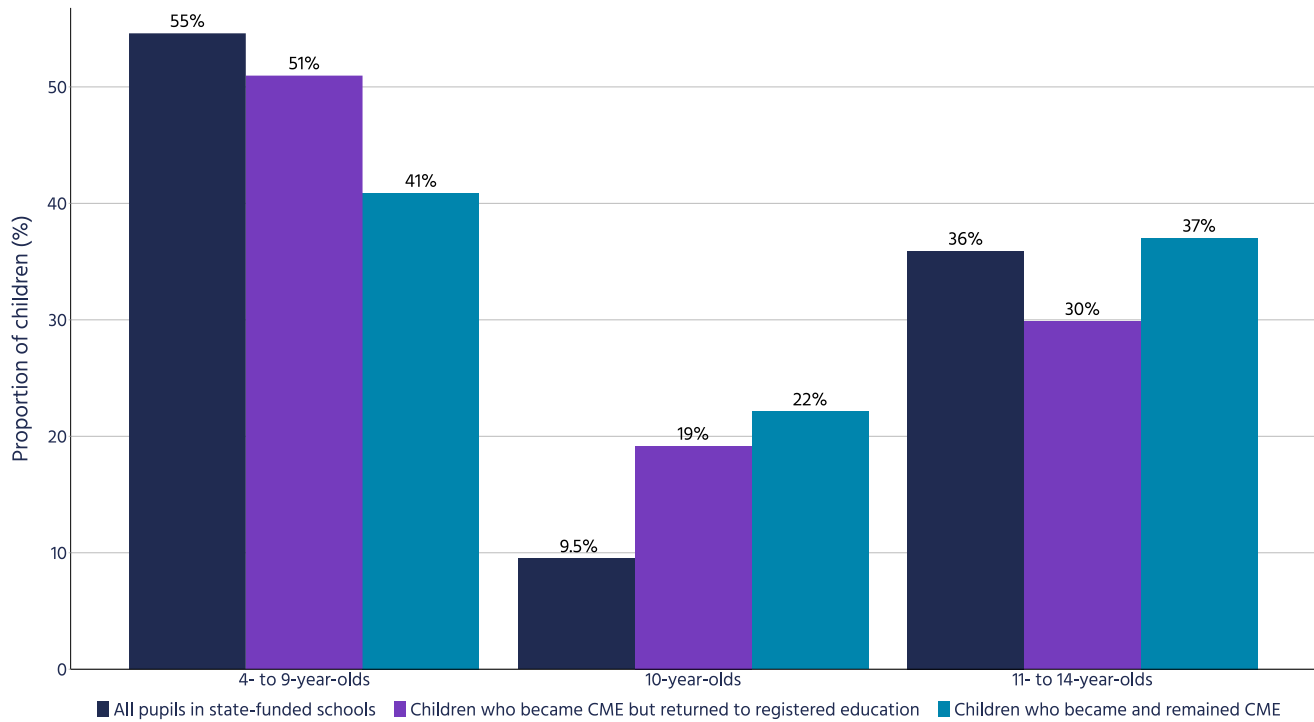
Children who became and remained a child missing education were more likely than their peers who returned to registered education to live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Figure 12). 46% of all children who became and remained a CME came from the most deprived quarter of neighbourhoods, compared to 41% of their peers who returned to registered education.

Figure 12: Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index of children who became and remained a CME, and of children who became a CME but returned to registered education.
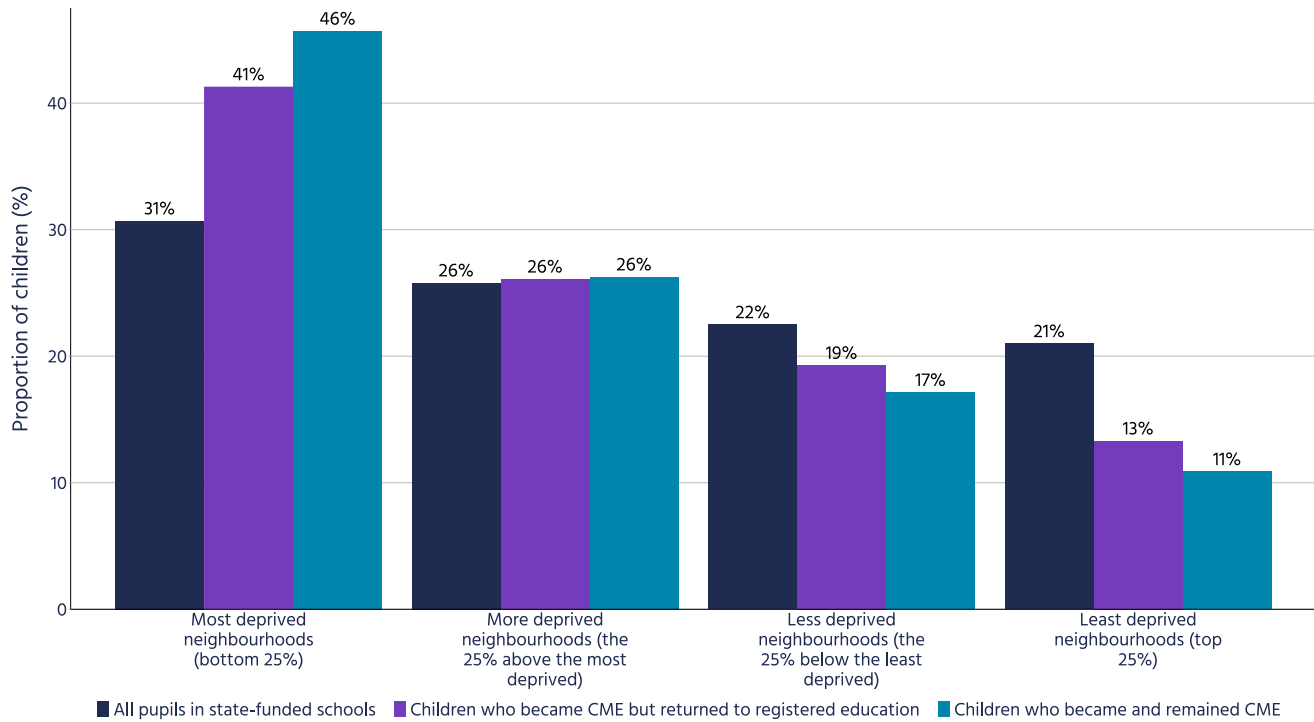
Those who became and remained a child missing education were more likely than their peers who returned to registered education to have been recorded as persistently or severely absent in the year they left the state education system (Figure 13). Local authorities told the office that children who had been persistently or severely absent often had underlying needs which explained their absenteeism and had led to them becoming a child missing education. Further, these children had often missed significant periods of learning in the classroom and sometimes found it difficult to return to a mainstream school environment. These cases were often seen as more complex and could require additional support to find a suitable education placement.

Figure 13: Attendance pattern in 2021/22 of children who became and remained a CME, and of children who became a CME but returned to registered education.
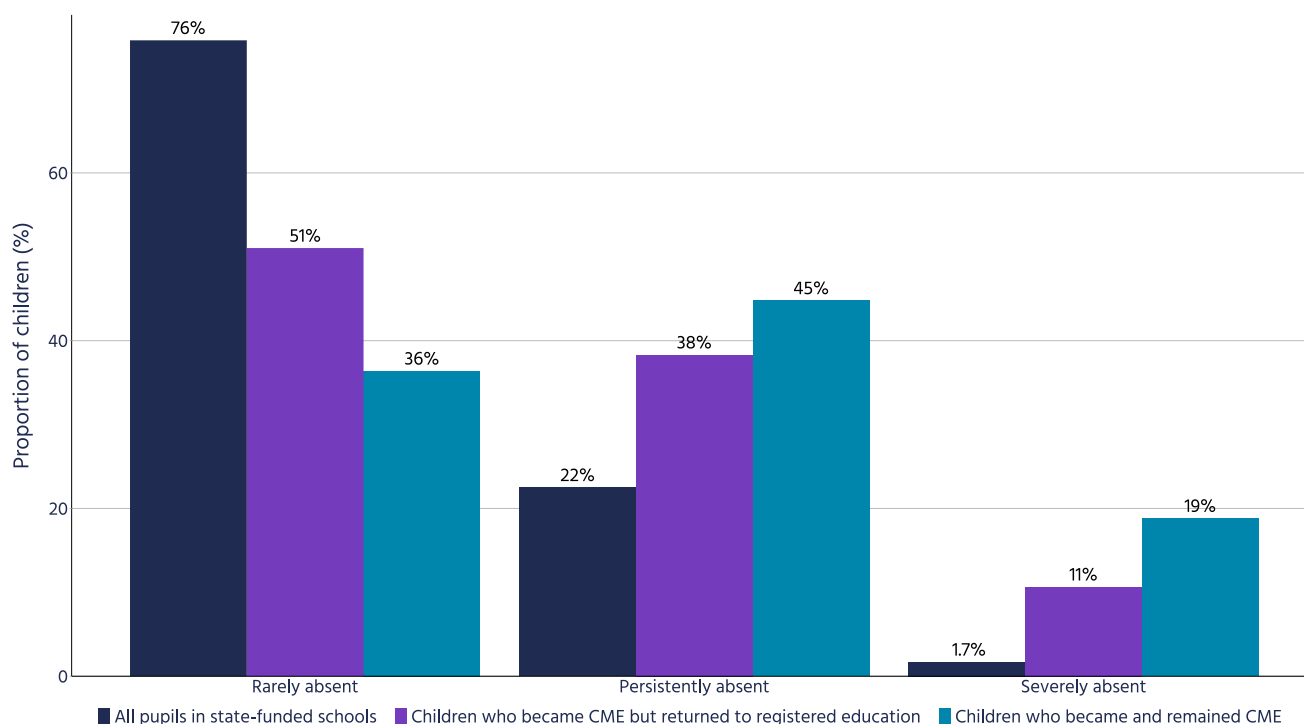
6.2.3   Those who return to registered education

Around one in four children (24%) who became CME between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23 were last known to be back in registered education by the end of that period. Local authorities said that these were normally children who they had supported back into school, following a stint of missing education. These children had either returned to school via the admissions process, the Fair Access Protocol, or by a School Attendance Order.

Of those who returned to registered education, 75% returned to the same school which they had left to become a CME. Among the other 25% of children who fell off school rolls and returned to a different school by the end of the year, 41% of children who had been a CME during the year returned to a school in a different local authority than their original school, while 59% returned to a different school in the same local authority as their original school.

Further analysis of the children who became a CME then returned to a different school than the one they had left shows that just 21% returned to a school with a better Ofsted rating, while 49% returned to a school with the same rating, and 30% to a school with a worse rating.

There were at least 273 schools which took on 2 or more children who had been a CME between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23 before returning to registered education.[iii] Some of these schools will have accepted children through the admissions system or Fair Access Protocol, others may have been directed to accept them. Of these, 88% were state-funded mainstream schools and 10% were independent mainstream schools, and they were less likely than all schools to have been rated 'Outstanding' (Figure 13; only includes schools which have previously been inspected).

Figure 14: Ofsted rating of schools which took on at least two or more children who had been missing education between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23.
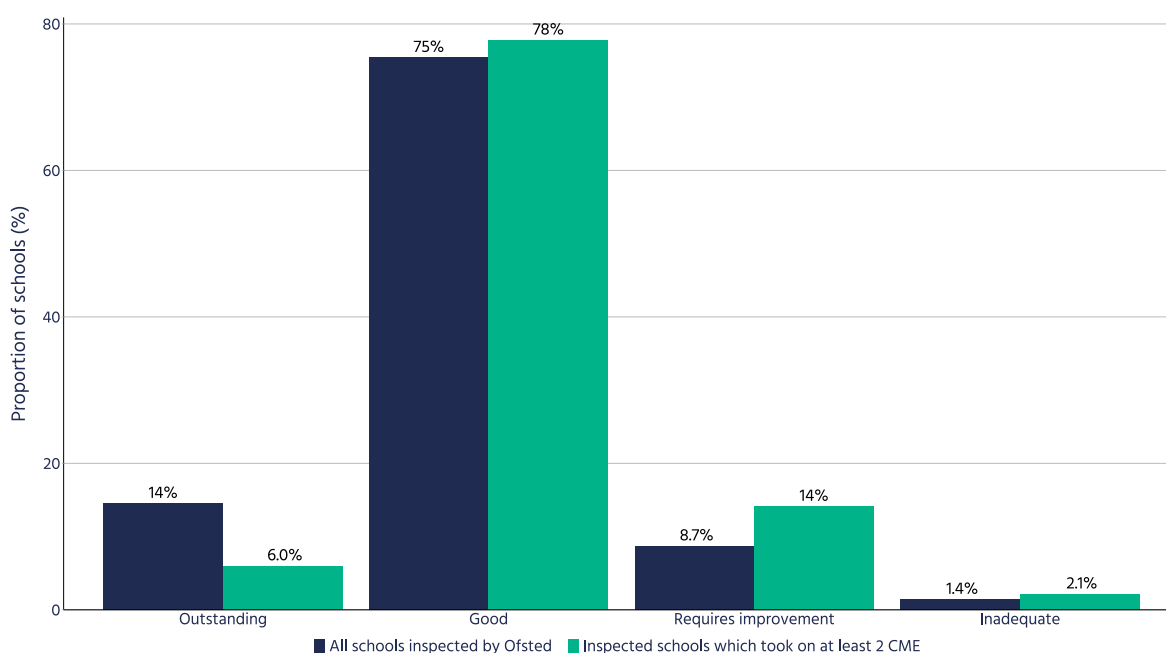
[iii] The exact number of schools in the office's data who took on 2 or more CME will be an undercount, as the office sampled approximately half of all in-scope children, to reduce the burden of the data collection on local authorities.

6.2.4   Those who move into home education

6% of children who were a CME between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23 were last known to be in elective home education. The office heard from local authorities that these cases split into two categories. Some of these children had been home educated since leaving school so had been falsely recorded as a child missing education. Others had been correctly initially recorded as a child missing education and then their parents had decided to home educate them, rather than return to school. The office heard that the latter often occurred when children were offered a school through the admissions process which their parents were not happy with (such as because of the perceived quality of the school or the length of commute from their home to the new school). The office's previous report 'Lost in Transition' discusses home education in more detail.[34]

6.3   Supporting children back into education

The Department for Education guidance on CME has a checklist of actions that local authorities should take to support children to re-engage into suitable education. This includes working with other agencies to provide support (i.e. for health or welfare reasons), having an agreed process for securing suitable education, monitoring the pace at which children move into provision, and monitoring information on the availability of school places and alternative provision.[35]

Local authorities told us that when they locate CME, they have three main mechanisms for supporting children back into school, these were: the admissions process, the Fair Access Protocol, and School Attendance Orders. These would be used based upon the circumstances of each individual case.

6.3.1   The Admissions System

Most local authorities depended firstly on the admissions system. The CME team would contact the family, once the child had been identified, and refer them to the Admissions team in the local authority.

Some CME Teams told us that once a case was picked up by the Admissions Team, they would close the CME case. In the office's interviews, one local authority said that they tracked the attendance and engagement of children who had historically been recorded as CME. They stated that they only closed

cases when it was confirmed that a child had successfully been admitted to a new school and was regularly attending.

Most CME Teams told the office that they did not have the resources available to track the reintegration into school. One local authority did track all cases of children re-entering school. This local authority would monitor the child's attendance at the next school and would only sign off the case once they were satisfied the child was on roll at a school and attending regularly.

In some cases, school places were available but in schools with lower Ofsted ratings or in schools within the local authority but far away from the child's home. Local authorities said that parents often objected to going to the school when they did not think the school place was suitable. In these instances, local authorities said that they would not offer an alternative school. They said that they rarely had alternative school places available and that they had met their statutory duty to offer a school place. If parents refused to take up the school place they were offered and did not provide an alternative suitable education, local authorities would often pursue a School Attendance Order.

Many local authorities said that they were experiencing a shortage of school places in some areas and so sometimes the admissions team would not be able to offer children an alternative school place. The office heard that admissions authorities would place children on waiting lists for schools and that they would remain out of education until a school place opened up. Sometimes local authorities would use their powers under Section 19 of the Education Act 1996 to provide tutoring or alternative education while children were waiting for a school place. In some local authorities, where there were no available school places, and a child was identified as having a known vulnerability, the local authority would escalate the case to the Fair Access Protocol (described below) in a bid to find a suitable school for the child.

6.3.2   School Attendance Orders

When children were offered school places via the in-year admissions process, but families refused to take them up, local authorities said that they would seek to issue a School Attendance Order to parents if no other suitable education was arranged. School Attendance Orders were also used to return children to school if they had been identified as a child missing education due to unsuitable home education.

Local authorities said that School Attendance Orders were not always effective at returning children to school. When families did not want their child to go to school, either because of specific problems with the school they were offered or broader problems with the school system more generally, School Attendance Orders did not change behaviour. Local authorities said that School Attendance Orders were seen as very punitive and could worsen relationships between the local authority and the family.

Local authorities also told the office that School Attendance Orders took a lot of time. The procedures around School Attendance Orders set out a timetable for the local authority to:

- inform parents of their duty to ensure a full time, suitable education;

- to consult with schools about whether they would admit the child through a School Attendance Order and, where necessary, for appeals to be made to the Secretary of State if the local authority needs to direct admissions to a local authority;

- to warn parents that the local authority intends to issue a School Attendance Order if they do not select a school; and

- to issue a School Attendance Order.

Local authorities told us that because of the various steps involved in the School Attendance Order process, it could take months to implement.

Sometimes local authorities judged that seeking a School Attendance Order would not be in the public interest, especially if a child was in Year 11 and would soon be older than the compulsory school age.

Local authorities also said that School Attendance Orders did not have sufficient legal power to ensure that a child would return to school. They told the office that failure to comply with a School Attendance Order is a criminal offence. Local authorities can prosecute parents if they do not abide by the terms of a School Attendance Order. Prosecution takes place in a magistrates' court. Local authorities said that parents did not always turn up to court for the hearing. If parents are convicted, they have to pay a fine of up to £1,000. Local authorities said that this fine was lower than the fine issued when parents are prosecuted for a child's non-attendance and therefore did not act as an incentive to comply with the School Attendance Order.

Local authorities said that following a conviction, they would often have to start back at square one with trying to reintegrate a child. In theory, following a conviction for a School Attendance Order, local authorities can apply for an Education Supervision Order which enables the local authority to impose conditions around a child's education and would require the child to be seen by the local authority. Local authorities said that this was a time-consuming process, and they rarely invoked these powers as it was not seen to be in the public interest to do so.

6.3.3   The Fair Access Protocol

The Fair Access Protocol (FAP) is a mechanism developed by the local authority to place vulnerable children who are unable to find a school place through in-year admissions.[36]

The guidance on Fair Access Protocols says that the following groups of children are eligible to be placed through a Fair Access Protocol:

- children either currently or within the last 12 months on a Child in Need Plan or a Child Protection Plan;

- children living in a refuge or in other Relevant Accommodation at the point of being referred to the FAP;

- children from the criminal justice system;

- children in alternative provision who need to be reintegrated into mainstream education or who have been permanently excluded but are deemed suitable for mainstream education;

- children with special educational needs, disabilities or medical conditions (but without an Education, Health and Care Plan);

- children who are young carers;

- children who are homeless;

- children in formal kinship care arrangements;

- children of, or who are, Gypsies, Roma, Travellers;

- children of, or who are, refugees and asylum seekers;

- children who have been refused a school place on the grounds of their challenging behaviour[iv];

- children for whom a place has not been sought due to exceptional circumstances;

- children who have been out of education for 4 or more weeks where it can be demonstrated that there are no places available at any school within a reasonable distance of their home[v]; and

- previously looked after children for whom the local authority has been unable to promptly secure a school place.[37]

To be eligible, it must be demonstrated that reasonable measures have taken place to secure a school place through in-year admissions.

In the office's desk-based review of policies, 18 local authorities said that they would use the Fair Access Protocol to place children with additional vulnerabilities or those who had been out of education for a long time. Three local authorities' policies also stated that they had a key worker to assist children to reintegrate into education if they needed additional support.

Fair Access Protocols bring together admissions authorities for all the schools in a given local authority area. In these forums, the schools and the local authority decide which school to allocate to a child referred to the FAP. The guidance states that this decision should be done based on a discussion of which school would best meet the needs of that child.

Schools must take on a child allocated through the FAP process, even if they have waiting lists. If a school is local authority maintained, the local authority has the power to direct admissions. If the school is an academy, the local authority can write to the Secretary of State for Education to ask him or her to direct the admission.

[iv] And referred to the FAP in accordance with paragraph 3.10 of the Admissions Code.

[v] This does not include circumstances where a suitable place has been offered to a child and this has not been accepted.

Local authorities told us that they often found Fair Access Protocols were ineffective. Schools could argue that they would be unable to meet the needs of a child who had been a CME and therefore could refuse to take a child. They would point to significant gaps in their education or special educational needs provision which they would not be able to meet. Local authorities said that they may have to offer to fund extra support, such as tutoring, to secure a school place through the FAP.

Local authorities said that schools were often reluctant to take children who had been missing education because of the impact it may have on the schools' results. This was particularly the case if a child was in Year 11, had missed significant periods in school due to absence or exclusion, had additional needs that they would have to cater for, exhibited difficult behaviour, or if a child was new to the country and had not followed a similar curriculum to that offered in their school. Local authorities said that the accountability system did not incentivise schools to take children who would need extra support or may not achieve good grades.

Some local authorities said that they had previously managed to place children through the FAP through relying on the goodwill of schools. In areas where the FAP had been seen as effective, the office heard about strong relationships between the schools and the local authority and a shared sense of responsibility for children in the area.

However, local authorities said that the increasing number of children not attending school and the increased number of children needing to be readmitted into school had led to increased pressure on schools and a growing reluctance to accept children who had been a CME. One area said that schools which had previously taken children through FAP were reducing their school rolls, to make it less likely that they would have to accept a child through in-year admissions.

Local authorities told the office that there was little point trying to direct admissions. They said that when the school was an academy, the process for a referral often took too long. They also said that directing admissions could create tensions between the school and local authority, which would hinder collaboration in the future.

Sometimes, it proved impossible to find a suitable school place. In these cases, local authorities relied on using unregistered providers instead.

Even when a school place was secured, some local authorities said that if a school did not want to take the child, they would not make an active effort to support them once they joined the school. Local authorities recounted instances of children placed on part-time timetables or being moved to off-site alternative provision at the first available opportunity. They said that these schools did not make an active effort to reintegrate the child back into mainstream school. While a child may be back on a school roll, they could still be outside of suitable education. These local authorities said that there was very little scrutiny around this practice.

6.4   Long-term children missing education

In the office's collection, nearly a quarter of children who became a CME between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23 (24%) were still last known to be a CME by the end of that period.

The Department for Education's statistics on CME found that 39% of children who were recorded as missing education at census date had been missing for twelve weeks or more, while 13% had been missing for more than a year.[38]

6.4.1   Cases where the local authority is unable to put in place suitable education

As detailed above, sometimes children identified as CME may remain so despite the local authority knowing where they were. Sometimes, children remain without access to suitable education due to a scarcity of school places. In other instances, they may remain a CME because their parents are not happy with the school place offered to them, as in the example above of court processes taking time to play out.

Many local authorities said that they needed help to bridge the gap between home and school when a child had been out of education for a significant period of time. Local authorities told the team that they would benefit from having case workers who could support children who had been identified as a CME. Case workers would be able to build a relationship with the child and parents, understand their objections to going to the named school, make a judgement about what form of educational provision would be suitable, and provide personalised support to address any barriers to education.

6.4.2 Cases where the local authority is unable to locate a child suspected or known to be a child missing education

Local authorities told us that many children they identified as a child missing education would not ever be found. Often, when a child could not easily be located through initial checks or conversations with other agencies, local authorities said they stopped actively searching for the child. If there were known safeguarding risks, the case may be referred to social services, but if there were not, the case would go cold. Only a small minority of local authorities would escalate the case to other forums and continue to actively search for the child.

The office's desk-based analysis of CME policies confirmed how rare it was for local authorities to continue active casework to search for children after the first round of checks. Only 25 local authorities (19% of the 129 policies reviewed) stated that they would escalate or triage cases to police or social care where they could not easily find a child. The other policies either did not specify any follow up actions or recorded the case on the Lost Pupil database and resorted to semi-frequent checks of these archived children against new data as it became available, until the child turned 18.

Some local authorities said that they would not keep cases open after they had checked whichever databases they had access to because the guidance only asks for local authorities to conduct 'reasonable' enquiries. Many interpreted this as saying that escalating the case or conducting extensive searches would not be 'reasonable'.

Local authorities said that they were often concerned about the CME cases which they put on the Lost Pupil Database. Local authorities stressed that when they put cases on the Lost Pupil Database they would often become deprioritised. In some cases, local authorities had a rule to close or archive cases if a child could not be found within a set period. Local authorities' officials who continued regular checks said that they worried that children who were missing and facing significant risk would become harder to find as searches became less frequent.

Even when there were processes in place to triage cases, some local authority teams said that they did not always feel confident making a judgement about which cases should be cold and which should be escalated to social care for safeguarding purposes. Local authority officers said that they would benefit

from the support of other professionals in making an assessment of what to do in the cases where they cannot find a child missing education.

In some local authorities, cases where children could not easily be identified were automatically escalated either to social care, often on the grounds of educational neglect, escalated to the police as a missing persons case, or referred to a multi-agency forum, to ensure that relevant professionals were aware of any children at risk of harm.

7.   The way forward

7.1   Improve the understanding of children missing education

Local authorities consistently told the office that a lack of a shared understanding of the term 'children missing education' often hampered attempts to work across borders. This sometimes hampered attempts to locate and support children who were extremely vulnerable and believed to be not in school.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should publish a single consistent definition of 'children missing education' which all local authorities should update their policies to reflect. The definition should not be time bound and should not refer to children with a school place. The Department for Education should work with Children Missing Education teams to ensure their processes are focused on the same cohort.

Recommendation: In cases where a child is believed to be missing education but their home address is disputed, the Department for Education should issue guidance on how to determine which local authority has responsibility.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should issue guidance on how to deal with instances where children are receiving unsuitable education but are on a school roll, such as when children are placed in unsuitable unregistered alternative provision or are inappropriately placed on part-time timetables. This guidance should clearly outline instances where alternative provision or a part-time timetable would be unsuitable and should provide a mechanism for schools and local authorities to regularly report on the suitability of any externally commissioned placement or part-time arrangement. The assessment of suitability should always be informed by the views of the child in question. This assessment should be made available to Ofsted as evidence during school and local authority inspections.

7.2   Preventing children missing education

Very few CME teams had a strategy in place to prevent children missing education. CME teams told the office that they often did not have the resources needed to work proactively. They stated that they

lacked access to data to identify children at risk of becoming CME, did not have the analytical capacity to check other data sources to identify children who had not registered at a school, or did not have a large enough CME team to run preventative activities.

Where local authorities did have preventative activities in place, they tended to involve data sharing, improved off-rolling procedures, and local authority-wide forums to support children deemed at risk of missing education.

7.2.1   Using data to identify children at risk of missing education

Recommendation: Border Force and council tax officials should routinely inform local authority CME teams when children arrive in the country and register their new address as being in their locality.

Recommendation: When local authorities are informed of children arriving in their area, either through Border Force, council tax or other sources, they should issue clear guidance to children and families about how they can register for a school place in their new local authority. This guidance should be tailored to the needs of each individual case, including cases where English is an additional language or where families are placed in temporary accommodation.

Recommendation: Every local authority should make use of the administrative data they have to identify any children approaching compulsory school age without a known educational placement for September.

Recommendation: Every local authority should conduct a termly review of School Census data to identify any children who have left school rolls who they have not been notified about. These cases should be triaged by the CME team.

7.2.2   Improving practices around off-rolling children

Recommendation: The Department for Education should provide training materials for schools on how to de-register children who leave their school rolls and on how to use the School2School database.

Recommendation: Ofsted should hold schools accountable for the extent to which they follow the correct processes for off-rolling children.

7.2.3   Proactively supporting children at risk of missing education

Recommendation: Every local authority should convene a multi-disciplinary forum to discuss cases of children at risk of missing education to meet at least every fortnight. These forums should focus on supporting children with a history of poor attendance where schools have exhausted all available support and where children are deemed at risk of missing education.

7.3   Developing a coherent approach to trace children missing education

Local authorities told the office that it could sometimes be very difficult to track children once they left the school roll. They said that they often relied upon data from other agencies to try to find children but that the data sources they had access to varied substantially from one area to the next. A child known to have moved to an unspecified other local authority in England would require separate contacts with each of the other 151 local authorities. There was no common method used to identify children missing education and no common thresholds around the evidence needed to close a case, and this was particularly a problem for children suspected to have left England.

Some cases of children missing education were archived, due to a lack of available leads. Local authorities told the office that it was common practice to archive cases and to only return to them periodically. It was rare for a local authority to triage or escalate a case once they reached the end of their 'reasonable enquiries'. Even in local authorities with mechanisms to escalate cases, CME teams told the office that sometimes they did not feel confident in their judgements around when children missing education might be at risk and when their case should be escalated.

7.3.1   Creating a reliable database for children missing education cases

Recommendation: The Department for Education should update the School2School database to be easier to use, to enable data sharing across local authorities, and to be integrated with school and local authority management information systems. Local authorities should be required to share anonymised data on children missing education from the School2School database with the Department for Education on a termly basis.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should introduce a central register of children not in school to record the educational destinations of children without a school place. Local authorities should update this daily, whenever children are identified by local authorities as being without a school place.

7.3.2   Adopting a consistent approach to data sharing

Recommendation: The updated Department for Education guidance on Children Missing Education should set out a common national framework for data sharing to track children missing education. The guidance should make clear that all agencies who work with children have a role to play in safeguarding children and identifying children missing education. This guidance should enable all local authorities to access information from their relevant council tax department, social care, the NHS Spine, HMRC, police, youth offending services, charities, and other local authorities.

Recommendation: The new guidance should set clear thresholds for what counts as acceptable evidence in instances where a child is suspected to have left England or to have left a locality.

Recommendation: The government should introduce a consistent unique identifier for all children, based on the existing NHS number. This unique identifier would better enable services to share information on a child, identify children missing education, and make an assessment of the support needed need to reengage in education.

7.3.3   Establishing a consistent risk-based approach to triaging untraceable children missing education cases.

Recommendation: The Department for Education's Children Missing Education guidance should be updated to clearly state what local authorities should do after they have conducted an extensive search for children missing education making use of all available information sources.

Recommendation: Local authority CME teams should be given powers to automatically refer such cases to safeguarding partnerships to progress.

7.4   Supporting children to return to education

Local authorities told the office that even if they were able to identify children missing education, it was often difficult to help them to reintegrate into education. In some instances, they told the office that there was a lack of available school places or that schools were unwilling to take children with a history of being a child missing education.

Very few local authorities had any dedicated resource, such as caseworkers, to support children who were not ready to reintegrate into a school setting.

7.4.1   Ensuring there are sufficient suitable school places

Recommendation: Local authorities and multi-academy trusts should be given powers to open special schools in addition to the existing special free school wave.

7.4.2   Speeding up the process to return children to education

Recommendation: Local authorities should become the admissions authority for all schools. This would simplify the process for children and families and provide greater oversight of pupil movement at the local authority level.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should conduct research to understand how and why some children with a history of being CME swiftly reintegrate into education and why other children are long-term CME.

Recommendation: The government should reintroduce the measures from the 2019 Schools Bill to reduce the statutory timelines for issuing School Attendance Orders to shorten the length of time it takes to place a child who is CME in a school.

7.4.3   Removing barriers to returning to education

Recommendation: The Department for Education should conduct a review into how pupil funding can be redesigned to follow a child. This review should look at how per pupil funding and top-ups, such as pupil premium, should be reallocated to the local authority and receiving schools when children leave

or join school rolls throughout the course of the school year. When this funding is redirected to the local authorities, in the instances of a child becoming a CME, it should be used to resource local authority children missing education caseworkers and to fund preventative work. Some of this funding should be made into a welfare fund for children missing education where there is a barrier to them attending school such as the expense of transport.

Recommendation: As part of the new guidance on children missing education, the government should publish best practice examples of the support available to reintegrate children who have been long-term missing education or who are not ready to engage with a school environment.

Methodology

Overview

This report is based on analysis of unpublished data gathered by the Children's Commissioner's office from local authorities in England, a mixture of published and unpublished administrative data held by the Department for Education, interviews with local authorities, and a desk-based review of published local authority published CME policies.

Quantitative data collection and analysis

Local authorities have a duty to identify all children in their area who are not in school, and who are not attending suitable education otherwise. However, no child is required to make themselves known to local authorities. Local authorities rely on reports from schools, other local authorities, or third parties to make them aware of children who are new to area or who move out of the school system. The Department for Education itself has minimal participation in the data sharing between local authorities and other bodies which this duty necessitates, and until recently did not routinely gather any data from local authorities on children in home education or missing education, inhibiting the understanding of the scale and nature of these issues at a national level.

In 2023 the Department for Education launched two data new publications based on data collected from local authorities. The 'Children missing education' and 'Elective home education' data collections make available for the first time an estimate of the number of children missing education and home educated children in each local authority and England overall. However, as these collections are aggregate, they do not contain child-level data. This limits our understanding of the characteristics or journeys of these children. To fill this gap, using its statutory section 2F powers, the CCo conducted a child-level data collection from local authorities to learn more about these children.

Using the Department for Education's child-level administrative education data, the CCo identified which children were present in the data at one point in time, but not present at a later time. These children, from the point of view of the centrally held data, appeared to have dropped off school rolls to unknown destinations.

Inclusion criteria

Children in scope of this collection were:

- **Aged 4 to 14 at the start of the 2021/22 academic year**[vi] (equivalent to Reception to Year 10). Children aged 3 and below were excluded as they were below compulsory school age so had no obligation to remain on school rolls. Children in Year 11 and above were excluded as they may reasonably move in the next year to destinations outside the scope of the administrative data, such as apprenticeships.

- **Present in the 2021/22 administrative data** and recorded as living in an English local authority.

- **Not present in the 2022/23 administrative data**, and therefore appeared to have dropped off school rolls.

The administrative data used was the Spring School Census and the Alternative Provision (AP) Census.[vii] The census date of both of these collections is the third Thursday of each year, and so the coverage of this collection was children who were present on 20 January 2022, but not present on 19 January 2023. The School Census covers all pupils in state-funded schools and nurseries, and pupils in non-maintained special schools. The AP Census covers all children in placements commissioned and wholly funded by a local authority, and which are not already in scope of the School Census (for example, unregistered alternative provision and independent schools where a local authority is wholly paying the tuition fees).

This left a total cohort of 81,940 children.[viii]

[vi] This is the child's age as at midnight of 31/08/2021.

[vii] The Individualised Learner Record (ILR), which covers colleges and other providers of further education, could also have been used to identify children who fall off school rolls. This would have allowed the collection to extend up to children in Years 11 and 12. However, the ILR does not collect the same IDs as the School and AP Censuses, which would have complicated the data request CCo sent to local authorities. Additionally, older children were not the primary focus of this study.

[viii] The only pupils removed at this stage were 75 pupils with no unique pupil number (UPN), as that was the ID the CCo sent to local authority to identify children. While all pupils should have a UPN, these pupils were perhaps missing theirs because of administrative or data errors.

Sampling approach

To reduce the burden on local authorities, the cohort was randomly sampled to reduce its size. Stratified sampling was performed by age, gender and ethnicity on the cohort in each local authority.[ix] The sampling was designed so that the size of the sampled cohort in each local authority would be the greater of: half of the size of their unsampled cohort; or 50 children. Local authorities with less than 50 children in their unsampled cohort were sent the full list with no children removed.

The quality of the sampling was tested using Pearson's chi-squared test. The test checked that the distribution of each characteristic individually was statistically similar in both the unsampled and sampled cohorts in each local authority. Although special educational need (SEN) status was not used in the sampling itself, it was used in the tests, to ensure that its distribution had been preserved through sampling. Across the 608 tests conducted (152 local authorities with 4 characteristics each – age, gender, ethnicity and SEN status), the average p-value – the probability that the output from the test could have occurred under the null hypothesis, that the distribution observed after sampling is the same as the original population distribution – was 0.78, and was never less than 0.05. After analysis of the p-values, 132 tests would be expected to be false positives, or less than 1 per local authority. These were interpreted as strong results, indicative that the sampling was very likely to be representative.

This led to a final sample size of 44,839 children sent to local authorities, 55% of the total cohort of 81,940.

Data fields collected from local authorities

For each child, the CCo asked local authorities the following 4 questions:

[ix] Sampling by special educational needs (SEN) provision was also tested. However, this substantially reduced the measures of sampling quality. This was because special educational needs are correlated with age, gender and ethnicity. As such, SEN was not used in the sampling.

- Question 1a: What was the child's latest known destination in the period 21/01/2022 (the day after the 2021/22 Spring censuses, the earliest they could have possibly left school rolls) to 19/01/2023 (the day of the 2022/23 Spring censuses, the latest date they were known to have left school rolls)? If you have multiple records for a child, return the most recent, so long as that record falls within the period 21/01/2022 to 19/01/2023.

- Question 1b: If the child's latest known destination was in a registered school, what was the URN or LAESTAB[x] of that school?

- Question 1c: If you selected 'other' to question 1a, please specify here (free text).

- Question 2: Was the child ever suspected or known to be a CME at any point in the period 21/01/2022 to 19/01/2023? Unlike questions 1a, 1b and 1c, which ask about the latest known destination of a child, question 2 instead asks if the child was known or suspected to be a CME at any point between the 2021/22 Censuses and the 2022/23 Censuses. The options were:

  o Known to be a CME

  o Suspected to be a CME

  o Neither known nor suspected to be a CME

  o Unknown

Local authorities were given the following list of 21 options for question 1a. If multiple options applied, local authorities were instructed to select the first numerically. This is a limitation, as it hid children enrolled at an unregistered provider – a population of concern for the CCo – if they were also enrolled at a registered school.

- Enrolment at a registered school:

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[x] LAESTAB (or Local Authority Establishment number) is a concatenation of the 3-digit code of the school's local authority and the school's 4-digit Department for Education number.

1. Registered mainstream independent school

2. Registered special independent school

3. State-funded mainstream school (maintained, academy or free school)

4. State-funded special school (maintained, academy or free school)

5. State-funded alternative provision (pupil referral unit, academy alternative provision, or free school alternative provision)

- Unregistered education and training:

6. Unregistered education setting

7. Unregistered online provider

8. Unregistered 1:1 or small group private tuition

9. Work based placement, including apprenticeships

10. Elective home education

- Missing education:

11. Not enrolled at any education setting and not receiving education otherwise (i.e. fits the statutory definition of CME)

12. Not receiving any education but awaiting provision (i.e. currently CME but will soon receive an education)

13. Child is suspected to be a CME (e.g. they have been referred to the local authority's CME team) but investigations are ongoing

- Other destinations:

14. Medical care

15. Youth offender's institute

16. Moved home, or moved to a school, outside of England

17. Deceased

18. Other

- Unknown destinations:

  19. Unknown because the child is known to the local authority but information on their destination is not available

  20. Unknown because this child is not known to the local authority

  21. Unknown because this data is not routinely collected or has been lost

The CCo received 100% of the data requested from all 152 local authorities.[xi]

Free text responses

All free text responses to question 1c were manually reviewed, and either categorised into one of the 21 options provided in question 1a or to a new category created through manual review. As these new categories were not present in the original collection, they were not used in the analysis as local authorities may not have described them under question 1c consistently. However, it is interesting to note them:

- Further education provider or other 14+ provider (mapped to 'state-funded mainstream school')

- Special post-16 institution (mapped to 'independent special school')

[xi] Cumbria split into two local authorities between 2021/22 and 2022/23: Cumberland; and Westmorland and Furness. The 2021/22 data only contains Cumbria. This made it impossible for the CCo to know, for each child who had lived in Cumbria, which of the two new local authorities should be asked for their destination. As such, the two new local authorities were sent a joint data request.

- Support through a personal budget (mapped to 'unregistered education setting')

- Education other than at a school (EOTAS) (mapped to 'unregistered education setting')

- Education from care provider (mapped to 'unregistered education setting')

- Relocated refugee (mapped to 'other')

- Police or witness protection (mapped to 'other')

- The local authority believes that the child is above compulsory school age (mapped to 'other')

- The local authority believes that the child is below compulsory school age (mapped to 'other')

- The child has moved to another local authority and has been referred to their CME team (mapped to 'suspected to be a CME')

- Unknown because the child has moved to another local authority (mapped to 'unknown because the child is known to the local authority but information on their destination is not available')

- Unknown because the child's school has not shared data with the local authority (mapped to 'unknown because the child is known to the local authority but information on their destination is not available')

- Unknown, but the local authority is aware that the child has left school (mapped to 'unknown because the child is known to the local authority but information on their destination is not available')

Data cleaning

The School and AP Censuses primarily use two different IDs to identify children: a Unique Pupil Number (UPN), an ID issued by schools to all children who enrol, and recognised by local authorities; and a Pupil Matching Reference (PMR), an ID used internally by the Department for Education for matching datasets together, but not recognised by local authorities. As such, the CCo used PMR to construct the initial population of in-scope children, and then provided the UPNs attached to those PMRs to local authorities as part of the data collection. However, it was noted during analysis that there were 550 PMRs which

had disappeared between 2021/22 and 2022/23, but their corresponding UPNs appeared in both years. This error was assumed to have occurred where the Department for Education had erroneously assigned a new PMR to an existing UPN which already had a PMR. Under this assumption, these children should never have been in the collection, and so were removed from the analysis.

Table 1: The number of children at each stage

Whole population: all children who left the state education system in 2021/22	81,940
Full sample: the children sent to local authorities as part of the office's data collection, for whom all data requested was received	44,839
Full sample, minus the children removed during cleaning, because their UPNs reappear in the 2022/23 Spring censuses	44,289
Study sample: the four groups of children predominantly used in the previous report's[39] analysis, including children who became children missing education	23,257
Children who became children missing from education: the focus of this report	2,868

During cleaning, the following rules were applied: if a child was recorded as known or suspected to be a CME in question 1a, then the local authority's response to question 2 was replaced with either known or suspected to be a CME (i.e. children whose latest known destination was to be a CME were also a CME at some point during the year); and if a child was unknown to the local authority in question 1a, then the local authority's response to question 2 was replaced with unknown (i.e. the local authority cannot claim to know if a child has been a CME during the year if they also claim to not know the child). These assumptions prefer responses from the local authority to questions which required greater specificity from them.

Joining to administrative data

The data returned by local authorities was joined to the following data sources:

- Get Information About Schools (GIAS), for the type and Ofsted rating of the school given in response to question 1b, as well as the type and Ofsted rating of the school the child attended

in Spring 2021/22. Each school's most recent Ofsted rating was used,[xii] and no limits were placed on how old that rating may be. If the school's type in GIAS disagreed with the type of school the local authority reported in response to question 1a, then the local authority's response to question 1a was ignored and replaced by the GIAS information on school type.

- The School Census and AP Census pupil data, for the age, gender, ethnicity, special educational needs provision and type of special educational need of each child, as well as the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) of their home neighbourhood (lower layer super output area), based on home postcode.

- The School Census attendance data, for whether the child had been rarely absent, persistently absent, or severely absent in 2021/22, and for their absence rate since 2012/13.

- The Children in Need Census data, for whether the children been a child in need on 31st March 2022, and if so their primary reason, identified by social workers, for being in need.

- The Children Looked After Census data, for whether the children had been looked after by their local authority on 31 March 2022.

Weighting

Children in the sampled data returned by local authorities were weighted by age, gender and ethnicity (the same characteristics used in the stratified sampling) so that their distribution by these three characteristics matches the distribution in the whole population of children in England who left the state education system.

This was done so that estimates could be made about the total number of children who left the state education system in 2021/22, for example the number who went into elective home education. This was carried out because, as described, the stratified sampling was not perfectly representative.

[xii] As of 19/10/2023.

Weighted numbers have only been used to report estimates of the total number of children in a destination across England. Unweighted numbers have been used for proportions.

Qualitative data collection and analysis

Group interviews

The office conducted seven group interviews with 22 officials across eight local authorities, representing London, Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West, the South West, and the West Midlands. All interviews were conducted online between November 2023 and January 2024.

The choice of local authorities took region into account but was primarily informed by the data returns local authorities provided. These showed, for three of the local authorities interviewed, high numbers of CME and, in two cases, written comments that the office wished to explore further. The purpose of these interviews was to understand local authority processes when children leave school rolls.

A limitation of this research is that no children, parents or schools were interviewed to inform this report, however, the office's previous report 'Lost in Transition' drew upon focus groups with home educating parents.[40]

Desk-based review of Children Missing Education policies

Between November 2023 and April 2024, the office conducted a desk-based review of children missing education policies published on local authority websites. These documents were variously described as policies, strategies, plans and procedures. From the 152 local authorities, the office was able to identify 129 local authority policies on CME. In some cases, the office was only able to find the local authority published guidance for schools in the local authority. The office aimed to use documents which detailed the children missing education procedure for the whole local authority. Where this was the only available document on the local authority procedures, the office used this document. Where the only publicly available policy on missing children was written by the safeguarding partnership, the office did not include this document in the analysis.

For each local authority, the office recorded what detail the policy provided on:

- Their definition of the term 'children missing education';

- Any steps taken to prevent children from missing education;

- Any partners the local authority worked with to locate children missing education;

- Any support on offer to help children missing education return to education; and

- Steps taken in cases where a child missing education proved difficult to trace.

Annex 1: Summary of key findings

Table 2: Summary of findings

	All pupils in state-funded schools	Children who became a CME and whose last-known destination was...				
		Registered education	Elective home education	Known or suspected to be a CME	Left England	Unknown
Age						
4 to 9-year-olds	55%	51%	24%	41%	60%	51%
10 year olds	9.5%	19%	22%	22%	9.8%	20%
11 to 14-year-olds	36%	30%	54%	37%	30%	29%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Ethnicity (major)						
White	71%	48%	75%	63%	45%	48%
Asian	12%	22%	5.4%	11%	22%	26%
Mixed	6.6%	7.2%	9.7%	6.9%	8.5%	8.0%
Black	5.8%	9.9%	4.6%	7.6%	13%	6.3%
Other	2.2%	8.1%	*	7.6%	7.8%	7.0%
Not recorded	1.6%	4.6%	*	4.4%	3.8%	4.1%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Ethnicity (minor)						
White - British	64%	21%	58%	32%	16%	24%
White - other	6.8%	20%	4.1%	19%	25%	16%
White - Gypsy/Roma	0.3%	5.5%	5.4%	8.5%	3.4%	5.3%
White - Irish	0.3%	*	*	0.8%	*	*
White - traveller of Irish heritage	0.1%	1.4%	5.7%	2.3%	0.7%	2.2%
Black - African	4.0%	8.0%	*	5.7%	11%	4.5%
Black - Caribbean	1.0%	1.2%	*	1.0%	*	*
Black - other	0.8%	*	*	0.9%	1.2%	*
Asian - Pakistani	4.5%	8.6%	4.1%	3.9%	7.5%	7.4%
Asian - Indian	3.4%	6.6%	*	3.1%	8.1%	13%
Asian - other	2.0%	4.3%	0.0%	2.4%	4.5%	3.4%
Asian - Bangladeshi	1.8%	1.7%	*	0.8%	0.9%	1.9%
Asian - Chinese	0.6%	0.8%	0.0%	*	0.7%	*
Mixed - other	2.5%	3.5%	3.8%	3.5%	4.3%	3.4%
Mixed - white and Asian	1.6%	1.4%	*	1.5%	1.8%	3.1%
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	1.6%	1.0%	3.2%	1.2%	0.7%	*

Mixed - white and black African	0.9%	1.2%	*	*	1.7%	*
Other	2.2%	8.1%	*	7.6%	7.8%	7.0%
Not recorded	1.6%	4.6%	3.5%	4.4%	3.8%	4.1%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Gender						
Male	51%	53%	45%	50%	51%	49%
Female	49%	47%	55%	50%	49%	51%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) quartile						
Most deprived 25% of neighbourhoods	31%	41%	43%	46%	39%	30%
More deprived 25% of neighbourhoods	26%	26%	25%	26%	32%	27%
Less deprived 25% of neighbourhoods	23%	19%	20%	17%	16%	25%
Least deprived 25% of neighbourhoods	21%	13%	11%	11%	13%	19%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) decile						
1st Decile (most deprived)	13%	19%	23%	20%	18%	10%
2nd Decile	12%	14%	13%	18%	14%	12%
3rd Decile	11%	15%	12%	13%	14%	11%
4th Decile	11%	11%	9.5%	12%	14%	14%
5th Decile	9.8%	8.1%	12%	9.1%	11%	8.6%
6th Decile	9.3%	8.7%	11%	7.1%	7.8%	9.4%
7th Decile	8.9%	7.4%	6.2%	7.2%	5.7%	9.3%
8th Decile	8.6%	6.2%	6.5%	5.5%	4.9%	12%
9th Decile	8.5%	5.0%	3.8%	4.8%	5.3%	7.5%
10th Decile (least deprived)	8.2%	5.3%	4.3%	3.5%	5.6%	5.1%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Special educational needs						
No identified SEN	84%	84%	69%	78%	87%	88%
SEN Support	12%	12%	25%	17%	10%	9.8%
Education, Health and Care Plan	3.9%	3.7%	5.7%	4.9%	2.4%	2.4%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Child in need status						
Child in need on 31 March 2022	2.6%	4.8%	5.7%	7.1%	3.5%	5.0%
Not a child in need	97%	95%	94%	93%	96%	95%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Looked after child status						
Child looked after on 31 March 2022	0.6%	0.9%	0.0%	1.4%	0.5%	2.1%
Not looked after	99%	99%	100%	99%	100%	98%

Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*
Attendance pattern						
Rarely absent	76%	51%	17%	36%	53%	51%
Persistently absent	22%	38%	50%	45%	41%	39%
Severely absent	1.7%	11%	33%	19%	6.3%	9.5%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*

See 'Key terms' for definitions.

* indicates that figures have been suppressed to protect confidentiality due to small numbers.

Annex 2: Mapping of recommendations

In 'The Big Ambition' the Children's Commissioner outlined a set of foundational reforms needed to create a new child-friendly system of government.[41] These included:

- A unique childhood identifier so that no child falls through the gaps in support;

- An outcomes framework, shared across government;

- Every child has a single 'Child's Plan' setting out what, if any, additional support they need;

- Every parent or carer can easily navigate the public services which exist to serve their children;

- There are clear, reliable, long-term funding streams for children, based on consistent measures of local need;

- All services are held to a consistent standard and are directly accountable to the children, parents and carers that they serve;

- A joint children's workforce strategy to ensure those working with children are caring, professional and equipped to do their jobs, and that there is a strong pipeline into senior leadership roles; and

- The Department for Education has direct responsibility for the delivery of core services for children.

The recommendations in this report build on these themes. We have mapped the recommendations accordingly.

Theme	Recommendation	Foundational reform
Improve understanding	Local authorities across England should adopt a single consistent definition of 'children missing education'.	Shared government vision for good outcomes
	The Department for Education should issue guidance on how to deal with instances where children are receiving unsuitable education but are on a school roll	Consistent accountability system for all children's services
Preventing Children missing education: Using data to identify children at risk	Border Force should regularly inform local authorities when children arrive in the country and register their new address as being in their locality.	Shared government vision for good outcomes
	When local authorities are informed of children arriving in their area, either through Border Force, Council Tax or other sources, there should be clear and consistent guidance given to children and families about how they can register for a school place in their new local authority.	Consistent accountability system for all children's services
	Every local authority should make use of the data they have from birth registrations and Border Force to identify any children	Services which are easy for children, parents and carers to navigate

	approaching compulsory school age without a known educational placement for September	Unique ID
	Every local authority should conduct a regular review of School Census data to identify any children who have left the school roll	
Preventing Children missing education: Improving practices around off-rolling children	The Department for Education should provide training materials for schools on how to de-register children who leave their school rolls and how to use the School2School database.	Unique ID
	Ofsted should hold schools accountable for the extent to which they follow the guidance on off-rolling children.	Consistent accountability system for all children's services
Preventing Children missing education: Proactively supporting children at risk of missing education	Every local authority should convene a multi-disciplinary forum to discuss cases of children at risk of missing education	Shared government vision for good outcomes
Developing a coherent approach to trace children missing education: Creating a reliable database for children missing education cases	The Department for Education should update the School2School database to be easier to use, to enable data sharing across local authorities, and to be integrated with management information systems.	Shared government vision for good outcomes

		Unique ID
	The Department for Education should introduce a central register of children not in school to record the educational destinations of children without a school place.	
Developing a coherent approach to trace children missing education: Adopting a consistent approach to data sharing	The updated Children Missing Education guidance should set out a common national framework for data sharing to track children missing education	Unique ID
	The new guidance should set clear thresholds for what counts as acceptable evidence in instances where a child is suspected to have left England or to have left a locality.	Shared government vision for good outcomes
	The government should introduce a consistent unique identifier for all children, based on the existing NHS number	Consistent accountability system for all children's services Unique ID
Developing a coherent approach to trace children missing education: Establishing a consistent risk-based approach to triaging	The Children Missing Education guidance should be updated to clearly state what local authorities should do after they have conducted an extensive search for children missing education making use of all available	Shared government vision for good outcomes

untraceable children missing education cases.	information sources. Local authority CME teams should be given powers to automatically refer such cases to safeguarding partnerships to progress	Consistent accountability system for all children's services
Supporting children to return to education: Ensuring there are sufficient suitable school places	Local authorities and multi-academy trusts should be given powers to open special schools in addition to the existing special free school wave.	Clear, long-term funding streams
Supporting children to return to education: speeding up the process to return children to education	Local authorities should become the admissions authority for all schools. This would simplify the process for children and families and provide greater oversight of pupil movement at the local authority level.	Consistent accountability system for all children's services Services which are easy for children, parents and carers to navigate
	The government should revise the School Attendance Order, shortening the length of time it takes to place a child in a school.	Services which are easy for children, parents and carers to navigate
Supporting children to return to education: removing	A new pot of funding should be created to resource children missing education teams to	Every child to have a single plan

barriers to returning to education	prevent children missing education and to support children who face additional challenges to reintegrating into school	Clear, long-term funding streams
	As part of the new guidance on children missing education, the government should publish best practice examples of the support available to reintegrate children who have been long-term missing education or who are not ready to engage with a school environment.	Shared government vision for good outcomes

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