

## Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill - Lords Briefing

### Summary

We welcome the Bill as it strongly aligns with our July 2024 policy report '[Every Child in School and Ready to Learn- a support led Route Map to tackle the school attendance crisis](#)' - however, the Bill needs to be strengthened to accelerate progress tackling the school absence **by investing in family support which is linked to attendance**. This would be facilitated by the following four amendments:

- Commit to funding a whole family support practitioner for every school;
- Mandate schools to train staff to embed a support-led, family-centric approach to addressing low attendance;
- Consult on a new vulnerability code for attendance registers that indicates when a child is absent but receiving support;
- Publish guidance on parental engagement and review impact of sanctions on attendance and relationship with parents/carers.

The need to act on school attendance is now greater than ever given the recent research published by the Department for Education. Specifically, the research demonstrates that school attendance is influential in a child's [educational attainment](#) and their [lifetime earnings](#).

### The School Attendance Challenge

School Attendance is a persistent and significant challenge. Despite the tremendous efforts of schools, local services and the third sector, the number of children who are persistently absent from school has nearly doubled since pre-pandemic levels.

This means that many children are missing out on their education, on developing important skills and on making friends. This is particularly stark for the 171,000 children who are 'severely absent' (less than 50% attendance). Specifically, our [School Attendance Gap Day](#) campaign showed that for the 2.3% of children who were severely absent in the 2023/24 school year, their 2024/25 school year effectively ended on the 4th February 2025.

There has been a cross party focus on school attendance which is welcome. However, despite efforts, the focus on improving attendance since the pandemic has not significantly moved the needle. The latest [data](#) published by the DfE for the 2023/24 school year detailed a **persistent absence rate of 20% - notably this is still drastically higher than the pre-pandemic rate of 10.9% in 2018/19**. Additionally, the overall **rate of severe absence has increased to 2.3% an increase from 2%** in the last year. Significantly, this 2.3% severe absence rate or 171,000 pupils is a 184% increase from the pre-pandemic levels (2018/19 data).

## Long term consequences of non-attendance:

- **Lower Attainment** - There is a proven correlation between school absence and school attainment. [Data](#) from the Children's Commissioner report 'Missing school, missing grades' reveals that 78% of pupils who were rarely absent in both years passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, in 2022. By comparison, just one in twenty pupils who were 'severely absent' met the same standards. Meanwhile, the Government's own [research](#) demonstrates that: 1) 'the students with the highest attendance throughout their time in school gain the best GCSE and A Level results'; 2) 'pupils who performed better both at the end of primary and secondary school missed fewer days than those who didn't perform'; and 3) 'primary school children in Key Stage 2 who didn't achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths missed on average four more days per school year than those whose performance exceeded the expected standard'.
- **Reduced Social Mobility** - The Social Mobility Commission views NEET (not in education, employment or training) as a key indicator for social mobility. [Research](#) has found that 'persistently absent' children and young people (missing 10% or more of education) are 3.9 times more likely to be NEET and 6.3 times more likely to be persistently NEET.
- **Risk of School Exclusion** - The Who is Losing Learning Coalition has [found](#) that children who are 'severely absent' from school are also five times more likely to be permanently excluded than the national rate, suggesting that severe absence may correlate with behavioural problems that schools do not have the capacity to address. The link between non-attendance at school and likelihood of exclusion has also been explicated by the Government's [Timpson Review](#).
- **Exposure to Harmful Influences** - School provides a strong protective effect from harmful influences. [Analysis](#) from the Centre for Social Justice in 2023 indicated that the rising rates of school absences could create an extra 9,000 extra young offenders by 2027 if left unresolved. The CSJ has also [noted in](#) a July 2018 report that 58% of the young adults in prison were excluded from school.
- **Cost to the Exchequer** - An assessment of the cost of pupil absence to the UK economy was last undertaken by New Philanthropy Capital in its 2012 [report](#). It found that the failure to address truancy from school is £800m per year or £8.8bn across 11 years of education. This covered the cost to the education system, health service and social services and the cost of lower earnings and of higher crime. The Bank of England [inflation calculator](#) indicates that £800m could be equivalent to £1.1 billion today.

## **The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill**

**We warmly welcome the Bill and the school attendance measures it contains and the progress made by the previous government on attendance.** It aligns strongly with our July 2024 policy report [Every Child in School and Ready to Learn- a support led Route Map to tackle the school attendance crisis](#)- and as in an important step towards tackling the school attendance crisis through a support first , family centred approach.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill builds on the strong start the previous and current Government has already made tackling the school attendance crisis, but we should not miss this opportunity to strengthen the bill to move further and faster **towards a support first family centred approach to tackling absence** and away from a sanctions based approach.

We welcome proposals to legislate on free breakfast clubs and limit the number of branded uniform items that schools can require. We also look forward to swift progress introducing the Children Not In School registers, which we have campaigned for.

### **School Home Support's Amendments to the Childrens' Wellbeing and Schools Bill**

To accelerate progress on the school attendance issue the Bill must:

#### **i) A whole family support practitioner for every school**

All schools should have reliable access to a community based service of whole family support practitioners to work more intensively with families to build positive relationships between home and school and tackle absence. The School- Home Support model and approach as recognised by the Education Select Committee in its [2023 Inquiry](#) as best practice, provides a blueprint for the professionals working within these community models. This is the missing piece in the Government's emerging system of support to tackle school attendance. The support should be made available to schools to help families of children who are between 15-50% absent.

In line with the SHS model, whole family support practitioners should be:

- work with but not for schools and statutory services.
- off timetable ensuring they are a dedicated go to point for families both in and out of school hours
- professionally trained and supervised in family engagement work.

These elements are key to building trust with parents, identifying the root causes of absence and co- creating solutions to address barriers to school. As well as promoting positive engagement between schools and parents - practitioners providing practical and emotional support to families who are often dealing with complex overlapping challenges which make school attendance a second or third order issue.

They have an attendance remit, delivering wider outcomes than improved attendance.

SHS [2023/24 Impact Report](#) demonstrates the success of intensive, bespoke whole family support approaches. 7/10 of children receiving intensive support improved their attendance by an average of 22 days annually and severely absent children improved their attendance by 46 days. 80% of all parents/carers improved engagement with school and learning, 88% of all children and young people improved their behaviour. The Government should use the Comprehensive Spending Review (2025 -28) to commit to a whole family support worker for every school and begin by investing in 10 community schemes of whole family support workers with an attendance remit. Each scheme could support 80 schools nationally in each area and a further 800 schools nationally using the SHS/ DfE community models in Liverpool, Black pool and Bradford as a blueprint. This whole family support proposal would complement the existing school based, child only focused Attendance Mentors Programme which is more appropriate for children and young people with less severe absence problems (5-15% absent)

## **ii) Mandate schools to train staff to embed a support-led, family-centric approach to addressing low attendance**

School staff are ill-equipped to deal with the increasing challenges around school attendance, despite their many efforts to do so. Like local Authorities, they have operated in a sanctions not support based system so skills gaps exist. We were pleased that as part of Government mandatory guidance, schools and local authorities will be required to adopt a support-led, family centric approach to tackling absence. However, we are concerned that schools do not currently have the capacity, skills or funding to deliver this themselves. Government should amend the bill to require and resource high quality training for school staff in support first family centric approaches to:

- ensure staff working with families on attendance are properly trained, supervised and supported
- similar to the current arrangements for safeguarding, ensure that all staff receive some training in “support-led, family centric approaches to tackling absence”. This would be a simple, quick, cost-effective way to ensure high levels of coverage throughout the country, creating a critical mass of people who are practicing a whole family approach to school attendance. We believe this would change the way the sector thinks about school attendance and support teachers in what must currently feel like an impossible task. Depending on how this is structured, we believe it would be relatively cost affordable. This could be as simple as requiring the family support practitioner that covers that school to deliver regular training to staff as part of their role. In the absence of a family support practitioner, this could be delivered through a mandatory e-learning module delivered in INSET training, which we estimate at around £100,000 to procure and deliver.

## **iii) Consult on a new vulnerability code for attendance registers that indicates when a child is absent but receiving support**

During the first two terms of 2023/24, a third of individuals supported by School-Home Support continued to see their attendance drop due to challenges they continued to face. There are rarely quick fixes to tackling underlying causes of poor attendance and improving relationships with school. Securing and implementing specialist support can take time, as can establishing trust and understanding between home and school. A new vulnerability code that indicates **when a child is absent from school but receiving help** would give the support enough time to be implemented and be effective. It also enables better understanding among staff of the wider context and interventions. Use of the code will indicate to Ofsted during inspections that children are actively being identified and supported by the school when their attendance is low. Good understanding of the code and its implications should be seen as a strong indicator that there is a strong whole school approach to attendance which is support-led and family-led.

#### **iv) Publish guidance on parental engagement and review impact of sanctions on attendance and relationship with parents/carers**

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, parental attitudes to school attendance have changed. This issue is seen acutely in the attendance crisis as fewer and fewer parents believe it is imperative that children attend school - our [report](#) with Public First demonstrated that there has been a 'seismic shift in parental attitudes to school attendance' with fewer parents/carers believing that it is essential that children attend school everyday. This is significant as a good relationship between parents/carers and schools is essential in improving a child's attendance in schools. For instance, [evidence](#) from the Education Endowment Foundation demonstrates that parental engagement can result in an additional four months of progress and [research](#) from ParentKind shows that it can lead to better behaviour, more confidence, higher attendance, and lower risk of exclusion. However, the DfE's approach of issuing fines to tackle non-attendance is counter-intuitive. This is because parents [perceive](#) these to be 'ineffective and antagonistic' as per our report with Public First. Therefore, as part of the Bill, the DfE needs to ensure that schools are supported to allow them the time to engage positively with parents/carers, develop skills in parental engagement and provide nuanced support where appropriate. Currently, basic teacher training is not conducive to this and therefore the DfE needs to go further and publish parental guidance for schools and review the impact of sanctions.

**About School-Home Support** [School-Home Support](#) is a national charity working through schools to support families whose children are persistently and severely absent, by addressing the root causes of high absence through whole family support. We are campaigning for a properly funded and consistent family support network in and around schools to tackle barriers to good school attendance, maximise opportunity for all children.

#### **Additional questions contact**

If you have any questions, queries or further thoughts on the above then please get in touch with our **Head of Policy and Engagement, Rachael Kenningham** at [rachael.kenningham@shs.org.uk](mailto:rachael.kenningham@shs.org.uk).

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