



#DigaLittleDeeper



Filling the gaps in family support to improve school attendance

School-Home Support Briefing Paper
March 2023

A portrait of Jaine Stannard, CEO, on the left side of the page. She is a woman with blonde hair, smiling, wearing a magenta top. The background of the portrait is slightly blurred.

Foreword from Jaine Stannard, CEO

Some of the children referred to School-Home Support don't have their own bed to sleep in, let alone a desk and a place to study. One boy feeding himself on budget microwave meals only went to school when he could scrape the bus fare together from around the house, ferreting down the side of the sofa for forgotten coins. We work with children who are carers, children whose families are in unsuitable housing, and others where the whole family is falling apart under the weight of mental ill health caused by the stress of challenging lives.

The families we work with live in this country's most deprived communities. Schools continue to astonish in their ability to give when there is nothing left to give, but they are stretched to the max. Funding of public services around schools hasn't kept pace with demand. Take the early help service, designed to ensure families get support from the local authority. According to research conducted for our 'Dig a Little Deeper' Campaign, almost one-quarter of school referrals are returned 'without action'. Thresholds for help are unacceptably high, meaning 'early' help effectively no longer exists, causing issues to escalate, feeding the school absence problem and costing more.

The sad truth is that the system is currently failing schools and vulnerable families. The reality is that some of today's persistently absent children are never coming back to school. The government's direction of travel on tackling school attendance has been broadly right, but it needs to go further and faster to provide practical support to families now.

Forty years of working with children and families have taught me two things. First, most parents want the best for their children, including doing well at school. Blaming and punishing them for absence doesn't work and can be counter-productive. Second, there are no quick fixes; getting children into school and their families fully engaged takes time, trust and understanding.

The goal must be to strengthen the bridge between home and school. Schools know what to do and who can help them do it, but without resources and recognition of the complexity of the task at hand, they (which means we) are doomed to fail.

When communities have complex, longstanding problems which need deep investment to level up, they shouldn't have to choose between good teaching and learning, and high-quality whole family support. Investment is needed in both.

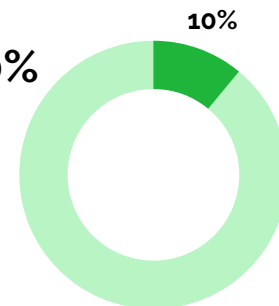


Children are missing weeks, months and sometimes years of their education, severely affecting their future life chances.

Recent Department for Education (DfE) data shows that a shocking 1.6 million children in England were persistently absent from school in the autumn and spring term 2021/22 (1). Of these children, 35% were eligible for free school meals, compared with 18% of pupils who were not eligible. The long-term impact of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis is disproportionately affecting disadvantaged families. The barriers to disadvantaged children accessing their education are greater than ever before and in order to support families to recover from the pandemic stronger and become more resilient, whole family support is never more needed.

Persistent absence in numbers

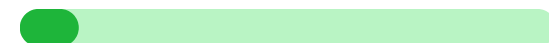
Missing 10% of school



Missing one half day each week

AM PM AM PM AM PM AM PM AM PM

Missing around 20 days every school year



Missing over one school year in a school career



Improving support for disadvantaged persistently absent children

Schools are doing their best, but they can't do it all. Having great teachers can't help these children if they aren't in school. Children with poor school attendance are also more likely to have lower attainment levels (2) and poor attendance increases the likelihood of a lifetime reduction in earnings and poor health outcomes (3). And it's not just their future that is at risk: children who are not in school are at risk of not being safe and are more vulnerable to becoming involved in extra-familial risks and harm:

- **More than 90% of young offenders had a previous record of being persistently absent from school (4)**
- **83% of knife possession offenders had been persistently absent in at least one of the five years of study (5)**
- **A quarter of school-age offenders have significant school non-attendance records and the majority of school-age offenders progress to become adult offenders (6)**

Ensuring children are in school on time and ready to learn can be challenging for families in crisis, especially for the most vulnerable families where contact with the education system may be fractured and relationships with school staff may have broken down.

Local Authority Early Help services aren't able to meet the demand for support from schools and families and this is contributing to the crisis in school attendance. According to our Freedom of Information research, nearly a quarter of family referrals made by schools to local authorities are returned without action. Too often, we see children and their families falling through the cracks, becoming invisible to key services and the vital support they need.

Attendance issues emerge when children cannot access the support they need, when they need it. The renewed focus on multi-agency working in the DfE's 2022 guidance - Working Together to Improve School Attendance (7) is welcomed, as is the guidance on the importance of tackling the underlying causes of absence. School-Home Support practitioners report that the guidance is not on the radar of all the relevant agencies they work with, possibly because it isn't statutory.



What is the Dig a Little Deeper campaign calling for?

School-Home Support launched its 'Dig a Little Deeper' Campaign to make the case for a properly funded whole family support network. By 2030 we want to see a national, universal whole family support system around schools, and are calling on the government to start by using the Spring Budget 2023 to commit £90.2 million for family support practitioners in the 19 Priority Education Investment Areas (8) hardest hit by the school attendance issue.

We believe that for some families, having a 'positive constant' through bespoke, whole family support, can make a real difference to attendance outcomes. A service committed to providing a bridge between home and school and improving the home-learning environment is required.

If, through a well-funded whole family support service, we are able to help families to prioritise education in the family home, the impact on child and adult skills and aspirations could be exponential. These transformations will strengthen local economies and enable all communities to reach their full potential.

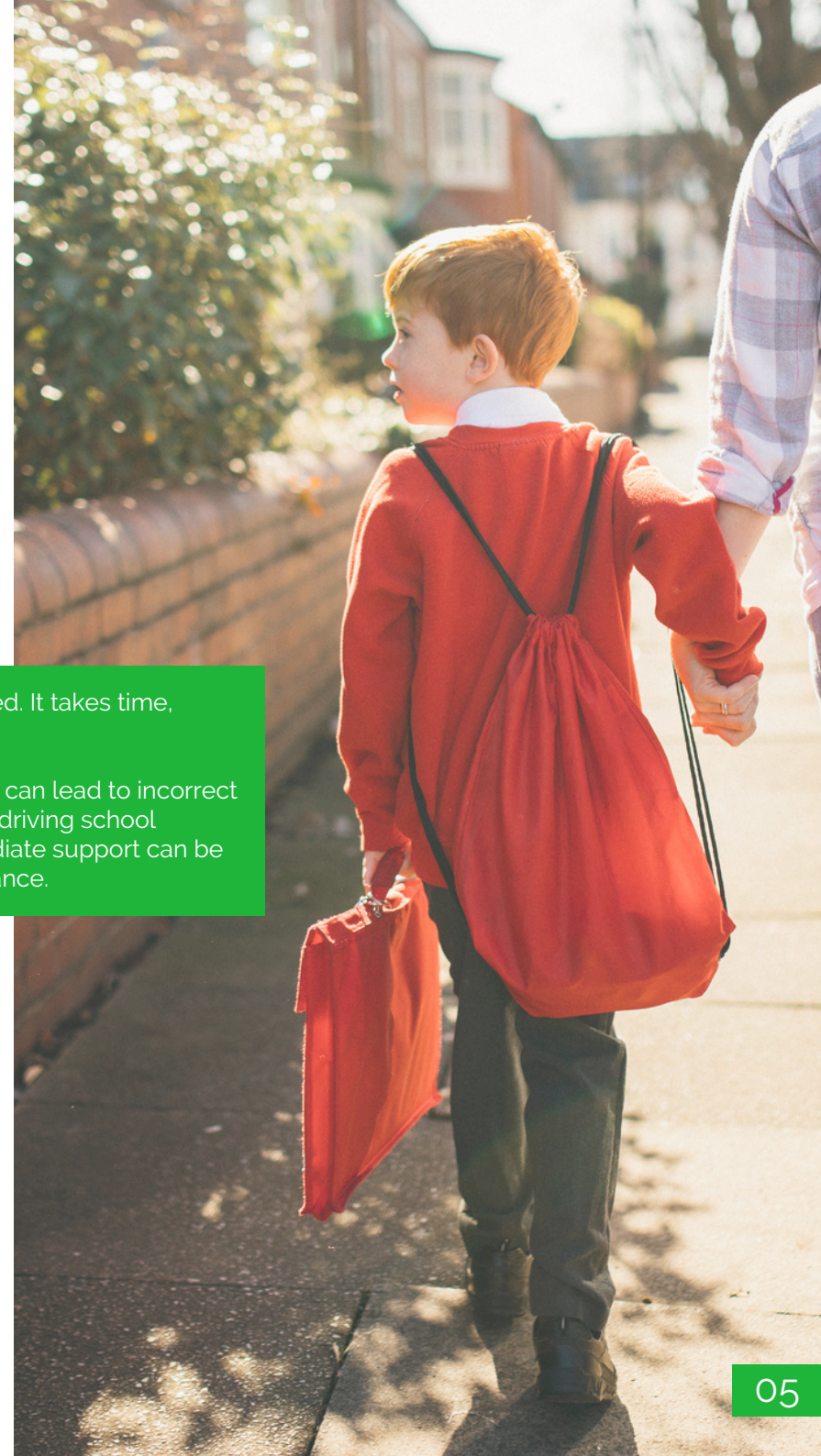
For some families, barriers to education and good attendance can be layered, complex and intertwined. It takes time, consistency and expertise to unpick how best to improve outcomes.

Sometimes reasons for absence identified by the school, mask the underlying causes of absence and can lead to incorrect referrals to other services. This can be the case when mental health challenges are cited as the issue driving school absence. Working with the family on a more intensive basis exposes practical problems where immediate support can be provided. This helps to alleviate stress and allows for more time to focus on issues like school attendance.

The School-Home Support principles of whole family support are:

- Targeted and bespoke support with parents/carers and children allowing for long-term outcomes
- Consistent, tenacious support without time limits which help build trusting relationships
- Working in partnership with the whole family to improve school engagement, encourage independence and improve resilience

The School-Home Support Practitioner Service delivers expert practitioners to work on a one-to-one basis with children and families to establish long-term trusting relationships that build a bridge between home and school. The model has been highlighted by the Centre for Social Justice as an example of a key worker model that centres around the whole family to address the underlying causes of poor school attendance (9).



The School-Home Support Impact Report 2021/22 demonstrates that School-Home Support practitioners helped over 18,000 family members tackle barriers to school attendance and engagement. The average caseload has intensified, with more than double the number of home visits, phone calls and meetings for each family supported compared to the previous year. Furthermore, the number of families with school attendance and engagement issues who also presented with concerns relating to work and money increased by 82% (10).

Some of the often interconnected, underlying issues that drive poor attendance include insecure housing, domestic abuse, children and young people acting as carers, relationship breakdown and family addictions. Often, families recognise that they need support but do not tell statutory services out of fear of repercussions. Families hide the real reasons for their children's absence, meaning that issues identified by schools as barriers to attendance, such as mental health, can often turn out to be quite different.

These issues result in families becoming disengaged with schools and families may become guarded and distrustful of schools and the educational process. In some cases relationships between schools and families have broken down so much that the gap between school and home widens almost beyond repair. Whole family support is often the only way to build this bridge and improve outcomes for the entire family.



School-Home Support data from 2020/21 includes the following outcomes:

Based on eight months of support, persistently absent children improve attendance by 6% (12 extra days in school)

Based on seven months of support, severely absent children improve attendance by 27% (54 extra days in school)

Based on 12 months of support, persistently absent children improve attendance by 16% (32 extra days in school)



The long-term cost of absence

According to government funded research for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the annual cost per individual missing at least five weeks of school (those below the persistent absence threshold) is £1,965 (11). New Philanthropy Capital conducted independent analysis for School-Home Support and found that for every £1 there is a net saving of £1.24 or a potential annual saving of £127 million (adjusted for 2020 prices). Their report also suggests that the return on investment analysis for getting a persistently absent child to school and improving attendance found that every £1 spent produced £11.60 in savings over the working lifetime of the child. Half of these savings accrue to the individual and half to the taxpayer. The report notes that this represents a potential annual saving of £250 million per annum (12).

Emir's story

Emir and his mum Aisha had suffered a devastating loss when Emir's dad passed away. The family's stability and routine was disrupted, leaving Emir struggling with his emotions and mental health. Emir felt anxious about attending school and his attendance fell to 83%. He would regularly lash out at his mum. With grief, and financial difficulties, Aisha's mental health deteriorated, so dealing with Emir's poor attendance was a challenge.

When school first introduced Laura first to the family, she didn't focus on attendance, but listened to Aisha and Emir to understand the challenges they faced. Laura supported with developing new routines for the home and helped with referrals to bereavement and mental health agencies.

Laura referred Emir to the Children and Adolescents Mental Health Service (CAMHS) to get professional support to manage his grief. Laura was a friendly, reliable face to talk to at school and this reduced Emir's anxiety about attending.

Laura worked with mum Aisha to build her confidence and skills so she could regain stability in the home. With a parenting course Aisha found new tools to rebuild her family routine and develop strategies to help when Emir lashed out. With the tools provided by Laura, Aisha was able to build her resilience, and improved the home learning environment for Emir.

When Laura first met the family she worried that Emir's persistent absence would be a significant challenge, but with support, Emir improved his attendance to 87%, and is much happier at school. With Aisha's improved confidence, Laura has every hope that Emir's upward trajectory will continue.





Recommendations

- 1. Making whole family support available at the earliest stage is necessary to tackle the root causes of absence.** School attendance issues escalate when children and families cannot access the support they need when they need it. Issues like insecure housing, domestic abuse, children acting as carers, relationship breakdown, and family addictions can act as a catalyst for attendance and engagement problems. Availability of whole family support services to schools for attendance concerns, can ensure key moments to intervene aren't missed.
- 2. The government should commit to a national, universal whole family support system which builds stronger bridges between home and school, and reduces the school absence problem which is feeding the disadvantage gap.** This should include appropriate funding and statutory guidance to multi-agency partnerships and the spread of best practice. If, through education focused whole family support, we succeed in bringing education into more family homes, the impact on child and adult skills and aspirations could be exponential.
- 3. The Dig a Little Deeper campaign is calling for the government to use the Spring Budget 2023 to commit £90.2 million to help 194,000 persistently absent children. This can be achieved by providing 2,225 family support practitioners (also called attendance practitioners by the Centre for Social Justice) across the 19 Priority Education Investment Areas hardest hit by the school attendance crisis.** The new funding available to these areas isn't enough to meet the scale of need. Family support practitioners working in partnership with schools can make progress with families where other parties cannot. Interventions should aim to allow practitioners to build trust and take the time to 'dig a little deeper' into barriers to school. Support should build family skills, resilience and ambition and signpost expert specialist services.
- 4. School attendance outcomes should be a key success criteria for the Supporting Families Programme, with an appropriate allocation of the funding to achieve it.** The new funding allocated to the Supporting Families Programme in the Spring Budget 2023, is a welcome investment in key services which impact on school attendance rates. The acid test for schools and families struggling with persistent absence is whether the boost to the Supporting Families Programme improves school attendance outcomes.

Recommendations (continued)

5. Schools should be given a clear idea of how much support they can expect from local authorities. School attendance support work is currently underfunded in local authorities and as budgets have been stretched, schools are not getting the support they would have previously with cases that do not meet the higher thresholds now in place. Alongside this, different cultures exist around the importance of attendance work at local authority level. Whole family support should be as much about a child's education and attendance as it is about getting the parents/carers back to work.

6. Schools should have a range of attendance support opportunities available to them including timely, bespoke whole family support. To this end, the NAHT remarks that "Like other vulnerable pupil policies, the most successful attendance/absence initiatives require a bespoke, closely co-ordinated multi-agency approach" (13).

7. The success of whole family support should be quantitative and qualitative, recognising the distance travelled on attendance progress. In some cases, the success may be negligible in terms of additional days in school but substantial, for example, if a child is kept in the mainstream system. New metrics should be produced to capture progress travelled on attendance. This data should examine attendance patterns at an individual and school level and should be integrated into the attendance dashboard. It should also recognise when support has ensured attendance hasn't worsened and a child remains in the system.

8. The Department for Education should conduct a review into the long-term effectiveness of fines and attendance prosecution, particularly on disadvantaged pupils. The aim of the government's attendance policy should be to strengthen the bridge between home and school, not weaken it. Fines rarely work if poor attendance is driven by underlying causes. They are regressive and can be counter-productive, weakening instead of strengthening the bridge between school and home.



References

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