

Children missing education

Children missing from education in
England 2016-17

Robyn Ellison and Dustin Hutchinson, January 2018

Executive summary

A child is defined in law as 'missing education' if he/she:

- is not registered at a school; and
- is not receiving suitable education otherwise than at school.

Missing education affects children's educational attainment, and can also impede socialisation. There are also serious safeguarding concerns around children missing education who may be at risk of abuse and exploitation, becoming involved in criminal or gang-related activity, and radicalisation.

In October 2017, NCB submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all local authorities in England asking:

- How many children were recorded as missing education (CME) in England for the year 2016/17;¹
- What proportion of CME qualified for free school meals (as an indicator of poverty and social disadvantage); and
- What proportion of CME were known to social services (as an indicator of challenging family circumstances including abuse and neglect).²

Children missing education

- Data provided by 136 local authorities in England shows that **49,187 children were reported as missing education** ("CME") at some point in 2016/17 (70 in every 10,000 children). This compares with 33,262 children recorded as CME in 90 local authorities in 2015/16.

Links with poverty and deprivation

- One in five (22 percent) children recorded as CME in 2016/17 were in receipt of free school meals when last on a school roll, compared with 13 percent of all school aged children.
- 15 percent of children recorded as CME were known to social services.

Policy Implications

- An **alarming number of children are missing education** - 49,187 in 2016/17 - especially as they are at high risk of poor outcomes.
- The data suggests children missing education are **more likely to be living in poverty**.
- It also suggests that 15 percent of children missing education are known to social services, raising **questions about whether this vulnerable group are getting the support they need**.
- There are **significant gaps in the data on vulnerable children**. Many local authorities did not record or provide figures for whether their CME are in receipt of free schools meals and/or are known to social services.
- The number of children recorded as missing education **varies greatly between local authorities**, but the reasons for this variation are not clear.

Recommendations for the Department of Education

- **Collect and analyse national-level data on children missing education, and publish an annual report to include:**
 - The number of children recorded as missing education in every local authority, including how many children qualified for free school meals and how many were known to social services; and
 - The length of time for which a child was missing education (e.g. less than one month, one-three months, three-six months etc.).
- **Revise the statutory guidance on children missing education to include:**
 - How to record data about children missing education and how to share that data in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and safeguarding law and guidance;
 - How to improve understanding of overlapping vulnerabilities, by recording e.g. whether children missing education are eligible for free school meals and whether they are known to social services; and
 - A requirement to use a single identifier for each child missing education across all agencies to encourage prevention, facilitate safeguarding and ensure children can be more easily traced.
- **Conduct a review into the variation in the number of children recorded as missing education across local authorities.**
- **Support local authorities and schools to share best practice across England.**

1. Introduction

Data on children missing education ("CME") is not collected at a national level, meaning an FOI to local authorities is one of the only mechanisms for estimating how many children are missing education across England. There is no official government figure.

Our research suggests that tens of thousands of children are missing out on education each year. These children are often very vulnerable, and may be at risk of abuse, neglect, sexual exploitation, and radicalisation, as well as academic underachievement and poor outcomes.³

Definition

Children missing education (CME) are defined as: '*children of compulsory school age who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school*'.⁴

A child can become CME for a variety of reasons. They may have moved into a different local authority or from abroad and find no school place available. They may have been withdrawn from school because of bullying, or there may be no school places available that can meet their special educational needs. They may have been unofficially excluded from school, or taken off the school roll after a long period of unexplained absence⁵.

Risk factors

In 2017 NCB received funding from Lankelly Chase to undertake qualitative research into the experiences of children missing education.⁶ This research found that a series of complex and often interrelated factors can lead to a child missing education, including:

- **The individual child's feelings and preferences** (e.g. mental ill-health, fear of school, past experience/trauma);
- **Problems in the family and home** (e.g. domestic violence, family breakdown, caring responsibilities, parental illiteracy);
- **The school environment** (e.g. special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, social and emotional problems, unsuitable placements, unofficial exclusions, bullying); and
- **Wider systems and society** (e.g. moving to/from another local authority or abroad).

Some groups of children are particularly at risk of missing education. These include: frequent movers, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, disabled children and those with SEN, teenage mothers, young carers, refugees/asylum seekers, children in care and young offenders.

There are serious safeguarding concerns around CME. Whilst they will not be receiving a suitable education, they are also at risk of abuse and exploitation, becoming involved in criminal or gang-related activity, and radicalisation.⁷

“All children, regardless of their circumstances, are entitled to an efficient, full time education which is suitable to their age, ability, aptitude and any special educational needs they may have.” (Children Missing Education Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, 2016)

Legal duties

Local authorities have a duty under section 436A of the Education Act 1996 to make arrangements to identify, as far as it is possible to do so, children missing education.⁸

Under the statutory guidance, schools must notify the local authority when a pupil's name is to be removed from the admission register, and local authorities should record this information.⁹ Where a pupil does not attend school for 20 consecutive days of unauthorised absence¹⁰, the guidance states that the school and local authority should jointly make “reasonable enquiries” to establish the child's whereabouts before taking the child off the roll. (see Appendix 1)

“Children missing education are at significant risk of underachieving, being victims of harm, exploitation or radicalisation, and becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) later in life.” (Children Missing Education Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, 2016)

Data on children missing education

The number of children missing education is poorly recorded, and available evidence has been described as conflicting and unreliable, due in part to the lack of national monitoring and confusing datasets.¹¹ Similarly, pathways for these children, their experiences and outcomes are not well understood.

In 2014, NCB conducted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to ascertain a snapshot of the number of CME in England.¹² It found that over 14,800 children were missing education across England at any one time.¹³ The whereabouts of approximately 3,000 of these children was unknown.¹⁴ The resulting report recommended a Department for Education led review of CME and an assessment of existing systems for national and local data collection and monitoring.

In 2016, the BBC conducted another FOI request¹⁵ showing that 33,262 school-aged children were recorded as missing from education in the academic year ending July 2015.¹⁶

NCB has conducted this latest FOI to determine the number of children missing from education in England in 2016-17. We chose to ask about the number of children missing education over the course of a year rather than collecting “snap shot” data from a single point in time, in order to provide a comparison with the most recent figures from the BBC's FOI in 2016.¹⁷

Government agenda

Since NCB's initial research in 2014, the Department for Education has updated the statutory guidance on CME, to include duties on schools to:

- Notify the local authority when they are about to remove a pupil from the school admission register;¹⁸
- Provide the local authority with details about the child¹⁹; and
- Make "reasonable enquiries" to establish the whereabouts of the child jointly with the local authority before removing the pupils from the register.²⁰

The 2016 guidance did not reflect wider NCB recommendations, including to assess data collection and monitoring and to introduce national data collection.

However, Government and Parliament are currently considering issues related to children missing education, providing potential opportunities for reform of the system.

- The Education Select Committee launched an inquiry into alternative provision in September 2017.²¹ Many children missing education experience alternative provision settings, and there is likely to be overlap between these cohorts.
- In December 2017, The Department for Education launched 'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education'.²² This new agenda, explicitly references vulnerable groups, including children in care and disabled children, all of whom are at greater risk of missing education.
- 'Children Missing Education Statutory Guidance for local authorities' will be reviewed by September 2019.

2. Findings from the 2017 FOI request

Data provided by 137 local authorities shows that **49,187 children were reported as missing education at some point in 2016/17** (this amounts to **70 of every 10,000 children** or 0.7 percent of the total school age population up to age 16). This compares to 33,262 children recorded as CME in 90 local authorities in 2015/16.²³

In 2016-17, a median average of **222 children** in each local authority were recorded as missing education at some point in the year. This equates to more than **seven classrooms** of children in every area.

However, there is huge variation in the numbers of children recorded as CME across local authorities. The three local authorities with the highest rates of CME had 419, 366 and 350 CME per 10,000 school aged children, whilst the lowest had 2, 2 and 3 CME per 10,000 school aged children.²⁴ It is unclear why variation is so high.

However, it is likely that despite there being a statutory definition of children missing education in law and guidance, local authorities are reporting and recording data differently.

Table 1: local authorities with the highest (A, B and C) and lowest (D, E and F) proportion of CME.

Local authority	Total no of children reported as missing education	Total school aged population	Rate of CME per 10,000 children
A	2,077	49,562	419
B	1,605	43,876	366
C	1,93	31,246	350
D	23	66,443	3
E	16	67,308	2
F	6	37,640	2

Methodology

In October 2017, NCB issued a Freedom of Information request to all 152 local authorities in England. We asked:

1. How many children were recorded as missing from education in the academic year 2016/2017, in your local authority?
2. Of the children recorded as missing from education during this period, how many were in receipt of free school meals, when last on a school roll?
3. Of the children recorded as missing from education during this period, how many were known to social services?

The request included the statutory definition of CME: '*Children missing education are children of compulsory school age who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school*' (Children Missing Education Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, 2016).

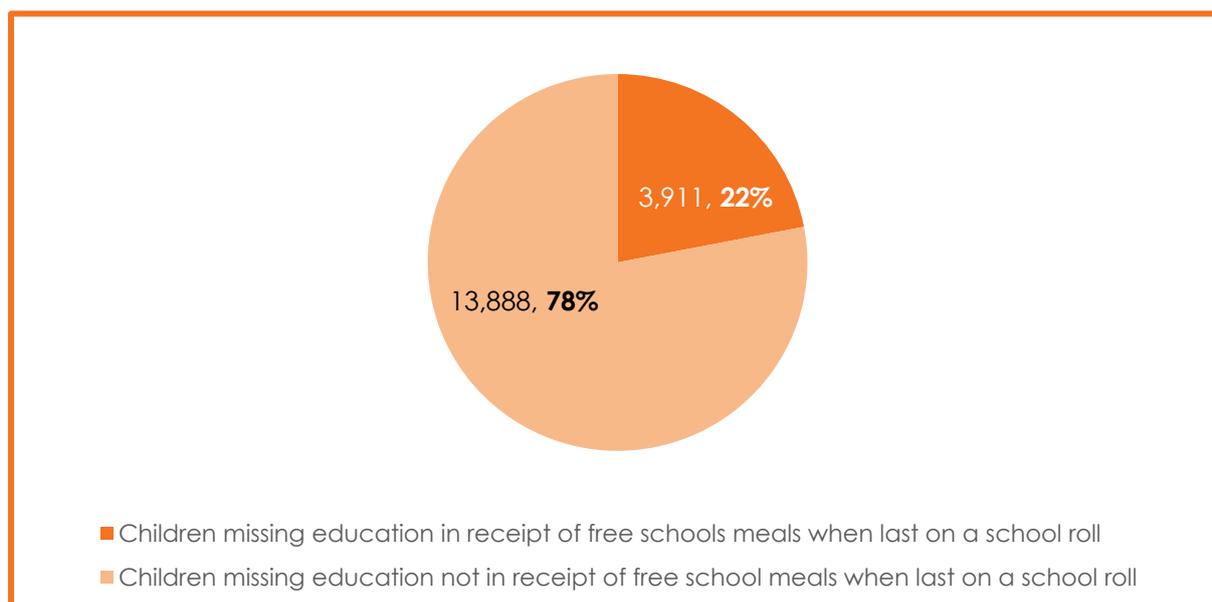
Of the 152 local authorities who were contacted, 145 responded. Of these 137 provided data for question 1, 59 for question 2 and 94 for question 3.

Response to question 1: How many children were recorded as missing from education in the academic year 2016/2017, in your local authority?	Number of local authorities
Provided data	136
Could not provide a response/do not record or hold the information requested/cited cost exemption.²⁵	9
No substantive response	7
Total	152

Children in receipt of free schools meals

Data provided by 58 local authorities shows that 22 percent of children recorded as missing education (3,911 children) were in receipt of free school meals when last on a school roll,²⁶ compared with 13 percent of all children in the same local authorities.²⁷ Given that eligibility for free schools meals is linked to an assessment of family income and is dependent on receipt of certain benefits, the data suggests a potential link between missing education and poverty or other forms of disadvantage.²⁸

Figure 1: Proportion of children missing education in receipt of free school meals when last on a school roll, 58 local authorities



Notably, rates of children recorded as CME who received free school meals when last on a school roll vary significantly between local authorities. Looking at local authorities who reported at least 50 CME in total, those with the highest proportion of CME in receipt of free schools meals were recorded at 65 percent, 52 percent and 49 percent. The three with the lowest proportion had 0 percent, 1 percent and 2 percent respectively. It is unclear why there are such high levels of variation in the proportion of CME in receipt of free school meals. Differences in data recording and collection may account for some of the variation.

Table 2: local authorities with the highest (A, B and C) and lowest (D, E and F) proportion of CME in receipt of free schools meals (of local authorities with at least 50 CME in total)

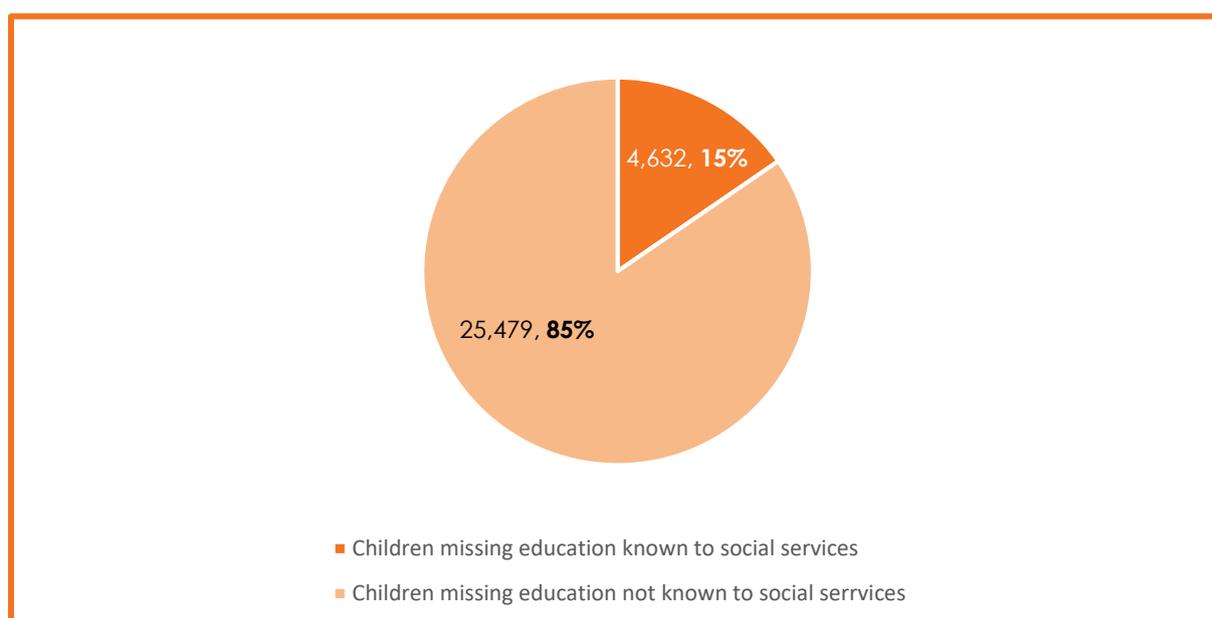
Local Authority	Total number of children reported as missing education (CME) in the local authority	Total number of CME in receipt of free school meals when last on a school roll	Proportion of CME in receipt of free school meals
A	534	347	65%
B	374	193	52%
C	180	88	49%
D	244	5	2%
E	978	13	1%
F	386	0	0%

Children known to social services

Data provided by 94 local authorities shows that **15 percent of children recorded as CME are known to social services**.²⁹ This amounts to 4,632 children. This is concerning, since children known to social services are particularly vulnerable, and have generally been referred by other professionals such as schools or the police.³⁰ If children already known to social services are missing out on education this raises questions about whether these children are receiving the right support.

There is no national figure for the total number of children known to social services in England.³¹ However we know that 5.5 percent of all children were referred to social services in 2016/17.³²

Figure 2: Proportion of children missing education known to social services, 94 local authorities



As with free school meals, the proportion of children missing education who were known to social services varied significantly between local authorities. Looking at local authorities who reported at least 50 CME in total, those with the highest proportion of CME known to social services were at 71 percent, 56 percent and 54 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, 6 local authorities reported that 0 percent of children recorded as missing education were known to social services. Again, it is unclear why there are such high levels of variation between local authorities and differences in data recording and collection may account for some of the variation.

Gaps in data collection

Of the 136 councils who provided data in response to our FOI request, more than half (86) said they were unable to provide figures for the number of CME in receipt of free schools meals³³ and 51 were unable to provide this information for the number of CME known to children's services.³⁴ Several local authorities stated that the data on children missing education was held on a separate system to the data on the

number of children who qualified for free school meals and/or who were known to social services. As this data was kept on separate systems, several local authorities reported that it was not possible to cross-reference individual children without manually checking each case which would exceed the 18 hours cost exemption for FOI requests.³⁵

3. Implications for policy makers and recommendations

Findings from the new FOI shed light on the scale of children missing education in England, highlight gaps in data collection, and point to areas for improvement in policy and practice.

Implications for policy makers

- The high number of children missing education in 2016/17 – 49,187 – is alarming, especially as CME are at high risk of poor outcomes.
- Based on the data we received, the proportion of CME who have been eligible for free school meals is 8 percentage points higher than for the whole school-age population, indicating a **potential link with poverty**.
- Based on the data we received, 15 percent of CME were known to social services. This raises **questions about whether this vulnerable group are getting the support they need**. There is no national figure for the total number of children known to social services in England.³⁶ However we know that 5.5 percent of all children were referred to social services in 2016/17.³⁷
- A high proportion of local authorities did not record, or were unable to provide figures for, CME who were in receipt of free schools meals and/or known to social services, demonstrating a **lack of easily accessible data** on this vulnerable group.
- The Children Missing Education Guidance (2016) states that “children may be missing from education because they are suffering from abuse or neglect”. However, **current data recording practices do not facilitate an easy assessment of the cross-over between missing education and children at risk of harm**.
- The **significant levels of variation** in the numbers of children reported as missing education between local authorities **needs to be better understood**. The Department for Education should establish whether the reported variation is an actual reflection of the situation or whether it is a result of reporting/recording methods.

Recommendations

There is an urgent need to improve data collection and information sharing.

The Department for Education should:

- **Collect and analyse national-level data on children missing education, and publish an annual report.**
 - This should include the number of children recorded as missing education in every local authority, including how many children qualified for free school meals and how many were known to social services.
 - It should also include the length of time for which a child was missing education (e.g. less than one month, one-three months, three-six months etc.).

- **Revise the statutory guidance** (due to be reviewed in 2019) to include:
 - Guidance on how to record data about children missing education and how to share that data in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and safeguarding law and guidance;
 - Best practice on how a local authority should maintain a record of children missing education including information such as eligibility for free school meals and whether they are known to social services, length of time they have been missing education, and comprehensive demographic information, to help promote a better understanding of overlapping vulnerabilities within this group; and
 - A requirement that a single identifier be used for each child missing education across all agencies to encourage prevention, facilitate safeguarding and ensure children can be more easily traced. We recommend this be the child's National Health Service number.
- **Conduct a review into the variation in the number of children recorded as missing education across local authorities.** Specifically, the review should consider the extent to which local demographics and/or local education practice have an impact.
- **Work in partnership with the Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Children's Services to support local authorities and schools to share best practice across England.**

Appendix 1: Statutory duties on local authorities and schools

Duties on local authorities

The statutory guidance sets out local authorities' responsibilities towards children missing education.³⁸

The Guidance states that local authorities:

- Have a duty “to make arrangements to establish the identities of children in their area who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise”;
- Have a duty to ensure all children who are identified as missing education return to full-time education “either at school or in alternative provision”.³⁹
- Should have robust children missing education policies and procedures in place, including tracking and enquiry systems;
- Should have a named person for schools and other agencies to make referrals to;
- Should “undertake regular reviews and evaluate their processes” to ensure they continue to be fit for purpose in identifying children missing education in their area;

The Guidance stipulates that local authorities' responsibilities towards CME “*play an important role in fulfilling the local authority's wider safeguarding duties*”.⁴⁰

Duties on schools

The Guidance also sets out schools' responsibilities towards children missing education.

It states that schools must:

- Monitor pupils' attendance through daily registers;
- Regularly report the details of pupils who are consistently absent from school, or have missed ten school days or more without permission, to the local authority;
- Notify the local authority when they are about to remove a pupil's name from their admissions register and give the reason for this removal;⁴¹

Where a pupil does not attend school, the guidance states that the school should make “reasonable enquiries” jointly with the local authority to establish the child's whereabouts.

Endnotes

- 1 This request was conducted in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 states that public bodies are bound to respond to a FOI request with 20 days with the information requested unless they don't hold the information, or it would take more than 18 hours to compile the information. If it would take more the 18 hours they can cite the cost exemption. Full wording of the 2017 FOI request is available on the NCB website: www.ncb.org.uk
- 2 The Children Missing Education guidance does not place a duty on local authorities to record the number of CME in receipt of free school meals or known to social services. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-missing-education>
- 3 NCB, 'Children missing education families' experiences', March 2017.
- 4 Department for Education (2016) 'Children Missing Education Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities'.
- 5 NCB (2017) 'Children missing education: families' experiences'.
- 6 NCB (2017) Children missing education: families' experiences.
- 7 *Ibid.* Note: this research included a literature review; interviews with 17 families and missing education officers from 3 local authorities; focus groups with local stakeholders.
- 8 See Education Act 1996.
- 9 Department for Education (2016) 'Children Missing Education Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities'.
- 10 Or after 10 days unauthorised absence following an authorised absence. See Department for Education 'Children missing education statutory guidance for local authorities' September 2016.
- 11 NCB (2017) Children missing education: families' experiences
- 12 The FOI request asked: the total number and percentage of children of compulsory school age in the local authority who are recorded as missing; and any statistical breakdown of the different groups of CME or reasons why these children are recorded as missing
- 13 NCB (2014) Not present, what future? This FOI request focussed on the number of children missing at any one time, as opposed to the 2017 FOI request and the 2016 BBC request, which looked at children missing at any point during the year.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 BBC (November 2016) 'Thousands of children 'missing' from education' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-38145058>.
- 16 90 local authorities responded to this FOI request.
- 17 BBC (November 2016) 'Thousands of children 'missing' from education' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-38145058>.
- 18 Under any of the fifteen grounds listed in the regulations
- 19 When removing a pupil's name, the notification to the local authority must include: (a) the full name of the pupil, (b) the full name and address of any parent with whom the pupil normally resides, (c) at least one telephone number of the parent, (d) the pupil's future address and destination school, if applicable, and (e) the ground in regulation 8 under which the pupil's name is to be removed from the admission register
- 20 Department for Education (2016) Children Missing Education Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities
- 21 Education Select Committee (2017) Alternative provision inquiry <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news-parliament-2017/alternative-provision-inquiry-2017-19-/>
- 22 Department for Education (2017) Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education
- 23 'Thousands of children missing from education' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-38145058>
- 24 Some variation can be explained by the fact that local authorities vary significantly by child population, however this does not explain everything. (This analysis excludes Isle of Sicily and City of London due to small child population size). Please note, all CME are included in this calculation. In accordance with the guidance, this includes children who were recorded as CME for a matter of days through to 12+ months.
- 25 See endnote 1.
- 26 The Universal Infant Free School Meals programme means free schools meals are available to all infant pupils regardless of household income or benefit claims. It is unclear whether local authorities included children receiving free school meals under the Universal Infant Free School Meals programme in the figures they provided or whether the figures only reflect the number of children and young people who were eligible based on household income and benefit receipt.
- 27 This figure is calculated based on the number of pupils who are eligible for and claiming free school meals based on household income and benefit receipt. It does not include pupils claiming a free school meal under the Universal Infant Free School Meals programme. See Department for Education, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2017'.
- 28 In England in January 2016, children in state-funded schools were entitled to receive free schools meals if a parent or carer were in receipt of any of the following benefits: Income Support, Income-based Jobseekers Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit, Child Tax Credit (provided they were not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and had an annual gross income of no more than £16,190, as assessed by Her

Majesty's Revenue and Customs), Working Tax Credit run-on - paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit, and during the initial roll out of the benefit, Universal Credit (this category was added from 29 April 2013). Additionally, all infant pupils were entitled to receive free school meals from September 2014. See Department for Education, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2016'.

29 Variation in local practice means reporting and recording mechanisms of children who have been referred to social services are not uniform across local authorities. However, in undertaking this research NCB undertook reasonable precautions to ensure the term 'known to social services' was well understood by children's services departments, including testing different forms of words with local authority staff. Nonetheless, since there is no legal definition of the term there is likely to be some variation in how it was interpreted. We found a total of 4,101 children reported as missing education were known to social services.

30 Department for Education 'Characteristics of children in need: 2016-2017'

31 "Known to social services" includes all children who have been referred to children's services, who are still under the age of 18 and for whom a record still exists. There is no requirement on local authorities to report on this number so there is no national data on this.

32 Department for Education, 'Characteristics of children in need: 2016-2017'.

33 19 local authorities were unable to give this information due to the cost exemption, 57 did not hold this information and 10 were unable to respond for other reasons

34 20 local authorities were unable to give this information due to the cost exemption, 24 did not hold this information and 7 were unable to respond for other reasons

35 See endnote 1.

36 "Known to social services" includes all children who have been referred to children's services, who are still under the age of 18 and for whom a record still exists. There is no requirement on local authorities to report on this number so there is no national data on this.

37 Department for Education, 'Characteristics of children in need: 2016-2017'.

38 Department for Education (2016) 'Children Missing Education Statutory Guidance for local authorities'.

39 *Ibid.* Local authorities are required to make arrangements to provide suitable education, otherwise than at school, for children who would not receive suitable education for any period of time without such provision (Section 19 of the Education Act 1996).

40 Department for Education (2016) Children Missing Education Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities

41 The guidance places a duty on schools to record pupils on admissions registers on their first agreed or notified day of attendance.

About NCB

NCB is a leading children's charity working to build a better childhood for every child. We listen to children and young people and work with those supporting them to develop evidence on what needs to be done to enable children to enjoy their right to be safe, secure and supported so they can flourish and fulfil their potential.

Visit www.ncb.org.uk for more information

Contact: Robyn Ellison (rellison@ncb.org.uk)

