

Reducing school absence

Innovation lessons from the last
Labour government



About this report

This report looks at how the last Labour government of the late 1990s and 2000s addressed the issue of school absence. It makes recommendations on how the government should tackle school absence now, and draws out wider lessons for the approach to mission-led government.

 [@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](https://twitter.com/instituteforgovernment.org.uk)
 www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

About the author

Moirá Wallace is a senior fellow at the Institute for Government. She is a former permanent secretary who began her career in the Treasury and No.10, and later served in delivery roles in the Home Office and the Department of Energy and Climate Change. From 1997 to 2001 she was director of the Social Exclusion Unit, which worked on school absence policy as one of its first projects.

Between 2002 and 2005 she set up and ran the Office for Criminal Justice Reform, a shared team reporting jointly to the home secretary, justice secretary and attorney general. From 2005 to 2008 she was Home Office director general of crime and policing. She was permanent secretary of the Department of Energy and Climate Change from its formation in 2008 until 2012.

She is currently a visiting professor of practice at the LSE Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, where she has been researching policy and outcomes for disadvantaged young people, and has researched the history of absence policy from 1997 to 2019 as part of a larger study of youth policy.¹

Contents

List of figures, tables and boxes	4
Summary	5
1. How did the last Labour government approach school absence?	12
2. What happened to absence levels?	20
3. School absence during the Coalition and Conservative governments	23
4. How to tackle school absence now	26
5. Recommendations	29
6. Lessons for mission-led government	33
Annex: School absence explained	37
References	43

List of figures, tables and boxes

Figure 1	Absence rate, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24	6
Figure 2	Pupils who are persistently absent, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24	7
Figure 3	Penalty notices issued for school absence, England, 1997–98 to 2018–19	15
Figure 4	Pupils who are severely absent, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24	20
Figure 5	Absence rate by eligibility for free school meals, state-funded secondary schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24	21
Figure 6	Absence rate by SEND status, state-funded secondary schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24	21
Figure 7	11- to 15-year-old pupils reporting two or more health complaints at least once a week, England, 2002–22	28
Figure 8	11- to 15-year-olds' perceptions of school, England, 2014–22	28
Figure 9	Pupils who are persistently absent by demographic group, state-funded secondary schools in England, 2023–24	39
Figure 10	Pupils who are severely absent by demographic group, state-funded secondary schools in England, 2023–24	39
Table 1	Absence rate in state-funded schools, England, 1997–98 to 2023–24	37
Table 2	Pupils who are persistently absent, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24	37
Table 3	Pupils who are severely absent, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24	38
Box 1	Summary recommendations on school absence	8
Box 2	What lessons should be learnt for mission-led government?	10
Box 3	Reasons why young people may be absent from school	40

Summary

Keir Starmer's government faces a uniquely difficult set of policy and delivery problems in an enormously challenging economic and fiscal context. Within that, it has committed to a new approach of mission-led government that will work in a more joined-up way to deliver ambitious and measurable long-term objectives.

These aspirations have much in common with the policy goals and delivery approach of the last Labour government of the late 1990s and 2000s. In a new series, the Institute for Government will explore what lessons Starmer and his cabinet can learn from the experiences of those Blair and Brown governments. It begins with this case study on absence from school.

Why school absence matters

School absence is a serious problem whose impacts are felt across society. Because of school absence, pupils miss important lessons, teachers have extra burdens of catch-up, and parents have to look after a child who is at home. Poor attendance is linked to low attainment and being NEET (not in education, employment or training), alongside a wide range of other risks, including poor mental health, self-harm, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, unemployment and offending.

Absence can become an issue for any child. But absence rates are significantly higher for disadvantaged children, including pupils eligible for free school meals and those who have special educational needs and disabilities.

Absence can be triggered by multiple factors in young people's lives. The most frequent cause is and has always been illness (physical or mental) but many other factors can lie behind it, including special educational needs, boredom or disengagement at school, severe difficulties at home, fear of bullying or crime, problems with sleep, and transport difficulties.*

Absence was reduced in the 2000s

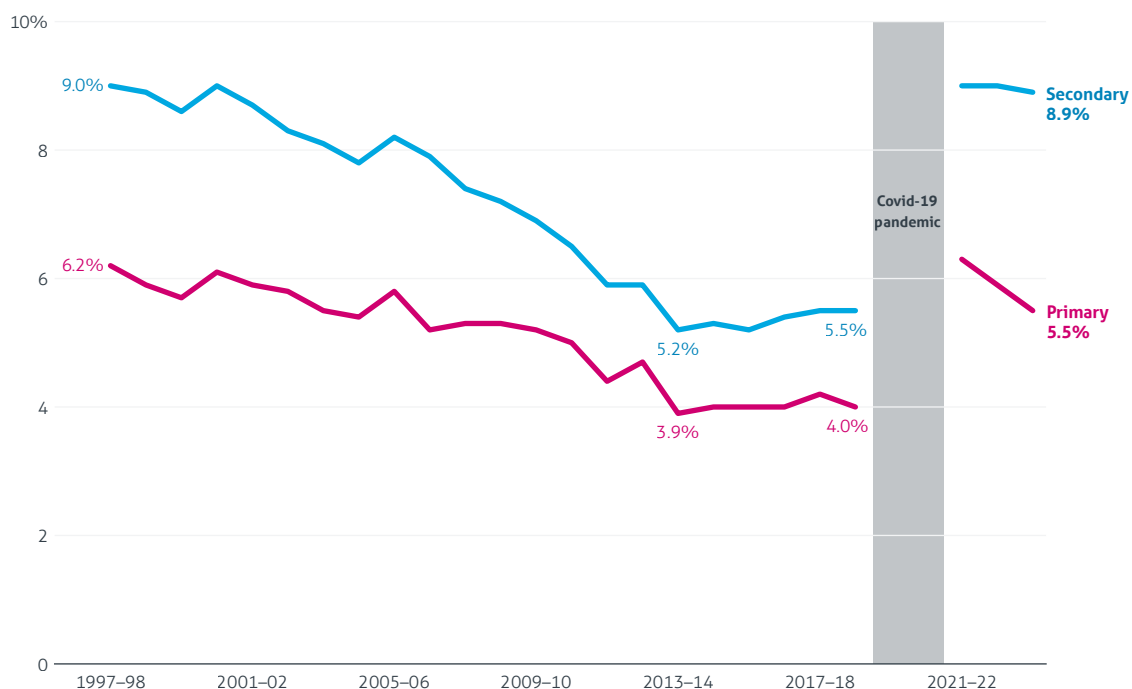
When the Blair government took office in 1997, school absence rates were high and absence was rightly identified as a driver of low attainment and crime. Tony Blair made the issue an early priority, and throughout the Blair and Brown administrations the government pursued a wide range of actions to tackle the causes of absence and encourage better attendance.

* See the Appendix for more detail on the distribution of absence, its costs and its many contributory causes.

A long-term downward trend in absence began after 2000–01 and continued for more than a decade. By 2013–14 school absence had fallen by a third in primary schools and by 42% in secondary schools (see Figure 1). 'Persistent absence' rates (the proportion of pupils missing 10% of their schooling or more) improved even faster, falling by around 45% in the seven years from 2006–07 when it was first measured (see Figure 2).

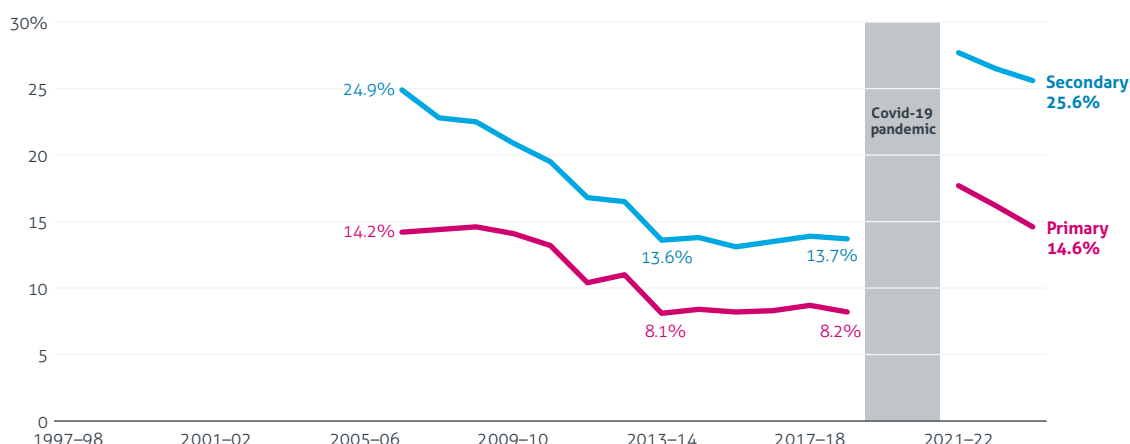
After 2013–14, progress stalled and absence began to edge up for disadvantaged groups, especially in secondary schools. Then absence rates exploded in the wake of the pandemic.

Figure 1 **Absence rate, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Children, Schools and Families, 'Pupil absence in schools in England, including pupil characteristics', 2006–07 and DfE, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2006–07 to 2023–24. Notes: Absence rate is the total number of sessions missed due to absence for all pupils as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions for all pupils. One session is equal to half a day. 2019–20 is omitted because data was not published. 2020–21 is omitted because absence rate excluded schooling missed due to Covid circumstances. 2021–22 data excludes a small amount of absence related to Covid-19 testing.

Figure 2 **Pupils who are persistently absent, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Education, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2006–07 to 2023–24. Notes: Persistent absence is the share of pupils missing at least 10% of school sessions. A session is a half day. Data is not available before 2006–07. 2019–20 is omitted because data was not published. 2020–21 is omitted because the data excluded schooling missed due to Covid circumstances. 2021–22 data excludes a small amount of absence related to Covid-19 testing.

School absence is now an urgent problem again

Past progress in reducing overall absence rates has been reversed. The latest full year figures (for 2023–24) show that nearly 1.5 million pupils were persistently absent in England, with a particularly serious problem in secondary schools. More than 25% of pupils in state-funded secondary schools, and 43% of secondary pupils eligible for free school meals, missed at least 10% of their schooling. Improvement since the pandemic has been slow and some things have got worse, with the proportion of pupils missing at least half their schooling deteriorating year on year (see Figure 4).

What can the government learn from its predecessors?

This paper sets out how the last Labour government approached school absence, the outcomes that were achieved, then examines the trends seen under the Coalition and Conservative governments. It then draws out two sets of implications. Twelve recommendations on absence suggest how the Department for Education (DfE) and its partners should reduce current absence rates. Then 10 lessons for 'mission-led government' highlight how the government can learn from the experience of the 2000s to embed an effective approach to delivery and achieve its objectives.

Box 1: Summary recommendations on school absence

1. Understand the cost of absence

The government should commission and publish a comprehensive estimate of the costs of the absence and missing school crisis, which will run to billions. Understanding the cost will help ensure it receives the necessary attention and resources.

2. Identify and communicate the root causes of absence

Absence was reduced in the 2000s by tackling its causes. To achieve success, the current government will need to acknowledge and tackle all the factors that drive the current absence problem, including adolescent health, the special needs system, school disengagement, family stress, bullying and crime.

3. Bring key partners on board in a comprehensive strategy

DfE should mobilise effort across government and with the front line in a long-term strategy on absence and missing school, covering prevention, response and recovery. This should be led by a national delivery board chaired by a DfE minister, and link to a proper government co-ordinating mechanism for policy on children and young people.

4. Put attendance at the heart of schools policy

Well-resourced schools, adequate special educational needs support, curriculum reform and attractive post-16 progression routes all helped improve attendance in the past. To succeed in reducing absence, the DfE will need to achieve a recovery in all these areas.

5. Support the front line with good practice

DfE has made a good start in helping schools access good practice in managing attendance. It needs to sustain this and tackle new topics, focusing on severe absence, disadvantaged groups, reintegration of absentees, remote education, and best use of new technology.

6. Rebuild the relationship with parents

The state rightly expects parents to support their child's school attendance. But many parents are struggling and worried, and need help and advice. Strengthening parents' ability to support their children, and building trusting relationships between home and schools, will be key to success in the future.

7. Ensure health services play a bigger role in tackling absence

The single biggest cause of school absence is, and always has been, illness. A public health approach to school absence could achieve a double dividend – catching health conditions early and helping children stay connected with learning with all the protective benefits that can bring.

8. Draw on the resources of policing and crime prevention

The safer streets mission and the fight against absence each depend on the other succeeding. The Home Office and DfE should work together closely and ensure that neighbourhood policing teams contribute to safety around schools and on home-to-school routes.

9. Encourage and drive local partnerships

Local partnership working on children's issues has been under severe strain in recent years. DfE should promote effective local partnerships, invite local authorities to the table alongside schools and trusts, share good practice in local partnership working, and communicate joined-up national thinking on prevention.

10. Make the strategy outcome-focused

The government should set a clear target for cutting absence. This would provide a benchmark against which to judge resources and results, and drive the energy of implementation. A sensible aim would be to match past success, reducing persistent absence rates by 45% and severe absence by half over seven years.

11. Jump-start action through funded 'whole system' pilots

The government needs a catalyst for joined-up local action on absence. This could be through the 'test and learn' programme, or DfE could create a modern equivalent to Excellence in Cities and the Behaviour Improvement Programme, to support a whole-system response to absence, behaviour and attainment problems at local level.

12. Watch the data like a hawk, evaluate and adapt

Close progress monitoring and evaluation were key to the last Labour government's school absence programme. The current government has better in-year data on absence, and plentiful information on drivers such as bullying or children's perceptions of school. It should use data to track progress and alter its approach if needed.

Box 2: What lessons should be learnt for mission-led government?

1. Governments can improve complex social outcomes

The Blair government's outcome targets were seen as risky at the time and the use of targets was not continued by the Coalition or the Conservative administrations. But the case study on school absence supports the new government's mission approach: outcomes can be improved – and bad outcomes can be prevented – by sustained and coherent action.

2. The prime minister's involvement drives priority and accountability

The last Labour government's school absence policy – like many of its achievements – shows the impact the prime minister can have in calling for action and tracking it through the Delivery Unit and No.10 'stocktakes'. The Starmer government was right to re-institute this system and should learn from the features that made it successful.

3. The government should set targets for its pivotal objectives

The decision to set public targets was a key ingredient in the success of absence policy in the 2000s, providing the spur to match resource and attention to the scale of the problem. The government should not be afraid to set clear and well-designed targets for pivotal components of the missions.

4. Implementation requires specific skills, which the government needs to foster

The new government needs to remember that its move back to an outcome-based approach to public services is an enormous change. Ministers are right to demand high performance – but they should also ensure that the system is developing and rewarding the delivery skills they require.

5. Problems with cross-cutting causes need cross-cutting solutions

Absence could not have been reduced in the 2000s by schools alone: action extended beyond the school gate to policing, crime reduction, drug treatment services, youth services and parenting support. Departments will always need to reach outside their own silos to tackle complex problems. If they are a willing partner to others when asked for help, they are more likely to get a positive response when the roles are reversed.

6. The big gains come from policies that reinforce each other

Behind school absence lies a bigger picture, of dramatic improvements in several forms of adolescent disadvantage over a short space of time. This is particularly marked for the generation who turned 16 around 2012. Compared with their predecessors this generation experienced much lower levels of absence from school, and also less exclusion, less teenage drug taking, lower alcohol use, better Level 2 attainment, higher staying-on rates, and fewer unwanted conceptions. Each of these developments is a story in its own right. But the fact that they all improved so significantly at the same time suggests a reinforcement effect, as each improving outcome reduced the risk factors for other outcomes.

7. In a tight spending climate, collaboration is vital

The last Labour government ended up with coherent structures and objectives on children and youth, though it took a few years before this came about. Now, rebuilding a proper government co-ordinating mechanism for policy on children and young people would improve delivery and reduce cost, as well as contributing to several of the government's missions. This is an issue the cabinet ought to address without delay.

8. There are low-cost interventions that work

With the spending review on everyone's mind, it is easy to feel that delivery is all about money. But public spending was not the only tool used to reduce absence, or other delivery outcomes tackled by the last Labour government. Today's missions should seek out such low-cost redesign and behavioural measures and harness their power wherever possible.

9. Mission boards need to be visible and engaged with the front line

National targets don't mean that delivery is achieved in Whitehall. Communicating and engaging with front-line partners should be a priority for Labour's mission boards. This will allow partners and funders to understand the wider picture and see how they can contribute. It also creates space for some of the key benefits of mission-led government, by encouraging co-creation, innovation and citizen engagement.

10. The government should use success stories to drive change

Much of the current debate about government effectiveness is being conducted in the abstract. Concepts such as 'rewiring' or 'being more agile' are not wrong, but they are unspecific. Ministers will make faster progress if they convey a clear picture of the delivery methods they want to see, backed up by evidence that they can work. That is where this case study, and the series that follows, can help: by showing what a different way of making and delivering policy achieved in the past.

1. How did the last Labour government approach school absence?

We begin by summarising how the 1997–2010 Labour government approached school absence.

Labour made absence an early strategic priority in 1997

Absence was one of several social issues propelled up the priority list in the early months of the Blair government. At the time, the focus was on 'truancy', more commonly described today as unauthorised absence. Several high-profile reports had drawn attention to the levels of truancy in schools, its correlation with low attainment, and high levels of offending among regular truants.¹ Getting children back into school was thus seen as critical to the new government's aims both on education and on crime. But this was part of a broader project. Blair's first major policy speech, at the Aylesbury Estate on 2 June 1997, spoke of his desire to have "no forgotten people" in the new Britain, and criticised the government machine for lacking coherence and too often working at cross purposes.²

Blair's No.10 created capacity to work on joined-up social problems

Blair followed up the Aylesbury Estate speech by creating the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), a new team in the Cabinet Office, whose purpose was to find "joined-up solutions to joined-up problems". The unit began work in December, and was staffed by civil servants from different government departments alongside front-line secondees. Truancy (and the related issue of school exclusion) represented its first project, and the prime minister kicked off its work by chairing a summit on truancy and exclusion at a London school.³

The SEU worked across government and with the front line to understand root causes

The SEU worked closely with DfE,^{*} the Home Office and other Whitehall departments – but also gathered evidence from local authorities, the police, other key front-line professions, and academic research. It conducted visits to schools and other projects working with young people in different parts of the country. The unit's analysis and recommendations were discussed with its ministerial network (on which eight departments were represented). The recommendations were agreed by cabinet as government policy and the SEU's report was then published in May 1998.⁴

^{*} The department responsible for schools has changed its name and role several times during the last three decades. It was the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) from 1995 until 2001, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) until 2007, then the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) until 2010. It became the Department for Education in 2010. This case study will use the term Department for Education and abbreviation DfE to refer to all of these, except in relation to the specific discussion of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

The report identified complex causes of absence and fragmented responsibilities

The report's analysis confirmed the importance of tackling absence, citing links between truancy and low qualifications, unemployment and homelessness. The connection with crime was particularly striking, with the Metropolitan Police reporting that 5% of all offences were committed by children during school hours.

The report found that truancy was more common for older pupils and children from poorer families. It identified a wide variety of factors contributing to truancy, including poor literacy, anxiety about coursework deadlines, dislike of particular lessons or teachers, and the impact of bullying, as well as parents condoning truancy or expecting their children to look after younger siblings.*

The report found some examples of good practice both in preventing absence and responding to it, as well as in re-engaging pupils who had become disaffected. But overall, practice was inconsistent. Many schools were struggling with the basics and many were still using paper registers rather than electronic attendance management systems (which can identify absence patterns and generate instant messages to parents about missing pupils).

The SEU found that the state's response to both truancy and exclusion was under-powered and fragmented. To quote from the report's introduction:

"Many schools and other agencies lack the training, support, or simply time to get to grips with what are very difficult problems.

"All this has been compounded by fragmented responsibilities and lack of political attention at the highest level. At the moment, no one either nationally or locally has a clear overall responsibility to bring the level of truancy and exclusions down. We need to change that."

The action plan to address absence

The report announced a national target to reduce unauthorised absence by a third, underpinned by a range of policies. These included targets at the local authority level and making attendance central to DfE's area-based school improvement programmes. The government said that it would consult on disapplying the national curriculum in favour of work-related learning where that would motivate pupils better; roll out digital school registers; give police the explicit powers to take truants back to school; and introduce an option for courts to impose a 'parenting order' for parents who failed to ensure their child's school attendance.⁵

DfE took ownership of the plan and was accountable for progress

The SEU report announced that DfE would lead work to reduce truancy. The department went on to oversee and fund significant programmes of spending and good practice support over the following years, extending well beyond the SEU's original action plan. The work was overseen by a ministerial group on exclusion and

* For a fuller and more recent checklist of causes of absence see the Appendix.

truancy chaired by a DfE minister and including ministers from the Home Office, Health, Treasury, and the Minister for Housing and Local Government.⁶ As the action programme developed it was aligned with other high-priority work on tackling low attainment, poor behaviour and high exclusion rates.

The department worked closely with the front line to raise the profile of attendance

The department worked closely with local authorities and schools in taking forward its plans, recognising that it depended on local implementation and leadership. Absence became a key success measure for local authorities and schools; poor performance on attendance attracted attention; and Ofsted inspections scrutinised schools' progress on attendance. Many local authorities took the message on attendance to heart and made it a key part of their education improvement plans.⁷

Two key spending programmes kick-started improvement

The department created two main spending programmes to jump-start progress in areas facing the biggest challenges. Excellence in Cities (EiC) was a DfE-funded programme aimed at improving educational achievement in disadvantaged areas. It was focused on cities because, at the time, 95% of schools in which more than 35% of pupils were known to be eligible for free school meals were in urban areas.⁸ EiC provided resources for learning mentors to help pupils with academic or personal issues, and funded in-school learning support units to provide short-term teaching and support programmes.

Beginning in 1999 with 24 local authority areas, including all 12 Inner London boroughs, EiC grew to cover a third of secondary schools in England by 2003/04. Its budget in 2000/01, its first full year, was £139 million.^{9*} The Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP) was a follow-on programme that began in 2002 and covered the majority of local authorities by 2005/06. By that year it had spent £331 million.¹⁰ Like EiC, BIP embedded action on absence alongside behaviour and school exclusion.

Local areas chose to spend most of the money on prevention

The Behaviour Improvement Programme allowed local authorities to select multiple items from a menu of possible approaches, or to add ideas of their own. Their choices (analysed in the national evaluation) reveal the broad range of issues they saw as important:

- 91% chose anti-bullying programmes
- 71% ran initiatives to improve registration and attendance management
- 65% experimented with an alternative curriculum
- 65% introduced learning support units
- 59% chose 'extended schools' (after-school study support, sport, arts etc)
- 51% introduced police in schools
- 41% chose support for parents with children at risk.¹¹

* This and other figures in the report are cash figures i.e., in this case, 2001 prices.

Good ideas were rolled out nationally

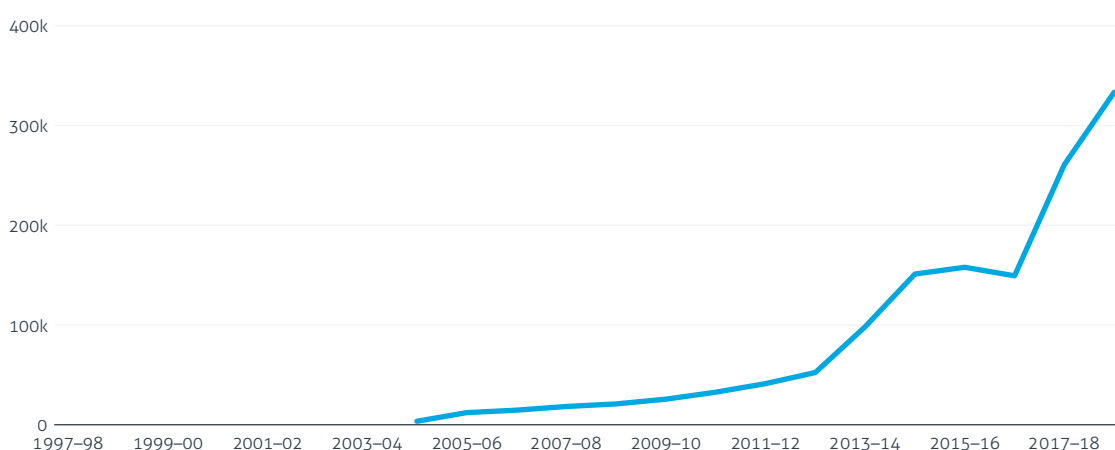
Excellence in Cities and the Behaviour Improvement Programme were bolstered by many other actions designed to accelerate take-up of the best ideas. To improve attendance management, DfE funded electronic registration systems for more than 500 schools between 2002 and 2005.¹² The department introduced increased curriculum flexibility for 14- to 16-year-olds to increase the vocational and work-related learning opportunities many young people said they wanted. The Youth Justice Board, the body set up in 1998 to oversee the youth justice system and local youth offending teams, collaborated with police leaders to roll out 'safer school partnerships', attaching a police officer to a school or cluster of schools to help tackle crime and antisocial behaviour and create a safer learning environment.

There is a wealth of evaluation evidence from these programmes, which will be discussed later. Some of the evidence was generated by Ofsted, which was a key player in disseminating lessons from emerging good practice.

Sanctions played a role alongside support

Throughout its time in office Labour emphasised the responsibility of parents for their children's school attendance. The government introduced the parenting order in 1998, which required parents to attend classes to help them improve their child's attendance, and legislated in 2003 to introduce penalty notices (fines) as an alternative to court action for parents who failed to ensure their child's regular attendance.* There was frequent press speculation that more draconian measures would be introduced – for example, withdrawing benefits from parents who failed to get their children to school – but these ideas were not taken forward. As Figure 3 shows, the use of fines grew slowly in the 2000s, and remained low relative to what was to happen under the Coalition and Conservatives.

Figure 3 **Penalty notices issued for school absence, England, 1997–98 to 2018–19**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Crowther K and Kendall S, *Investigating the use of Parental Responsibility Measures for School Attendance and Behaviour: Final Report*, DfE, 2010; DfE, 'Parental responsibility data', 2007–8 to 2018–19. Notes: Penalty notices were introduced from 2004–5.

* Parenting orders were introduced by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. The increased sanction of imprisonment was in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000. Penalty notices (fines) and the parenting contract were in the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003.

Spending reviews and PSA targets reinforced the importance of absence

DfE did not find the money for anti-absence programmes out of thin air. The Treasury was consistently supportive of resourcing work on attendance, and saw the cross-departmental impact of absence on crime and youth policy.¹³ DfE was set PSA (public service agreement) targets to reduce unauthorised absence in the spending reviews of 1998, 2000 and 2002, with the target then widening to encompass both authorised and unauthorised absence in the 2004 spending review and the government's Children's Plan (published in 2007).*

The prime minister and Delivery Unit took a close interest

The prime minister maintained continued pressure for delivery on absence. The truancy and absence targets featured on the very short list of government priorities that were directly monitored by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU) through the 2000s. One former senior DfE official recalls the "galvanising effect" on departments of being set outcome targets and then being called to Downing Street every six weeks to be held to account. And several former officials recall the wider positive effect of PMDU involvement outside these meetings:

"The Delivery Unit taught us to analyse the causes of a problem from the evidence and then systematically to design programmes to tackle those problems. That relentless focus on a whole-system approach, with constant review and revision of the approach as we learned what worked, was one of the keys to progress."

"One of the key drivers of the policy improvements we saw under Labour was a clear-eyed understanding of 'delivery chains'. PMDU 'deep dives' also deepened our understanding of how they worked."¹⁴

Absence policy was seen as part of a wider picture

Absence was not seen as an issue for DfE alone to tackle, and its wider ramifications were well understood. For example, in early 2002 a rapid increase in street robberies began to preoccupy government. The prime minister and PMDU were not convinced that front-line agencies were able to grip the robbery surge, and set up the 'street crime initiative' in March 2002. This used the COBRA crisis response machinery to gather multiple departments and senior leaders of the relevant agencies to intensify their response. While much of the discussion was about the operation of the criminal justice system, the initiative also gave more impetus to absence and youth-focused prevention, since many of the robberies were being conducted by young people who were not in school.¹⁵

* Initially, the targets were focused on unauthorised absence, but in 2004 the focus shifted to overall absence and in 2007 data allowed the target to shift to the proportion of persistent absentees.

Officials grew more confident about change in the light of experience

At the start of the absence effort, in the late 1990s, DfE felt nervous about what it had taken on, wondering if it really had the mechanisms to effect such profound change. A former senior official recalls that “the most important thing the Labour government did was to challenge that belief”. The early success of the literacy and numeracy strategies – both highly directive programmes driven from DfE – also contributed to changing the department’s sense of what it could achieve.¹⁶

Progress accelerated with better data, a larger field force and leadership from within schools

A National Audit Office (NAO) report from 2005 provides a useful insight into progress halfway through the decade. It found that attendance was improving but significant challenges remained, recommending that the department work more closely with local authorities and schools to encourage best practice.¹⁷ This meant broadening the effort to have more impact in schools and areas that were struggling. The department acted on this and from 2006 drove work on absence through the overall framework of the ‘national strategies’, which provided training and support to schools and teachers through a direct field force, alongside local authorities deploying their own advisers and consultants.¹⁸

Several developments helped to build momentum during this period. The department started to reap the benefits of its investment in the national pupil database, which provided granular information on absence down to the individual pupil level. An expert practitioner group led by Sir Alan Steer set a strong lead on how schools could promote strong relationships with parents and pupils to raise behaviour, attendance and attainment.¹⁹ The department complemented this by introducing a new professional development programme, the National Programme for Specialist Leaders of Behaviour and Attendance, which had significant take-up.²⁰

Wider education and youth policies reinforced the drive on absence

The overall direction of schools policy during these years supported the drive to reduce absence. Significant real-terms increases in per-pupil funding enabled schools to employ more staff and provide more support. Flexibility to include more vocational options at Key Stage 4 helped retain and motivate some pupils who would otherwise have become disengaged. The new Connexions service for 13- to 19-year-olds provided personal adviser support to young people, and the introduction of the education maintenance allowance provided a route to continued study for pupils who might otherwise not have been able to afford to continue after the age of 16. Many other social policies introduced at the same time had a bearing on the risk factors for absence – with policies on early years, child poverty, adolescent drinking, adolescent drug use and youth offending being prominent examples.²¹

Behind all these policies lay a growing strategic focus on joined-up and preventive youth policy, reinforced by structural changes in Whitehall and in local authority children’s services departments. The 2000 spending review included a cross-departmental review on ‘youth at risk’, which determined that new resources for

Connexions and other cross-cutting children's programmes would be overseen by a new cabinet committee on children and young people, and administered by a new children and young people's unit.²² In 2003, responsibility for children's social services was moved into DfES, with Margaret Hodge becoming the first minister for children,²³ while the *Every Child Matters* green paper set a new framework for joint working at national and local level.²⁴ In 2007 Gordon Brown built on this further, transforming the DfES into the Department for Children Schools and Families, and published the first cross-government children's plan.²⁵

Evaluation evidence was encouraging

The multiple absence programmes described above were often pulled together at speed: one former senior official noted that the department was sometimes "casting around for solutions" and didn't always know what would work. But there was extensive evaluation, inspection and audit. The results were positive in the main.

- In 2003 Ofsted reported that EiC and education action zone programmes were making an important difference to schools in disadvantaged areas, were helping schools and teachers to meet the needs of disaffected and vulnerable pupils more effectively, and that attendance was improving at a faster rate in EiC schools than in the nation as a whole.²⁶ A separate evaluation in 2004 found EiC to have had a strong positive effect on attendance.²⁷ And a 2005 NAO analysis also found that EiC schools were associated with falls in total absence and unauthorised absence.²⁸
- Evaluation of the Behaviour Improvement Programme found a statistically significant reduction in overall absence. Memorably, the researchers suggested that "the programme had a major impact on pupils' experiences in school leading them to want to attend". In case study visits they found perceived positive changes in the status of behaviour and pastoral issues in school, school policies and practices, school ethos, the way that schools supported families, children's wellbeing and learning, relationships with parents, and staff stress.²⁹
- Experiments with more flexible curricula and alternative providers during the GCSE years showed some positive results in building engagement, confidence and attitudes towards learning among disengaged and low-attending students.³⁰
- Evaluation of police-school partnerships found promising results in relation to truancy rates.³¹
- A 2003 joint inspection of the street crime initiative found positive effects on attendance. Examples mentioned included truancy sweeps returning pupils to school, identifying a child who had never been registered at any school, and the deployment of police in schools improving attendance because pupils were no longer afraid to come to school.³²

-
- A 2010 study that looked at parenting contracts, penalty notices and parenting orders, as well as fast-track approaches to prosecution, found evidence to suggest that they were contributing to improvements in attendance for pupils, when used early or as part of a wider integrated local authority approach to addressing irregular attendance and persistent absence.³³
 - Ofsted found positive impacts from the post-2005 behaviour and attendance strategy, with a 27% reduction in the number of persistent truants in the target schools. Specific improved practices included a higher profile for attendance in some 'coasting' schools and local authorities, a higher status for the Education Welfare Service in schools, and increased multi-agency involvement with Connexions, police liaison, health advisers, and child and adolescent mental health services.³⁴
 - The 2010 evaluation of the national programme for specialist leaders of behaviour and attendance described "a wealth of positive, sometimes passionate, testimonies from participants regarding their experience of the programme and its benefits for themselves, their workplace, and children and young people".³⁵

2. What happened to absence levels?

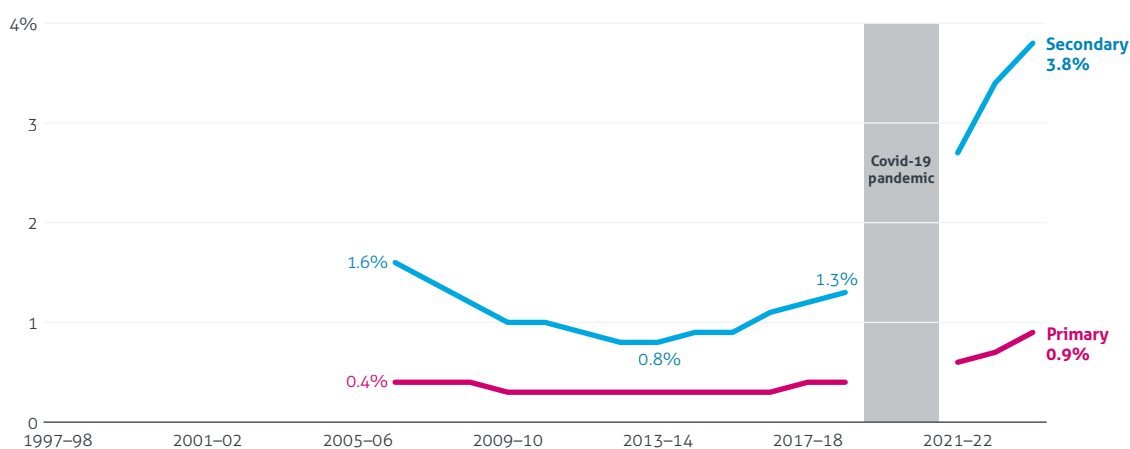
The last Labour government succeeded in establishing a downward trend in absence during its time in office.

Absence improved but progress was slow at first

It was not a given in the early 2000s that absence would be reduced. It took a while to shift the dial nationally, and ministers expressed frustration about this, while taking comfort that truancy in Excellence in Cities areas had started to fall.³⁶

However, as Figure 1 showed, after 2000–01 overall absence in secondary schools began an almost uninterrupted 13-year decline.^{*} The decline endured for several years under the Coalition government and reached its lowest level in 2013–14: a 42% fall since 2000–01. As Figure 2 showed, persistent absence fell even more steeply. In just seven years (between 2006–07, when it was first measured, and 2013–14) there was a 45% fall in persistent absence in secondary schools and 43% in primary.^{**} Figure 4 charts the trends in 'severe absence' (missing 50% of schooling) over the same period – again, showing a sizeable reduction in secondary schools after 2006–07.

Figure 4 **Pupils who are severely absent, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Education, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2006–07 to 2023–24. Notes: Severely absent pupils are missing more than half of school sessions. One session is equal to half a day. Data is not available before 2006–07. 2019–20 is omitted because data was not published. 2020–21 is omitted because the data excluded schooling missed due to Covid circumstances. 2021–22 data excludes a small amount of absence related to Covid-19 testing.

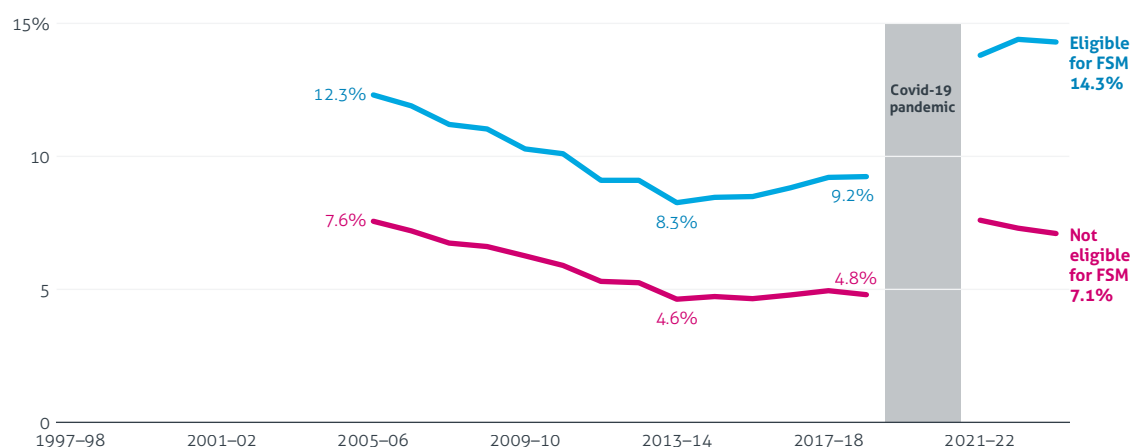
^{*} The rise in absence in 2005–06 was attributed by the department to outbreaks of flu and norovirus. The increase in absence (primary and secondary) that year was seen in authorised absence, not unauthorised. (DfES Annual Report 2007).

^{**} It is likely that persistent absence had begun to fall earlier in the decade, but persistent absence was only measured from 2006–07.

Inequalities decreased

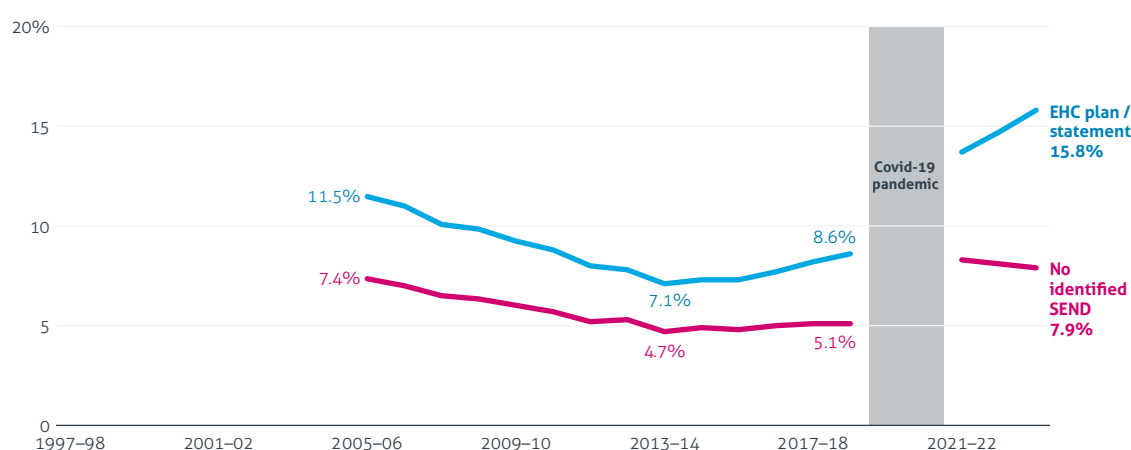
The overall reduction in absence was accompanied by some narrowing of the gap between disadvantaged groups and other pupils. Figure 5 shows this for secondary schools, with the absence gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and others narrowing between 2005–06 and 2013–14 before starting to increase again. Figure 6 shows the same phenomenon for secondary pupils with statements of special educational needs. In both cases the absence gaps reduced until 2013–14, before rising again. Then after the pandemic, gaps widened further.

Figure 5 **Absence rate by eligibility for free school meals, state-funded secondary schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Education, 'Pupil absence in schools in England, including pupil characteristics', 2005–6 to 2023–24. Notes: Absence rate is the total number of sessions missed due to absence for all pupils as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions for all pupils. One session is equal to half a day. 2019–20 is omitted because data was not published. 2020–21 is omitted because the data excluded schooling missed due to Covid circumstances. 2021–22 data excludes a small amount of absence related to Covid-19 testing. Data is not available before 2005–6.

Figure 6 **Absence rate by SEND status, state-funded secondary schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Education, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2006–07 to 2023–24. Notes: Absence rate is the total number of sessions missed due to absence for all pupils as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions for all pupils. One session is equal to half a day. The series reporting education, health and care (EHC) plans includes statements of SEND. 2019–20 is omitted because data was not published. 2020–21 is omitted because the data excluded schooling missed due to Covid circumstances. 2021–22 data excludes a small amount of absence related to Covid-19 testing. Data is not available before 2005–6.

Other indicators of youth disadvantage fell in parallel

These reductions in school absence in the 2000s were not an isolated instance of improving outcomes for young people. Over the period, there were significant falls in a range of other related indicators of youth disadvantage.³⁷ For example:

- Child poverty fell in both relative terms and against a fixed real threshold, with the improvement concentrated in the early part of Labour's term. By 2010/11, the proportion of 11- to 18-year-olds in poverty against a fixed real income threshold had fallen by 16 percentage points, from 43% to just under 27%.
- The rate of permanent exclusions in secondary schools halved between 2003–04 and 2012–13.
- Between 2002 and 2014, there was a 50% fall in the proportion of 15-year-old pupils who had been drunk at least twice, and a 50% fall in the proportion who had ever used cannabis.
- Under-18 conception rates halved between 1998 and 2014, with the steepest improvement from 2007 onwards.
- In 2010–11, over two thirds of 16-year-olds attained five good GCSEs or equivalents (69%), up from under half in 2001–02 (49%).
- Staying-on rates after age 16 increased significantly. For 17-year-olds in England, participation in full-time education rose by 15 percentage points between 2001 and 2010, from 58.7% to 73.8%.

These sizeable and largely simultaneous improvements in different youth outcomes are striking but in many ways not surprising. In each of these policy areas, the government was making strenuous efforts to improve outcomes. And in each policy area, it was expected that there would be positive spillover effects on other outcomes.

This is not an area where one can confidently attribute benefits in one area to actions in another. Nonetheless, it seems likely that reductions in school absence both contributed to and benefited from progress in improving other dimensions of youth disadvantage. Certainly, we can say that the fall in absence was part of a broad-based reduction in adolescent disadvantage that was seen over many different dimensions of young people's lives.

3. School absence during the Coalition and Conservative governments

The downward trend in absence continued in the early years of the Coalition. But absence was less of a priority and progress stalled before exploding in the pandemic.

Absence rates stopped falling after 2013–14 and started to get worse for disadvantaged groups

There was a striking halt to the improving trend in absence in 2013–14 (Figures 1 and 2). The level was broadly sustained in the years that followed, but for disadvantaged groups things started to get worse. In secondary schools, absence rates for pupils eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs began to increase after 2013–14 (Figures 5 and 6), while the proportion of secondary pupils missing more than half their schooling also began to rise (Figure 4).

This change in trend had many probable causes

This change in trend, which pre-dated the pandemic, is often overlooked in discussions about absence. It is part of a wider picture of stalling progress that can be seen in other indicators of adolescent disadvantage such as school exclusion, the Key Stage 4 attainment gap, and adolescent drug and alcohol use.³⁸ The causes will be complicated but are likely to include funding and policy changes affecting disadvantaged young people, lack of focus on prevention and increases in the prevalence of risk factors.

Austerity affected benefits and school funding, while access to special needs support declined

Pupils eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs – disproportionately at risk of school absence – were particularly affected by several policy and funding changes during the mid years of the Coalition.

For low-income families, this was a period of reductions in benefit support. The benefits cap and the 'bedroom tax' both came into force in 2013, but are just two examples of a series of policy changes that saw real social security spending per child (under-18) fall 25% between 2009/10 and 2018/19.³⁹

For pupils seeking support with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) the landscape also changed significantly. The proportion of secondary pupils recognised as having additional needs stood at 21.7% in 2010, a historic high following years of rapid growth. It then fell steadily to a low point of 12.2% in 2017/18, and has since risen again, to 15.6% in 2023–24.^{40,41} Appeals on SEND matters rose sharply from 2016–17 onwards.⁴² As of 2023–24 they stood at record levels: of the cases decided that year, 99% (11,000) were decided in favour of the appellant.⁴³

Several wider changes under the Coalition and the Conservatives affected the ability of schools and other front-line services to support disadvantaged pupils, particularly for adolescents. Spending per pupil in secondary schools fell by 3% in real terms between 2011/12 and 2015/16. Although a new pupil premium was introduced in funding allocations to reflect the proportion of pupils on free school meals, for some schools the effect of the premium was outweighed by the loss of other funding. The National Audit Office found that because of this, the per-pupil funding of 16% of the most disadvantaged secondary schools fell by over 5% in real terms between 2010–11 and 2014–15.⁴⁴ Between 2015/16 and 2019/20, spending per pupil in secondary schools fell by a further 9% overall, with the most deprived fifth of secondary schools seeing the largest reduction, a 14% real terms cut.⁴⁵

Many schools policy areas went through root and branch change under the Coalition, with changes to GCSEs and performance measures having a significant impact on the curriculum choices available to pupils in years 10 and 11. And the support for schools from key external services – the police, youth services, drug and alcohol services, and local authority preventive services – all saw substantial cuts to their budgets after 2010.

The focus on absence was limited and ineffective

The Coalition inherited a declining trend in school absence and was sceptical of outcome targets. There was therefore no quantified ambition for absence to improve. Some might say that maintaining a historic low figure for absence was itself an achievement in a period of retrenchment. It may also be that the government felt a change in attitudes to attendance had been achieved and would keep absence low. But it is certainly the case that absence was not a ministerial priority under the Coalition and Conservative governments.

A crackdown on parental holidays was the key anti-absence measure under the Coalition: headteachers lost the right to authorise term-time holidays, and the government increased the level of fines for non-attendance. Parental fines continued to be seen as the key response under the Conservatives, after 2015, with the total reaching more than 300,000 a year by 2019, far above pre-2010 levels.

Action was limited in terms of prevention and tackling the root causes of absence. The Coalition government repealed the duty for schools to participate in local behaviour and attendance partnerships in 2011. The troubled families programme, introduced in 2012, had absence as one of its trigger criteria, and this continued under later rounds of the programme. But evaluation of the programme found no evidence of significant or systematic impact on school attendance.^{46,47}

Absence became a higher priority after the pandemic

It is hard to overstate the disruption caused to children's school experience during the pandemic. Children missed much more schooling than normal because of lockdowns, and absence levels did not return to normal once the pandemic was over. The Conservative government responded with a series of steps:

- In 2021 DfE announced an investment of £30 million into a programme of 'Safe' task forces ('support, attend, fulfil, exceed') to protect young people at risk of truancy or being permanently excluded.⁴⁸ The education secretary, Nadhim Zahawi, also set up a national attendance alliance, bringing together leading experts to tackle the issue.⁴⁹
- In 2022, a pilot attendance mentoring scheme, funded by the government and delivered by Barnardo's, began in Middlesbrough and the government later announced plans to expand this.⁵⁰
- From 2022 onwards the government supported the creation and expansion of sector-led attendance hubs to share effective practice.⁵¹
- Weekly collection of attendance data from schools began on a voluntary basis during the pandemic and became mandatory from September 2024. (This has since developed into interactive dashboards and benchmarking tools made available fortnightly to schools and local authorities.)
- In 2022 DfE published non-statutory guidance to local authorities, designed to give local authorities clarity on their role on attendance. The Local Government Association estimates that local authorities spent an additional £40 million in 2023/24 adhering to the guidance, creating around 1,100 extra posts.⁵² The guidance became statutory in August 2024.

4. How to tackle school absence now

The case study of school absence patterns and policy responses outlined in this paper shows how important a committed, joined-up approach from government is – and what happens when that commitment wanes. The Starmer government can learn from past successes, tailoring its approach to the current context.

The government has already taken some steps on school absence

In opposition Labour signalled that improving attendance at school is a priority. It is a key part of the opportunity mission and has obvious links to the health and safer streets missions. Manifesto pledges to increase teacher recruitment, introduce breakfast clubs, review the curriculum, expand mental health services and introduce the 'young futures' programme offered the first glimpses of future policy.

Since coming into office, this programme has been added to in several ways. The education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, has highlighted the importance of raising pupils' sense of belonging in school.⁵³ DfE has supported the development of a toolkit written by practitioners, held nine regional conferences to share good practice, and included attendance as one of four key priorities for the new 'Rise' regional improvement teams.⁵⁴ Attendance also features as one of 11 priority areas in the new 'report cards' proposed by Ofsted in February 2025, as part of the move to replace one word judgments.⁵⁵

DfE is working with a new expert advisory group to develop reforms to improve education outcomes and experiences for children and young people with SEND.⁵⁶ The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, introduced in December, contains measures to require local authorities to maintain 'children not in school' registers, and to ensure that the most vulnerable children cannot be withdrawn from school until it is confirmed that this would be in their best interests.⁵⁷

Funding and capacity pressures, plus high levels of need, make for a daunting task

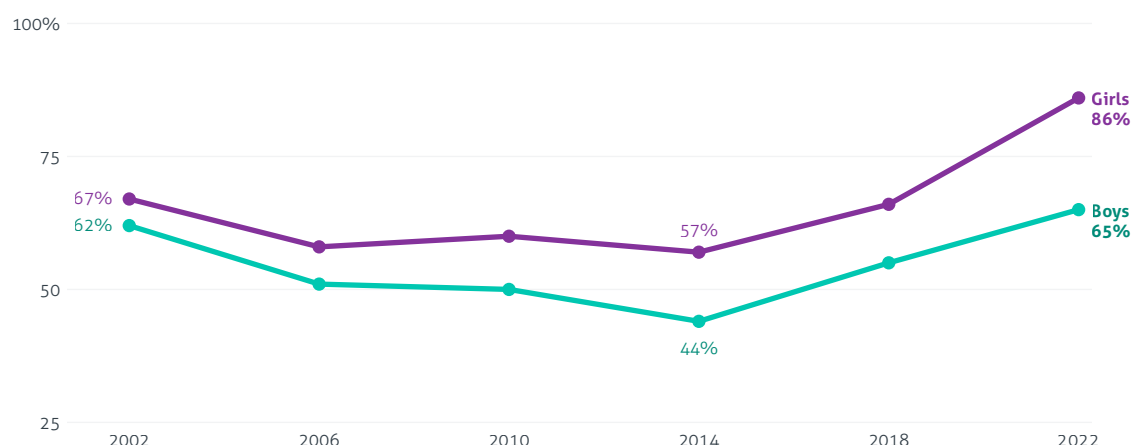
As the government builds out its response to absence, it faces enormous headwinds. The coming spending review will be extremely tight, and the local delivery landscape has been fragmented by pressures on local authority funding and the changed relationships brought about by academisation.

Moreover, some of the key risk factors for school absence are at very high levels.

- **Incomes:** in 2022/23, 30% of all children in the UK were living in poverty.⁵⁸
- **Health:** in 2022 the HBSC school survey of 11- to 15-year-old pupils found that 65% of boys and 86% of girls said that they had two or more health complaints at least once a week⁵⁹ (see Figure 7).

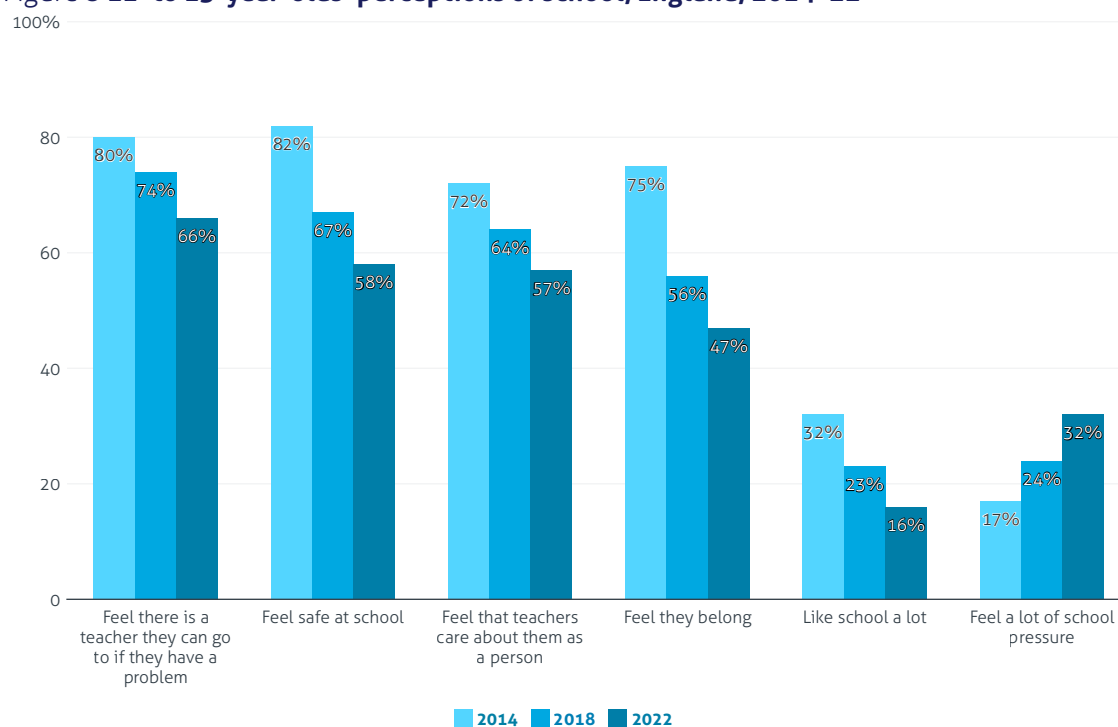
-
- **Sleep:** the same survey found that about a third of 11- to 15-year-old pupils reported not having enough sleep to feel awake and concentrate on their school work.⁶⁰
 - **Mental health:** in 2023, an NHS survey found that 22.6% of 11- to 16-year-olds in England had a probable mental disorder.⁶¹
 - **Family stress:** the same NHS survey found that more than 1 in 10 (11.7%) of children aged 8 to 16 had experienced a parent or someone close to them being seriously ill, 10% lived in families that had fallen behind with bills, rent or mortgage, and 6.2% lived in households that couldn't afford to buy enough food or needed to use a food bank.⁶²
 - **Households in temporary accommodation:** the latest figures show that in September 2024 there were more than 80,000 households with children living in temporary accommodation in England, including more than 164,000 dependent children.⁶³
 - **Special educational needs and disabilities:** DfE's Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice survey asks parents of pupils with SEND how confident they feel that their child's school is able to support their child's special educational needs or disability. As of February 2024, 57% were confident, but 35% were not. Respondents indicated some areas (such as mental health support) where support required was in very short supply, which they attributed to lack of funds or support staff, or being on a waiting list.⁶⁴
 - **Bullying:** in 2022 the HBSC school survey found that around a third of pupils had experienced bullying "in the last couple of months".⁶⁵
 - **School safety and belonging:** as of 2022, only 58% of 11-, 13- and 15-year-old pupils felt safe in school.⁶⁶ Figure 8 shows these figures alongside other indicators of school experience that deteriorated markedly between 2014 and 2022.

Figure 7 **11- to 15-year-old pupils reporting two or more health complaints at least once a week, England, 2002–22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of University of Kent, *HBSC England National Report: Findings from the 2021–2022 HBSC study for England*, 2023. Notes: The health complaints covered were headache, backache, irritability, sleeping difficulties, stomach ache, feeling low, feeling nervous and feeling dizzy.

Figure 8 **11- to 15-year-olds' perceptions of school, England, 2014–22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of University of Kent, *HBSC England National Report: Findings from the 2021–2022 HBSC study for England*, 2023.

5. Recommendations

The following 12 recommendations are designed to drive progress on absence against this challenging background. They centre on:

- Developing a cross-government strategy to tackle school absence and children missing education (numbers 1–3)
- Six key components of change (4–9)
- Developing a delivery culture (10–12).

1. Understand the cost of absence

The government should commission and publish a comprehensive estimate of the costs of the absence and missing school crisis. The cost will run to many billions and have a bearing on achievement of all the government's missions. Understanding the cost of absence, in its widest sense, is essential to ensure it receives the necessary attention and resources across government, and that school attendance and inclusion are appropriately prioritised in policy and spending decisions.

The exercise should cover the full economic and social costs of the absence and missing school crisis, spanning all its dimensions:

- risk to children's attainment and educational progress
- the cost of lost socialisation
- missing life skills education, e.g. careers guidance, drug and alcohol awareness, sex and relationships education etc
- disruption to school functioning
- mental health impacts on children and parents
- impact of children's absence on parents' ability to work
- raised vulnerability to risky behaviours (teenage pregnancy, alcohol, drugs) and to abuse/exploitation
- long-term employment, health and income disadvantage
- the link with skills gaps and worker shortages
- the cost of absent pupils' involvement in crime, whether as perpetrator or victim.

2. Identify and communicate the root causes of absence

The last Labour government's success in reducing absence rested on a broad-based strategy that tackled the multiple drivers of absence. But over the last decade absence policy has skirted the big issues of adolescent health, problems in the special needs system, school disengagement, family stress, and the fear of bullying and crime.

The figures outlined above highlight how widespread many of these are. The new government has already widened the debate to cover school belonging, food poverty, and reform of the special needs system. To reduce absence successfully it will need to go further in recognising and communicating all the factors that drive the current absence problem.

3. Bring key partners on board in a comprehensive strategy

Expecting schools to tackle absence on their own will not work. Instead, government should mobilise a national effort to tackle absence and children missing school – including support from the Treasury, to give schools and local authorities the resources they need, and close partnerships with other Whitehall departments that influence some of the drivers. But the effort also needs to include a wide range of other players – schools, multi-academy trusts, local authorities, and other front-line agencies and voluntary sector organisations, as well as representatives of parents and young people.

This national effort needs to be aligned through development and publication of a comprehensive long-term strategy, which should cover all aspects of missing school (prevention, response and recovery) and should join up action on absence and missing school with other preventive work with young people. The strategy should be led by a national delivery board chaired by a DfE minister, as part of the opportunity mission structures. Ideally, this would be linked to a proper government co-ordinating mechanism for policy on children and young people on the model of the 'every child matters' programme and the children's plan.

4. Put attendance at the heart of schools policy

The overall direction of schools policy is a powerful driver of attendance. And good attendance is a sine qua non of a functioning school system. Well-resourced schools, adequate support for special educational needs, a curriculum that is appropriate for pupils' interests and needs, and attractive routes for post-16 progression all appear to have helped improve attendance in the past. To get on top of absence, DfE will need to achieve a recovery in all these areas, as part of an overall drive to make schools supportive, safe and engaging places of learning that motivate pupils rather than push them away.

5. Support the front line with good practice

The DfE has already made a good start in helping schools access good practice in managing attendance. It has supported the development of a toolkit written by practitioners, and held nine regional conferences to share good practice. Absence and attendance are to be key elements of the new regional improvement teams and the department has transformed the data and analytical tools that schools can use to understand attendance. DfE needs to sustain this effort, which will foster strong relationships and feedback loops. And it needs to work with the front line to tackle

new topics, focusing on severe absence, disadvantaged groups, best practice in reintegration of absentees, how to provide education for those who are simply unable to attend class, and how to make best use of new technology.

6. Rebuild the relationship with parents

The state rightly expects parents to support their child's attendance at school. But that should not slip into assuming that it is inevitably parents' fault if their children don't attend. This is particularly relevant in the current context. Many parents are deeply concerned about their children's problems, including their absence from school. Many have had to fight to access special needs and other support and are desperately worried about their children's mental health. And, amid an ongoing cost of living crisis, many are struggling to put food on the table.

Parents who are struggling and worried need help and advice above all. Strengthening parents' ability to support their children, and building trusting relationships between home and schools, was part of success in the past and will be key to success in the future.

7. Ensure health services play a bigger role in tackling absence

The single biggest cause of school absence is, and always has been, illness. All the evidence suggests that levels of adolescent mental ill health have soared. But many different medical conditions can interfere with a child's attendance at school. DfE and the Department of Health and Social Care need to ask what can be done to reduce the amount of illness experienced by children, ensure children get access to treatment as fast as possible, and support those who are ill to keep learning when they cannot be at school.

A public health effort to explore and improve the mental and physical health of school absentees could achieve a double dividend – catching health conditions early before they become entrenched, and helping children stay connected with learning with all the protective benefits that can bring.

8. Draw on the resources of policing and crime prevention

The safer streets mission and the fight against absence each depend on the other succeeding. The Home Office will struggle to make the streets safer if large numbers of children are not in school. And absence will remain high if children avoid school because they're afraid of bullying, petty crime or serious violence. Strong links should be built between the Home Office and DfE as prevention policies and enhanced neighbourhood policing are rolled out. The 'young futures' programme is one element of this; another is ensuring that there is appropriate deployment of neighbourhood policing teams around schools and on home-to-school routes.

9. Encourage and drive local partnerships

Local partnership working on children's issues has been under severe strain in recent years, both from funding pressures, and the move to academisation and geographically scattered multi-academy trusts. To deliver its youth objectives in the opportunity, safer streets and health missions the government will need to re-establish robust and empowered local partnerships, and work closely with them towards a shared purpose.

DfE has made a start in clarifying what it expects of local authorities in relation to attendance through issuing new guidance. But it should push for local partnerships to develop further, inviting local authorities to the table alongside schools and trusts, establishing regular conversations about absence between the department and local authorities, finding and sharing good practice in local partnership working, and communicating more joined-up national thinking on prevention.

10. Make the strategy outcome focused

Setting a clear outcome ambition for improvement provides a benchmark against which to judge resources and results, and drives the energy of implementation. Targets were a key element of the last Labour government's success in reducing absence. It is surely not to be contemplated that absence rates remain at anything like their current level. But so far, the new government has not set a quantified ambition to reduce absence.

A sensible aspiration would be to match past success in reducing the most serious forms of absence. This would mean targeting a 45% reduction in persistent absence rates and a halving in severe absence over seven years. Alternatively, targets focused on pupils eligible for free school meals, and those with special educational needs and disabilities, would focus action on disadvantaged groups who are disproportionately likely to miss school.

11. Jump-start action through funded 'whole system' pilots

As this case study has shown, Excellence in Cities and the Behaviour Improvement Programme both served as catalysts for successful innovation on absence, behaviour and attainment. They combined central investment, local partnership, with freedom to tailor action to local circumstances. Nearly 25 years on, it would be a smart move for DfE to create a modern equivalent to these, to require and support a joined-up local response to absence problems that go beyond the remit of any one agency, school or group of schools. This would be in the spirit of the new government's 'test and learn' programme, which might also provide a source of extra resource and cross-departmental energy.

12. Watch the data like a hawk, evaluate and adapt

Close monitoring of progress and evaluation of policies were key to the last Labour government's school absence programme. They should come to the fore again now.

Active tracking of data is also key to delivery. Paying close attention to data, feedback and evaluation gives governments the chance to change the approach if it does not work, and helps disseminate good practice quickly. With virtually real-time data on weekly absence, as well as plentiful information on key drivers such as children's perceptions of school, and experience of bullying, the government has an enormous advantage over its predecessors and should make the most of it.

6. Lessons for mission-led government

Alongside specific recommendations for the government on tackling school absence, this case study also provides wider insights for the practice of 'mission-led government'.

1. Governments can improve complex social outcomes

The approach of the Blair government in setting outcome targets was seen as risky and revolutionary at the time, and was not continued by the Coalition government or the succeeding Conservative administrations. Delivery, and the notion of an active state, went seriously out of fashion. The lesson of a case study like school absence supports the new government's mission approach: outcomes can be improved – and bad outcomes can be prevented – by sustained and coherent government action.

2. The prime minister's involvement drives priority and accountability

The last Labour government's school absence policy – like many of its achievements – shows the clear imprint of prime ministerial prioritisation. Richard Rumelt's classic work *Good Strategy. Bad Strategy* urges leaders to focus strategy on "pivotal objectives whose accomplishment will lead to a cascade of favourable outcomes".⁶⁷ In school absence, Blair and No.10 identified an issue that clearly met this definition. They then created a capacity and process to get the priority addressed and followed through with a programme of coherent action. Stocktakes at No.10 and the disciplines spread by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit reinforced delivery of priorities.

Senior officials involved in absence at the time clearly recall the galvanising effect of No.10's attention. The same view was widely held by senior officials in other priority policy areas.⁶⁸ The government is right to have reinstituted this system and should learn from the features that made it successful.

3. The government should set targets for its pivotal objectives

The decision to set public targets for school absence was a key ingredient in the success of absence policy (and many other of Labour's achievements). It provided the spur to match resource and attention to the scale of the problem. The government's complementary targets on issues such as child poverty, youth crime and low attainment meant other departments found themselves pointed in the same direction.

By contrast, the story of pupil absence in the last decade is a good example of what happens when the focus on outcomes drifts away. If nobody has a target to reduce absence, it can stagnate or deteriorate without anyone in government seeing it as an issue they have to address.

There are many people who dislike national targets. Some have experience of badly designed objectives, or have had to deal with too many trivial targets. These are all real risks that policy makers should seek to avoid by using targets selectively and

designing them well.⁶⁹ But the government should not be afraid to set clear and well-designed targets for reducing absence and other pivotal components of the missions. Mission-led government won't deliver if the mission is left vague.

4. Implementation requires specific skills, which the government needs to foster

To achieve results, outcome targets need to be followed through with high-quality delivery planning and implementation. This is partly about senior leaders role-modelling the core values – focus, urgency, thoroughness and partnership. But it also comes from systematically building delivery planning skills. Under the last Labour government the Delivery Unit played a major role in this, challenging lead departments to develop a comprehensive understanding of each issue, its causes and the 'delivery chain', and then to devise and implement credible plans to make things work better. It also organised tailored training and encouraged delivery leaders to learn from each other.

The new government needs to remember that its move back to an outcome-based approach to public services is an enormous change from the practice of recent administrations. Ministers are right to demand high performance. But they should also ensure that the system is developing and rewarding the delivery skills they require.

5. Problems with cross-cutting causes need cross-cutting solutions

Absence could not have been reduced in the 2000s by focusing on rules and sanctions alone. By understanding the causes of absence, the last Labour government was drawn to a broader set of actions – a 'multi-component approach'. Actions covered multiple issues: basic attendance management; improving special needs provision; making the curriculum more engaging; tackling bullying. In-school actions were complemented by approaches that reached outside the school gate to cover policing, crime reduction, drug treatment services, youth services and parenting support. Similar multi-component programmes drove action on other youth outcomes, such as reducing teenage pregnancy, cutting drug use and reducing school exclusion.

The lesson for today is that departments need to reach outside their own silos to tackle the most complex problems. If they are a willing partner to others when asked for help, they are more likely to get a positive response when the roles are reversed.

6. The big gains come from policies that reinforce each other

Most of this case study has been about absence. But behind it lies a bigger picture, of dramatic improvements in several forms of adolescent disadvantage over a very short space of time. This is particularly marked for the generation who turned 16 around 2012 and 2013. Compared with their predecessors a decade older, this generation experienced much lower levels of absence from school, and also less school exclusion, less teenage drug taking, lower alcohol use, better Level 2 attainment, higher staying-on rates, and fewer unwanted conceptions.

Each of these developments is a story in its own right. But that they all improved so significantly at the same time suggests a reinforcement effect, as each improving outcome reduced the risk factors for other outcomes.

Coherence is a core principle in effective strategy design. It adds leverage and reduces friction. For ministers, this means that delivery of any government priority is much more likely if other government policies point in the same direction. Conflicting policies, on the other hand, are a recipe for failure.

7. In a tight spending climate, collaboration is vital

The coming spending review takes place in a very different economic climate from the circumstances the Blair government inherited in the late 1990s. This makes it particularly important for departments to co-ordinate their efforts and get the best possible value out of public money. This will require more oversight of youth spending than currently exists. An NAO report in 2022 looked into the work of seven mainstream departments who all had spending programmes supporting vulnerable adolescents. The report concluded that there was no overall strategic approach and that “government does not know whether there are gaps or overlaps in the support for vulnerable adolescents”.⁷⁰

Co-ordination is always challenging and particularly so with departments facing such a tight spending climate. The natural instinct will be to hoard resources rather than share them to tackle common problems. But this is a net loss for the government, and for the public, as available money is spent in an uncoordinated way, never achieving its full potential.

The lesson of history is that departments tend not to self-organise. Though the last Labour government ended up with coherent structures and objectives on children and youth it took a few years before this came about. Now, rebuilding a proper government co-ordinating mechanism for policy on children and young people would improve delivery and reduce cost, as well as contributing to several of the government’s missions. This is an issue the cabinet ought to address without delay.

8. There are low-cost interventions that work

In that poor economic climate, and with the spending review on everyone’s mind, it is easy to feel that delivery is all about money. But public spending was not the only tool used to reduce absence, or other delivery outcomes tackled by the last Labour government. The reduction in school absence was supported not only by additional investment but also low-cost measures such as sharing good practice, making changes to school culture, introducing more flexibility in the curriculum, encouraging better communication with parents and improving the design and management of school sites.

Today’s missions should seek out such low-cost redesign and behavioural measures and harness their power wherever possible.

9. Mission boards need to be visible and engaged with the front line

National targets don't mean that delivery is achieved in Whitehall. The 2000s reduction in absence was achieved by a huge cast of characters far from Whitehall, including schools, teachers and teaching assistants, young people and their families, and many other front-line professionals, including youth services, social care, the police, the Connexions service, and a range of charities and voluntary sector providers.

The Delivery Unit popularised the term 'delivery chain' to describe this concept and required departments to identify and engage with the players in their delivery chain. Analysis of delivery chains almost always reveals a complex set of individuals, many not close to the department or accountable to ministers, but potentially part of the solution if brought into the discussion and invited to help.

Communicating and engaging with front-line partners should be a priority for mission boards and their members. There will be great benefits if the ministers and officials who lead mission delivery in Whitehall publicise who they are and what they are doing, show they are open to input and feedback, and take time to talk through the strategy and plans at local level. This will allow partners and funders to understand the wider picture and see how they can contribute. It also creates space for some of the key benefits of mission-led government, by encouraging co-creation, innovation and citizen engagement.

10. The government should use success stories to drive change

Much of the current debate about government effectiveness is being conducted in the abstract. Concepts such as 'rewiring' or 'being more agile' are not wrong, but they are unspecific. Ministers will make faster progress if they convey a clear picture of the delivery methods they want to see, backed up by evidence that they can work.

This will get easier once the government has more working models of initiatives that it is pleased with and which have delivered results. But in the meantime, ministers are missing a trick if they fail to look back at the last time their party was in government, and what they can learn from the methods they used and the results they achieved.

To accelerate progress, those learning a new way of working need confidence that it will deliver. That is where this case study, and the series that follows, can help, by showing what a different way of making and delivering policy achieved in the past.

Annex: School absence explained

What counts as school absence?

Data on school absence measures pupils who are missing school for any reason. Unauthorised absence, or truancy, is a subset of this.

How much schooling is missed overall?

'Overall absence' measures the total percentage of schooling missed across the system. It aggregates absences of all pupils – those who miss just a few days and those who are off for weeks at a time. Table 1 below shows overall absence rates for primary, secondary and special schools for selected years.

Table 1 **Absence rate in state-funded schools, England, 1997–98 to 2023–24**

	1997–98	2006–07	2010–11	2013–14	2018–19	2023–24
Primary	6.2%	5.2%	5.0%	3.9%	4.0%	5.5%
Secondary	9.0%	7.9%	6.5%	5.2%	5.5%	8.9%
Special schools	11.3%	10.6%	10.0%	9.0%	10.1%	13.0%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Children, Schools and Families, 'Pupil absence in schools in England, including pupil characteristics', 2006–07 and DfE, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2006–07 to 2023–24. Notes: Absence rate is the total number of sessions missed due to absence for all pupils as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions for all pupils. One session is equal to half a day.

How many children miss substantial amounts of schooling?

'Persistent absence' refers to pupils missing more than 10% of schooling and 'severe absence' means those missing more than 50%.

Table 2 below shows rates of persistent absentees in primary, secondary and special schools for selected years. Across all three types of school in England in 2023–24, there were 1,487,000 persistent absentees.

Table 2 **Pupils who are persistently absent, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24**

	1997–98	2006–07	2010–11	2013–14	2018–19	2023–24
Primary		14.2%	13.2%	8.1%	8.2%	14.6%
Secondary		24.9%	19.5%	13.6%	13.7%	25.6%
Special schools		30.5%	30.0%	26.5%	28.8%	37.2%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Education, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2006–07 to 2023–24. Notes: Persistent absence is the share of pupils missing at least 10% of school sessions. A session is a half day. Data is not available before 2006–07.

Table 3 below shows rates of severely absent pupils in primary, secondary and special schools for selected years.

Table 3 **Pupils who are severely absent, state-funded schools in England, 1997–98 to 2023–24**

	1997–98	2006–07	2010–11	2013–14	2018–19	2023–24
Primary		0.4%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	0.9%
Secondary		1.6%	1.0%	0.8%	1.3%	3.8%
Special schools		3.9%	3.1%	3.2%	4.6%	6.7%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Education, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2006–07 to 2023–24. Notes: Severely absent pupils are missing more than half of school sessions. One session is equal to half a day. Data is not available before 2006–07.

Is school absence evenly distributed?

It can be seen from the tables above that absence rates are much higher in secondary schools than in primary. Rates are higher still in special schools.

Absence is also much more frequent among disadvantaged pupils, such as those eligible for free school meals, and those with special educational needs and disabilities. This has been true since records began but the degree of inequality has varied (see Figures 5 and 6). Within secondary schools, absence peaks in years 10 and 11, the critical GCSE years.

Figure 9 shows the disparities in persistent absence rates between these different groups in secondary schools. It shows that 43.3% of secondary school pupils eligible for free school meals are persistently absent, as are 38.9% of secondary pupils with special educational needs support, and 40.5% of secondary pupils with an education health and care plan. It also shows that girls have higher persistent absence rates than boys.

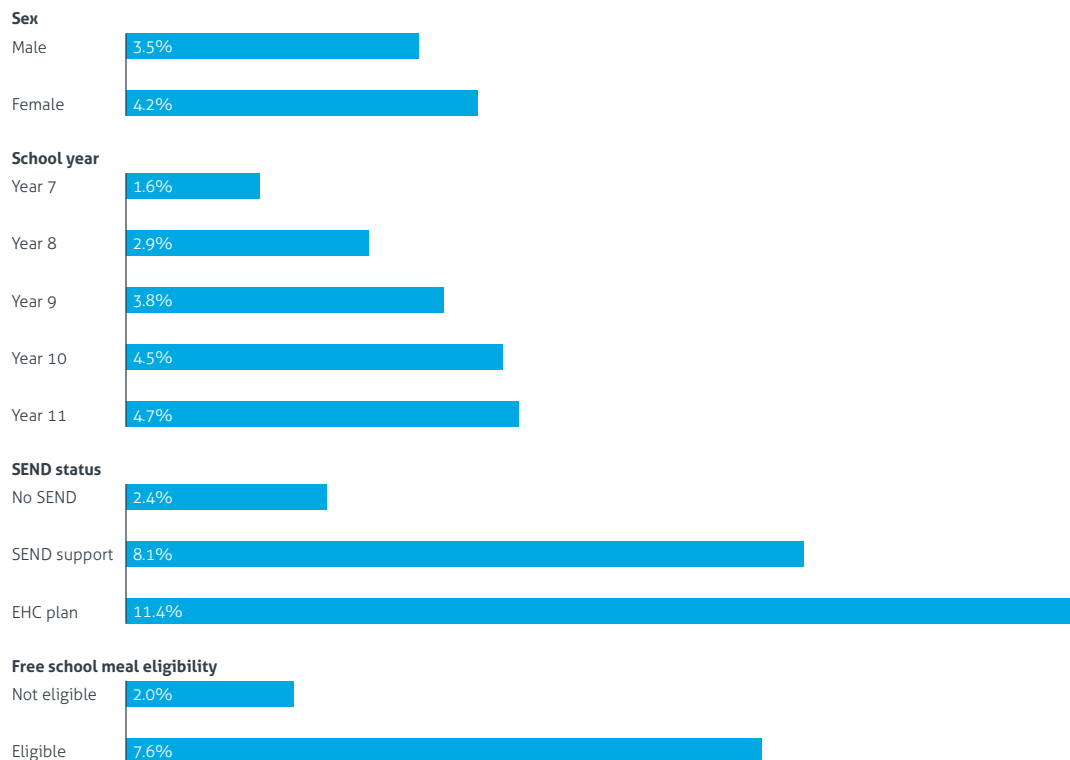
Figure 10 shows the disparities in rates of severe absence in secondary schools. It shows that 7.6% of secondary pupils eligible for free school meals are missing more than half their schooling, as are 8.1% of secondary pupils with special educational needs support, and 11.4% of secondary pupils with an education health and care plan. Again, it shows that girls have higher severe absence rates than boys.

Figure 9 **Pupils who are persistently absent by demographic group, state-funded secondary schools in England, 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2023–24. Notes: Persistent absence is the share of pupils missing at least 10% of sessions in a year. One session is equal to half a day.

Figure 10 **Pupils who are severely absent by demographic group, state-funded secondary schools in England, 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2023–24. Notes: Severe absence is the share of pupils missing at least half of school sessions. One session is equal to half a day.

Why do children miss school?

A range of problems in school, or outside it, may trigger or contribute to absence. These are illustrated in Box 3 below.

Box 3 **Reasons why young people may be absent from school**

Physical illness/ disability	Struggling/fallen behind	Child's safety fears about school or way to school	Transport problems
Mental health, e.g. anxiety, depression	Unidentified/unmet special needs	Child being bullied/ avoiding bullies	Problems with morning routine
Physical symptoms of mental health issues	Not settled in new school or placement/ lonely at school	Kept home by parents: perceived safety reasons	Lack of sleep
Period poverty	Fear or dislike of teacher or subject	Child absent owing to forced marriage	Peer pressure/ go with friends
Anxiety about separation from home, parent, sibling	Racism or other discrimination	Kept home to conceal problem, e.g. injuries	Child thinks absence not noticed/ challenged
Disability or illness in family	Not interested in subjects studied	Kept away by other adults e.g. sexual exploitation	Parents find it hard to enforce attendance
Bereavement	Undone homework/ avoiding test	Is involved in gangs, drugs or offending	Parental fear of school or lack of interest
Severe problems at home: poverty, hunger, conflict, mental health, drugs, alcohol, debt, housing...	Disengaged and wants to leave	Impact of drug use	Family keeps child home to work or be carer
	Temporary exclusion	Impact of alcohol use	Family holiday

Source: Adapted from Wallace M, *Trends in Adolescent Disadvantage*, London School of Economics, August 2023, <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp15.pdf>

Which are the most common causes?

Historically, the most frequent reason given by children for not going to school regularly is illness (physical or mental). In a 2018 survey the most common reasons given by pupils for not going to school regularly were:

- illness (83%)
- being bullied or having been bullied (9%)
- lack of support for health or disability needs (8%)
- found school boring (8%)
- found school work difficult / struggled to keep up (7%)
- transport problems (6%).⁷¹

Have the causes changed since the pandemic?

In the data and in surveys, illness still features as the most common reason for school absence. Within that the prominence of anxiety and mental health issues has risen, which is no surprise given the rise in mental ill health among adolescents in general.

A 2024 survey conducted by DfE asked primary and secondary school parents whose child had not attended school every day over the past two weeks why this was. The majority of parents (64%) said that their child had been ill. Similarly, the majority of pupils (64%) also said they had been ill. The second most common reason given by parents (24%) and pupils (30%) was anxiety and mental health problems. Asked what factors had contributed to anxiety and mental health problems, the most common factors selected by parents were their child's worries about lessons and learning (47%), worries about other pupils' behaviour (40%), and worries about getting on with teachers (39%).⁷²

Have parental attitudes changed since the pandemic?

Current debates about absence quite often assert that there has been a fundamental shift in parental attitudes to school attendance. A 2023 focus group study portrayed a complex picture of parents' attitudes in the wake of the pandemic. Some of the parents quoted in the study thought it was hypocritical for the government or schools to make a fuss about two weeks away when young people had lost so much schooling as a result of the pandemic and teacher strikes, or had regularly been taught by supply teachers. Others felt cross about the lack of support for special needs and mental health services. Fines were seen as antagonistic and irrelevant, and no deterrent to term-time holidays if that was the only break a family could afford. A sense that schools were often winding down as holidays approached and mainly scheduling fun activities led some parents to feel it was justifiable to organise a family holiday in the last weeks of term.⁷³

Is working from home a factor?

There has also been speculation that increased working from home may lie behind some patterns of absence. Data sources that have become available recently do suggest that absence is higher on Fridays – but we lack the historic data to establish whether it is a new phenomenon.⁷⁴ As for a possible correlation with working from home, research looking in more detail at the 'Friday effect' found it was larger in more deprived areas, and did not find a positive relationship between areas with high Friday absence and areas where large numbers of workers are able to work from home.⁷⁵

The costs of school absence

School absence poses a range of short- and long-term harms for pupils, and society more widely. Absent pupils miss important lessons, teachers have extra burdens of repeating material when the pupil reappears, and parents have to find a way to look after a child who is at home. These burdens often fall on those who already face significant challenges.

Longer term, poor attendance is linked to low attainment, and is a key and growing driver of the disadvantage gap.⁷⁶ Absence from school is associated with a wide range of other risks, including being 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training) between age 16 and 18, experiencing poor mental health, self-harm, becoming pregnant as a teenager, drug and alcohol use, unemployment, low earning, and offending.^{77,78}

A 2007 study estimated that the 198,000 truants who missed five weeks of school or more had a lifetime cost of £8.8 billion. The costs included extra help required in education and social services, lost earnings, extra health needs, and the impact of higher crime.⁷⁹ There has not been a more recent estimate of the full costs. However, DfE has recently published an assessment of impact on attainment and individual earnings.⁸⁰

Not in school but not in the absence data

School absence statistics do not include children missing education (sometimes abbreviated to CME) who are not registered at a school or receiving suitable education elsewhere. The government estimates that there were 149,900 children missing education at some time in 2023–24. On school census day in autumn 2024, the estimated total was 39,200.⁸¹ Recent work by the Education Policy Institute, based on comparing school rolls with GP registrations, and deducting those formally registered in elective home education, suggested a higher figure.⁸²

References

About this report

- 1 Wallace M, *Trends in Adolescent Disadvantage: Policy and Outcomes for Young People under Labour, the Coalition, and the Conservatives (1997 to 2019)*, SPDO Research paper 15, Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2023, <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp15.pdf>

Reducing School Absence

- 1 Graham J and Bowling B, *Young People and Crime*, Home Office, 1995; *Misspent Youth*, Audit Commission, 1996.
- 2 Bevins A, 'Blair's Pledge to the Dark Estates', *The Independent*, 2 June 1997, www.independent.co.uk/news/blair-s-pledge-to-the-dark-estates-1253883.html; 'Blair's Speech: Single Mothers Won't Be Forced To Take Work', BBC News, 1997, www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/news/06/0602/blair.shtml
- 3 House of Commons, *Hansard*, 'Written Answers', 8 December 1997, col 409-10, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1997-12-08/debates/7040d036-3c41-4dfb-901b-f7084000e3ad/SocialExclusionUnit>
- 4 Social Exclusion Unit, *Truancy and School Exclusion*, Cm 3957, The Stationery Office, 1998, <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/5074/2/D5074New.pdf>
- 5 House of Lords, *Hansard*, 'Written Answers', 11 May 1998, col WA 95, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/1998-05-11/debates/1e326b1c-8df8-491c-a86d-12c20d775bc8/SocialExclusionUnit>
- 6 'Education task force set to tackle rising tide of truancy', BBC News, 5 June 1998, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/107700.stm>
- 7 Woods D, Husbands C and Brown C, *Transforming Education for All: The Tower Hamlets Story*, Tower Hamlets Council Communications Unit, 2013, https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1570688/1/Transforming_Education_final.pdf
- 8 Ofsted, *Improving City Schools*, 2000, <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/15145/1/Improving%20city%20schools%20%28OFSTED%29.pdf>
- 9 Kendall L, O'Donnell L, Golden S and others, *Excellence in Cities: The National Evaluation of a Policy to Raise Standards in Urban Schools 2000-2003*, Department for Education and Skills, 2005, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20110207084023mp_/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR675A.pdf
- 10 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Improving School Attendance in England*, Session 2004-05, HC212, National Audit Office, 2005, www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2005/02/0405212.pdf
- 11 Hallam S, Castle F and Rogers L, *Research and Evaluation of the Behaviour Improvement Programme*, Department for Education and Skills, 2005, <https://oro.open.ac.uk/4565>
- 12 Lindsay G, Mujs D, Hartas D and Band S, *Evaluation of Capital Modernisation Funding for Electronic Registration in Selected Schools*, Department for Education and Skills, 2006, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20111122110451mp_/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR759.pdf
- 13 HM Treasury, *Prudent for a Purpose: Building opportunity and security for all: 2000 Spending review*, Cm 4807, 2000, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7ba913ed915d4147621cfd/csr2000.pdf>
- 14 Private communication with the author.
- 15 Barber M, *Instruction to Deliver: Tony Blair, public services and the challenge of achieving targets*, Politico's, 2007.
- 16 Private communication with the author.
- 17 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Improving School Attendance in England*, Session 2004-05, HC212, National Audit Office, 2005, www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2005/02/0405212.pdf
- 18 Department for Education, *The National Strategies 1997-2011: A Brief Summary of the Impact and Effectiveness of the National Strategies*, DfE, 2011, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b70cbcd915d3ed906467b/DFE-00032-2011.pdf>
- 19 Steer Sir A, *Learning Behaviour: The Report of the Practitioners' Group on School Behaviour and Discipline*, Department for Education and Skills, 2005, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20060715140237/http://www.dfes.gov.uk/behaviourandattendance/about/learning_behaviour.cfm

- 20 Department for Children Schools and Families, *The National Programme for Specialist Leaders of Behaviour and Attendance*, DCSF, 2010, https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/769/1/npslba_eval_rep0033010.pdf
- 21 For a fuller discussion of this context see Wallace M, *Trends in Adolescent Disadvantage, 1997 to 2019*, Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE, 2023, <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp15.pdf>
- 22 HM Treasury, *Prudent for a Purpose: Building opportunity and security for all: 2000 Spending review*, Cm 4807, 2000, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7ba913ed915d4147621cfd/csr2000.pdf>.
- 23 'Look up a minister', Margaret Hodge, Institute for Government, (no date), www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-database/look-minister?machinery_of_government_changes=1&minister=Margaret%20Hodge; Durrant T and Baker F, 'Margaret Hodge', interview, Institute for Government, 11 September 2024, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/margaret-hodge
- 24 HM Government, *Every Child Matters*, Cm 5860, The Stationery Office, 2003, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20180411021557/https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-matters>
- 25 Department for Children, Schools and Families, *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures*, DCSF, 2007, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20170427060848/https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/325111/2007-childrens-plan.pdf
- 26 Ofsted, *Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones: Management and Impact*, Ofsted, 2003, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20100505014257/http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Government-and-community/Governance/Excellence-in-Cities-and-Education-Action-Zones-management-and-impact>
- 27 Machin S, McNally S and Meghir C, 'Improving Pupil Performance in English Secondary Schools: Excellence in Cities', *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 2004, vol. 2, no. 2, pp.396–405.
- 28 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Improving School Attendance in England*, Session 2004-05, HC212, National Audit Office, 2005, www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2005/02/0405212.pdf
- 29 Hallam S, Castle F and Rogers L, *Research and Evaluation of the Behaviour Improvement Programme*, Department for Education and Skills, 2005, <https://oro.open.ac.uk/4565>
- 30 Golden S, O'Donnell L, and Rudd P, *Evaluation of Increased Flexibility for 14 to 16 Year Olds Programme: The Second Year*, DfES, 2005, www.nfer.ac.uk/media/keecgf05/ife03.pdf; Hallam S, Rogers L, Rhamie J and others, 'Pupils' Perceptions of an Alternative Curriculum: Skill Force', *Research Papers in Education*, 2007, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 95–111, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02671520601152078
- 31 Bowles R, Garcia Reyes M and Pradiptyo R, *Safer Schools Partnerships*, Youth Justice Board, 2005, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20110601234740/https://www.yjb.gov.uk/Publications/Resources/Downloads/Safer%20Schools%20Partnerships%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- 32 Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Social Services, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service and others, *Streets Ahead: A Joint Inspection of the Street Crime Initiative*, Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2003, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20221201141948/https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/cjji/inspections/streets-ahead-a-joint-inspection-of-the-street-crime-initiative>
- 33 Crowther K and Kendall S, *Investigating the Use of Parental Responsibility Measures for School Attendance and Behaviour*, DfE, 2010, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20160219080935/https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/investigating-the-use-of-parental-responsibility-measures-for-school-attendance-and-behaviour-final-report>
- 34 Ofsted, *Attendance in Secondary Schools*, Ofsted, 2007, https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/7087/2/Attendance_in_secondary_schools_briefing_note_0.pdf
- 35 Department for Children Schools and Families, *The National Programme for Specialist Leaders of Behaviour and Attendance*, DCSF, 2010, https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/769/1/npslba_eval_rep0033010.pdf
- 36 House of Commons, *Hansard*, 21 May 2002, col 160-210, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/%E2%80%8CCommons/2002-05-21/debates/665dc9d8-01bb-4233-a773-f272c48d5c51/SchoolDiscipline>
- 37 Wallace M, *Trends in Adolescent Disadvantage, 1997 to 2019*, Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE, 2023, pp. 16–22, <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp15.pdf>
- 38 Andrews J, Robinson D and Hutchinson J, *Closing the Gap? Trends in Educational Attainment and Disadvantage*, Education Policy Institute, 2017, <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/closing-gap-trends-educational-attainment-disadvantage>; Wallace M, *Trends in Adolescent Disadvantage, 1997 to 2019*, Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE, 2023, <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp15.pdf>

-
- 39 Hills J, *The Coalition's Record on Cash Transfers, Poverty and Inequality 2010-2015*, Social Policy in a Cold Climate Working Paper 11, Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2015, <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spcc/WP11.pdf>; Cooper K and Hills J, *The Conservative Governments' Record on Social Security: Policies, Spending and Outcomes, May 2015 to Pre-COVID 2020*, SPDO research paper 10, Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2021, <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp10.pdf>
- 40 Department for Education, *Special Educational Needs in England: Academic year 2023/24*, DfE, 2024, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england>.
- 41 For more discussion of these trends see Comptroller and Auditor General, *Support For Pupils With Special Educational Needs And Disabilities In England*, Session 2017-19, HC 2636, National Audit Office, 2019, www.nao.org.uk/reports/support-for-pupils-with-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities/?nab=1; Comptroller and Auditor General, *Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs*, Session 2024-25, HC 299, National Audit Office, 2024, www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/support-for-children-and-young-people-with-special-educational-needs.pdf
- 42 Long R and Roberts N, *Special Educational Needs in England*, House of Commons Library, 2025, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07020/SN07020.pdf>
- 43 Ministry of Justice, *Annual Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Statistics, 2023 to 2024*, MOJ, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tribunals-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2024/tribunal-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2024#annual-special-educational-needs-and-disability-send-statistics
- 44 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Funding for Disadvantaged Pupils*, Session 2015-16, HC 90, National Audit Office, 2015, www.nao.org.uk/reports/funding-for-disadvantaged-pupils/?nab=1.
- 45 Sibieta L, *School Spending in England: Trends over Time and Future Outlook*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2021, https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/BN334-School-spending-in-England-trends-over-time-and-future-outlook.pdf
- 46 Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, *National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme 2015-2020: Evaluation Overview Policy Report*, MHCLG, 2019, www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-evaluation-of-the-troubled-families-programme-2015-to-2020-findings
- 47 Day L, Bryson C, White C and others, *National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme: Final Synthesis Report*, DCLG, 2016, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20161124155533/https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/560499/Troubled_Families_Evaluation_Synthesis_Report.pdf
- 48 Department for Education, 'Support for vulnerable young people in serious violence hotspots', press release, 2 December 2021, www.gov.uk/government/news/support-for-vulnerable-young-people-in-serious-violence-hotspots
- 49 Department for Education, 'Education Secretary launches new attendance alliance', press release, 9 December 2021, www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-launches-new-attendance-alliance
- 50 York Consulting LLP, *Evaluation of the attendance mentors pilot*, Department for Education, 2024, www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-attendance-mentors-pilot; Department for Education, 'Major national drive to improve school attendance', press release, 8 January 2024, www.gov.uk/government/news/major-national-drive-to-improve-school-attendance
- 51 Department for Education, 'Government to tackle post pandemic absence rates with new support', press release, 18 May 2023, www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-tackle-post-pandemic-absence-rates-with-new-support; Department for Education, 'Major national drive to improve school attendance', press release, 8 January 2024, www.gov.uk/government/news/major-national-drive-to-improve-school-attendance
- 52 Local Government Association, *School Attendance Support Survey 2024*, LGA, 2024, www.local.gov.uk/publications/school-attendance-support-survey-2024
- 53 Phillipson B, Speech to the Confederation of School Trusts, 7 November 2024, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/bridget-phillipsons-speech-to-the-confederation-of-school-trusts
- 54 Department for Education, 'Regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE)', press release, 26 March 2025, www.gov.uk/government/publications/regional-improvement-for-standards-and-excellence-rise/regional-improvement-for-standards-and-excellence-rise
- 55 Ofsted, *Improving The Way Ofsted Inspects Education: Consultation Document*, Ofsted, 2025, www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improving-the-way-ofsted-inspects-education/improving-the-way-ofsted-inspects-education-consultation-document
- 56 Department for Education, *Terms of Reference: Expert Advisory Group for Inclusion*, DfE, 2025, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67922cb89091065484572d18/Terms_of_reference_-_Expert_Advisory_group_for_inclusion.pdf
-

-
- 57 The Education Hub, 'The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: what parents need to know', blog, Department for Education, 17 December 2024, <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/12/the-childrens-wellbeing-bill-what-parents-need-to-know>
 - 58 Department for Work and Pensions, 'Households Below Average Income: an analysis of the UK income distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2023', DWP, 2024, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2023/households-below-average-income-an-analysis-of-the-uk-income-distribution-fye-1995-to-fye-2023#children-in-low-income-households, relative poverty measure, after housing costs (Figure 15).
 - 59 Hulbert S, Eida T, Ferris E, Hrytsenko V and Kendall S, *HBSC England National Report: Findings from the 2021-2022 HBSC Study for England*, University of Kent, 2023, Figure 2.5, https://hbscengland.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2022_FULL_REPORT_final_02.12.24-2.pdf
 - 60 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
 - 61 Newlove-Delgado T, Marcheselli F, Williams T and others, *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 – Wave 4 Follow-up to the 2017 Survey*, NHS England, 2023, <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up>
 - 62 *Ibid.*, Table 4.1a.
 - 63 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Statutory Homelessness in England: July to September 2024*, MHCLG, 2025, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-july-to-september-2024/statutory-homelessness-in-england-july-to-september-2024#temporary-accommodation-table-ta1
 - 64 Department for Education, *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice: February 2024*, DfE, 2024, www.gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2023-to-2024/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-february-2024
 - 65 Hulbert S, Eida T, Ferris E, Hrytsenko V and Kendall S, *HBSC England National Report: Findings from the 2021-2022 HBSC Study for England*, University of Kent, 2023, Figure 5.26, https://hbscengland.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2022_FULL_REPORT_final_02.12.24-2.pdf
 - 66 *Ibid.*, Figure 4.8 and 4.18.
 - 67 Rumelt R, *Good Strategy. Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why it Matters*, Random House, 2011.
 - 68 Performance and Innovation Unit, *Wiring It up: Whitehall's Management of Cross-Cutting Policies and Services*, Cabinet Office, 2000, <https://ntouk.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/wiring-it-up-2000.pdf>; Panchamia N and Thomas P, *Public Service Agreements and the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit*, Institute for Government, 2014, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/case%20study%20psas.pdf
 - 69 Davies N, Atkins G, and Sodhi S, *Using Targets to Improve Public Services*, Institute for Government, 2021, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/using-targets-improve-public-services
 - 70 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Improving School Attendance in England*, Session 2004-05, HC212, National Audit Office, 2005, www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2005/02/0405212.pdf
 - 71 Panayiotou S, Andersson D, Matthews P and Coleman N, *Omnibus Survey of Pupils and Their Parents or Carers: Wave 3*, Department for Education, 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a821c98ed915d74e3401c98/Pupils_and_their_parents_or_carers_omnibus_-_wave_3_survey.pdf
 - 72 Department for Education, *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice: March 2024*, 2024, www.gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2023-to-2024/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-march-2024
 - 73 Burtonshaw S, *Listening to and Learning from Parents in the Attendance Crisis*, Public First, 2023, www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ATTENDANCE-REPORT-V02.pdf
 - 74 Beynon K and Thomson D, *Absence from School on Fridays*, FFT Education Datalab, 2023, <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2023/03/absence-from-school-on-fridays>
 - 75 Clifton-Sprigg J and James J, 'The "Friday Effect": School Attendance over the Week', *British Educational Research Journal*, 2025, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 73–92, <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4066>
 - 76 Hunt E, Tuckett S, Jimenez E and Robinson D, *Breaking down the Gap The Role of School Absence and Pupil Characteristics*, Education Policy Institute, 2025 <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Breaking-down-the-gap.pdf>
 - 77 Wallace M, *Trends in Adolescent Disadvantage, 1997 to 2019*, Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE, 2023, p. 123, <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp15.pdf>
-

-
- 78 Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre, *School Absence and Not in Education, Employment or Training*, VPFRC, 2024, <https://vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/133/2024/09/0002889-VPRC-School-Absence-Report-A4-DIGITAL-020924.pdf>
- 79 Brookes M, Goodall E and Heady L, *Misspent Youth: The Costs of Truancy and Exclusion*, New Philanthropy Capital, 2007, www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/misspent-youth
- 80 Department for Education, *The Impact of School Absence on Lifetime Earnings*, DfE, 2025 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67d2cf8f4702aacd2251cbae/The_impact_of_school_absence_on_lifetime_earnings.pdf
- 81 Department for Education, *Children missing education: Autumn term 2024/25*, DfE, 2024, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-missing-education>
- 82 Crenna-Jennings W and Hutchinson J, *Children Missing from Education Estimates, Trends and Characteristics*, Education Policy Institute, 2024, https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CME-report_final-1.pdf

The Institute for Government is the leading think tank working to make government more effective.

We provide rigorous research and analysis, topical commentary and public events to explore the key challenges facing government.

We offer a space for discussion and fresh thinking, to help senior politicians and civil servants think differently and bring about change.



 instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 +44 (0) 20 7747 0400

 [@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](https://twitter.com/instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

**Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA, United Kingdom**