

**SCHOOL
ATTENDANCE
UPDATE:**

**URGENT
IMPROVEMENT
REQUIRED**

School attendance update:

Urgent improvement required

This update highlights:

- **New evidence** since the Child of the North report in 2024 [1] highlighting that attendance rates are still nowhere near pre-pandemic levels and alarmingly, **severe non-attendance worsens for disadvantaged students** (see Figures overleaf).
- The Covid pandemic particularly exacerbated challenges facing pupils living in poverty or with SEND and these trends have persisted (see below and Figures overleaf).
- Pupils with SEND, receiving FSM, or living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods **are ~2X more likely to be persistently absent** defined as missing up to 10% of sessions (see Figures overleaf)
- Students with an **EHCP are 7X more likely to be severely absent** (missing more than 50% of sessions) and those **students receiving FSM are 4X more likely** with these rates increasing.
- Suspensions are **~4X higher for pupils receiving SEND support and on FSM and >3X higher for those with an EHCP** [2].
- Pupils who experience multiple adverse factors are at increased risk for suspension and attendance difficulties [3].
- Suspensions restrict education opportunities and are related to lower levels of attainment, with **students excluded just once approximately 12 months behind their peers** [4]
- Persistently absent pupils are **2X less likely to achieve at expected levels** [5], **6X more likely to become NEET** [5] and **3X more likely to become young offenders** [6].
- Persistently absent pupils are £10,000 worse off on average at 28 years [5].
- There has been a **breakdown in trust between families and schools**, particularly when families experience multiple challenges such as living in poverty, severe absence and unmet SEND or mental health needs [7].
- Since 2019, the **number of children in home education has more than tripled**, highlighting parental concerns about schools [5].
- The **narrow academic focus of secondary school can be alienating** for many students whose strengths and interests do not align with an academic model of education [8]
- Poverty is driving disadvantage with 72% of young people from more affluent households passing their English and Maths GCSE's but only 43% from disadvantaged backgrounds - **increasing their risk of becoming Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)** [9].
- The **school system needs to be more inclusive** and reduce lost learning so that more pupils can succeed in mainstream schools [2, 10].

Holistic approaches required

The evidence is clear - we need to reconsider the purpose of our education system to address the challenges outlined opposite and shown in the Figures overleaf. Our conceptualisation of education needs to be **future focused** with a **broadier definition of success** to enable all young people to engage with learning in different ways irrespective of whether they have identified SEND. Greater diversity of qualifications and pathways such as internships and apprenticeships will increase autonomy and ensure opportunities are more effectively tailored to individual strengths and interests.

An inclusive school culture is central to a positive school experience and approaches based on building relationships with students and their families are crucial. Consulting pupils about the school environment and policies which affect them can help to increase pupil's sense of safety and their engagement.

Preventative approaches such as Family Hubs are essential in addressing need early. Hubs can offer activities to help parents support their children's school readiness and provide a focal point for schools and professionals to work collaboratively with communities to develop place-based approaches responsive to local need. Breakfast clubs in schools can help to ensure children are ready to learn.

When engagement with education is a concern, mentoring, school readiness interventions, academic catch up, social, emotional and mental health interventions, technological approaches such as telepresence and alternative provision can all be useful at specific times or to address specific gaps but as supplements to a broader inclusive offer.

Broader opportunities such as play in the EY and primary schools and enrichment opportunities such as sport, arts and volunteering can also promote engagement and develop broader attributes such as resilience and social skills, particularly for pupils at risk of underachievement.

The WARMTH framework ([Welcome to Barriers to Education](#)) co-produced with autistic people, parents and professionals offers an innovative and compassionate approach to supporting YP who are struggling with their attendance and their families. It is premised on inclusive principles and offers a flexible tool for schools and professionals to consider how learners can be actively engaged and supported when engaging with learning becomes challenging. We need to continue to be ambitious for all of our YP and innovative in our solutions to ensure that all YP are able to access and engage with education in meaningful ways [11].

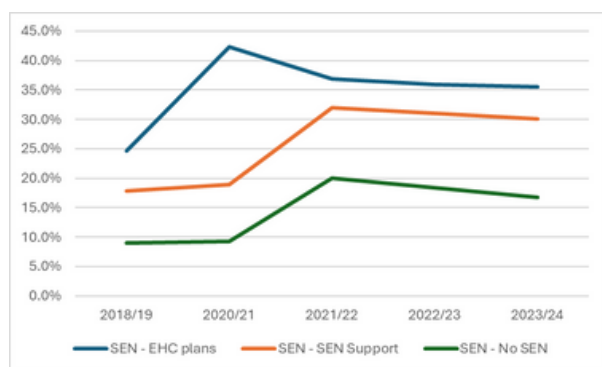


Figure 1. Percentage of persistent absentees (>10% missed) by SEN status, 2018/19 to 23/24.

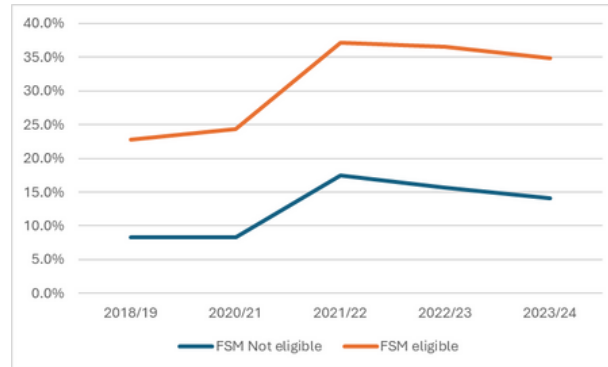


Figure 2. Percentage of persistent absentees (>10% missed) by FSM status, 2018/19 to 23/24.

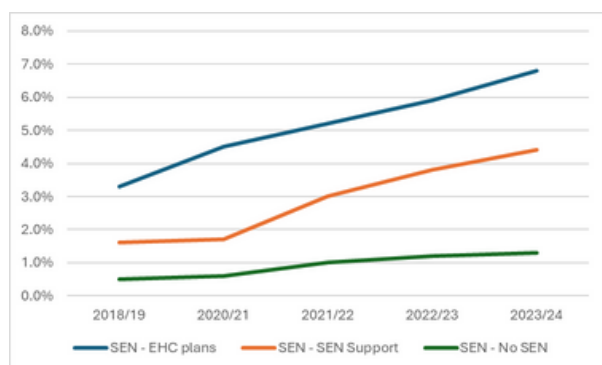


Figure 3. Percentage of severely absent pupils (>50% missed) by SEN status, 2018/19 to 23/24.

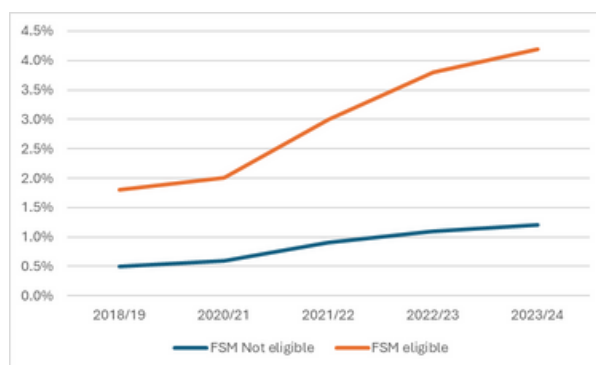


Figure 4. Percentage of severely absent pupils (>50% missed) by FSM status, 2018/19 to 23/24.

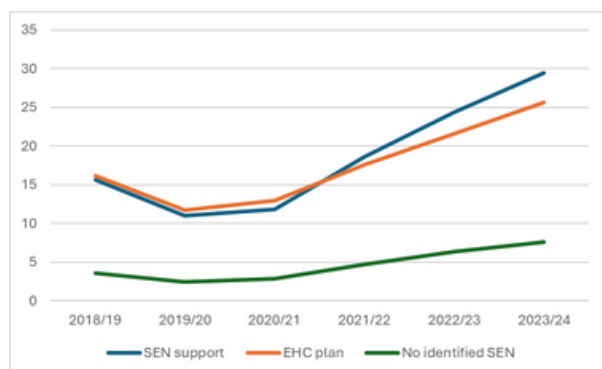


Figure 5. Suspension rates by SEN status, 2018/19 to 23/24.

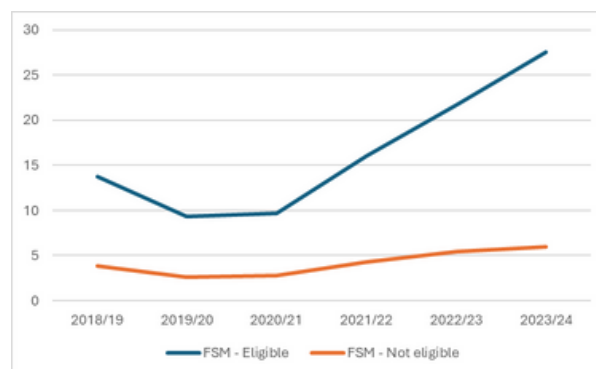


Figure 6. Suspension rates by FSM status, 2018/19 to 23/24.

OnSide and its network of 16 open Youth Zones

OnSide and its network of 16 open Youth Zones play a role in supporting schools and young people by providing complementary, relationship-based learning environments. Each centre offers an alternative space where young people can build confidence, resilience and aspiration through informal and experiential learning. Different models for each Youth Zone have been developed to suit the local needs however broadly fit into the following categories:

- Curriculum enhancement programmes that help enhance the educational offer provided by schools/PRUs/AP
- Reintegration support as a short-term intervention for pupils disengaging or on the verge of exclusions
- Curriculum offer - Youth Zones as the main or only education provider for an individual/cohort
- Out of school leisure and informal learning activities to support personal development and readiness to learn
- Re-engaging young people missing education or NEET

Examples:

Mahdlo Youth Zone (Oldham) offers tailored, phased programmes to re-engage students struggling with mainstream education, focusing on personal development, life and workplace skills.

Inspire Youth Zone (Chorley) supports pupils at risk of exclusion through 1:1 or small-group learning, mentoring and goalsetting, working closely with schools to improve behaviour and retention.

Bolton Lads and Girls Club (BLGC) delivers AP for 8-16-year-olds, combining academic, vocational and enrichment activities that build life skills and lead to meaningful qualifications.

#BeeWell

In a recent #BeeWell study at the University of Manchester [12], the attendance, mental health, school belonging and relationships with school staff were tracked for over 25,000 young people in more than 150 secondary schools in Greater Manchester from Year 8 to Year 9 to Year 10.

#BeeWell wanted to understand more about the complex and nuanced relationships between these different aspects of their lives over time. For example, #BeeWell were interested to know whether changes in a pupil's experiences in school (e.g., their relationships with school staff) would lead to changes in their attendance, or vice-versa (or a reciprocal relationship where relationships with staff predict attendance, and attendance predicts relationships with staff).

#BeeWell used an advanced statistical method called RI-CLPM. RI-CLPM isolates between-person effects (that is, stable differences between individuals, e.g. "young people who report high levels of mental health difficulties attend school less frequently than those who do not") from within-person effects (that is, situational change for an individual, e.g. "an increase in mental health difficulties for a young person leads to less frequent school attendance").

#BeeWell focussed on within-person effects and were able to control for a range of background factors that might confound such effects; in this study, ethnicity, neighbourhood deprivation, familial deprivation, special educational needs, and age were controlled for. RI-CLPM allowed an examination of whether the nature and magnitude of the different effects observed varies by factors such as gender.

The findings showed that relationships with school staff predicted later attendance for both boys and girls. For girls only, mental health difficulties predicted later attendance. Finally, #BeeWell also found that attendance predicted later school belonging, though again this effect was found only among girls. The size of the effects observed ranged from small to moderate (compared to those reported in other developmental studies using RI-CLPM), but all were practically meaningful.

In terms of strategies to improve attendance, the #BeeWell findings highlight the need to prioritise identification of need and support for mental health difficulties (particularly among girls), and to nurture positive relationships between school staff and the young people in their classes.



C2C

C2C is a national network which aims to provide holistic support beyond the school through better integration of systems to support children and locally rooted community-led approaches, with the aim of ensuring children thrive. C2C is working across the NW of England.

The localised nature of C2C projects ensures they are responsive to local need. Engagement is a key focus of the work with pupils and families. In the Northwood, Kirkby project, engagement is embedded within all areas of project delivery, with a specific requirement for schools to include wider engagement opportunities from all stakeholders. For example, in the current SEND projects one school is arranging parent workshops to support language development at home and another is looking to create parent ambassadors to support the impact and learning of their new SEND KS2 provision.

Also in the Northwood project, a new Engagement Coach will be working with targeted young people and their families to help identify and break down barriers to support their post-16 aspirations, ensuring that they can make informed and sustained choices that are suitable for them.

In addition to the direct work with families and young people the emphasis upon multi-agency working has enabled local teams to address broader areas which affect children's attendance and engagement with education, such as diet and sleep. Being part of a national project also enables local teams to share expertise when a need is identified, such as developing local SEMH support or NEET provision.

This sharing of expertise ensures that discrete concerns such as school attendance or NEET are not addressed in isolation but are part of a holistic approach to address intersecting needs and improve young people's lives, opportunities and futures.

Conclusion

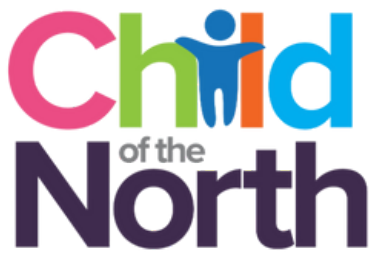
The 2024 CotN report described a school attendance crisis following the covid-19 pandemic. **The crisis remains** with inequalities related to poverty and disadvantage becoming entrenched.

The **root causes of school absence are multifaceted** and require a whole system response tailored to localities.

There have been successful approaches and government must **systematically evaluate what works** and ensure that children in disadvantaged areas—such as Northern England—are not left at elevated risk of becoming Not in Employment, Education or Training.

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This report is a collaborative programme of work between Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives.

A note about language

Please note that this report often uses “schools” as shorthand for “schools, nurseries, and other educational settings such as pupil referral units and special schools.” One central message of this report is the need for a “whole system” approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system.

About Child of the North

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. [@ChildoftheNort1](#) [@childofthenorth.bsky.social](#)

About the N8 Research Partnership

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. www.n8research.org.uk [@N8research](#) [@n8research.bsky.social](#)

About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives is a dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children’s Commissioner, Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children’s issues for decades, the Centre’s agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people’s futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous. www.centreforyounglives.org.uk [@CfYounglives](#)

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