

School Attendance: Improving Consistency of Support - National Children's Bureau Response to the Department for Education Consultation

Our vision

NCB's vision is an inclusive education system that empowers children to fulfil their potential in a safe and respectful environment. Attendance is a crucial indicator of how well our education system is delivering for all children.

The data shows that the vast majority of variation in attendance is linked to the characteristics of children within schools, not between schools or local authorities. Children with SEN and disabilities, children from some Black and Minority Ethnic communities, and children from low-income households are far more likely to be persistently absent than their peers. It is therefore imperative that both national and local approaches seek to address the structural barriers and discrimination that lie at the heart of these inequalities in attendance. Many of the reasons for poor attendance at school begin early, so any effective long-term strategy must also focus on access and inclusion in early years settings and supporting children's transition into reception.

The starting point for removing these barriers must be an understanding of the views of children and parents. This is true whether considering action at the individual, school, local authority or national level. Only by engaging with the experiences of children themselves – including their access to learning, feelings of safety, and emotional wellbeing – can we deliver sustainable improvement in levels of attendance.

Proposal 1: Requiring schools to have an attendance policy, and have regard to statutory guidance on the expectations of schools, academy trusts and governing bodies of maintained schools on attendance management and improvement.

NCB would support a requirement on schools to develop an attendance policy. However, as set out in Ofsted's thoughtful report, [Securing good attendance and tackling persistence absence](#), attendance policies will only drive improvements if they reflect the interrelationship between attendance and the quality of the school's curriculum, ethos, behaviour and inclusivity.

We believe that the key features of effective attendance policies will be:

- **Co-production** with parents and children, particularly those most likely to be persistently absent;
- **Clear expectations** on children, parents and the school itself about how they will support and enable good attendance;

- Committed to planning and taking action based on the **individual circumstances** of a child;
- A focus on the **prevention** of persistent absence, including a strong emphasis on removing barriers to attendance for individual children: meeting special educational needs; making reasonable adjustments; addressing mental health and wellbeing issues; tackling bullying; supporting children after a bereavement; etc...
- An emphasis on using data and **consideration of data in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty**: understanding who is persistently absent and why, and consideration of what barriers can be removed to improve access for those with protected characteristics.
- Integrated with, and reflective of, **other key policies**, including the behaviour policy, SEN and disabilities policy, anti-bullying policy, medical needs policy etc...

Proposal 2: Introducing guidance on the expectations of local authority attendance services, including a minimum set of expectations for all LA attendance services; collecting data, sharing best practice, whole family support is provided (i.e. early help workers), making use of legal powers, fixed penalty notices and prosecutions if support does not work or not engaged with.

To be successful, emerging government policy must integrate and connect with the priorities of the existing system. This must include a shared set of outcomes that all services and agencies are working towards.

NCB would support stronger guidance on the role of local authority attendance services. As well as clarifying the expectations for engaging with parents, we would also support a stronger role for them in promoting inclusive practice across their area, working alongside specialist SEN and disability services, mental health support teams, and other school-focused services.

In addition, the support of other key services and agencies – including CAMHS, Youth Offending Teams, and social workers - should be drawn on as part of a strategic local approach to improving attendance. These services and agencies must connect and work together with shared purpose to improve attendance.

More specifically we would support clear expectations regarding:

- Using data to set an LA wide attendance strategy; this should focus on analysis and problem solving, rather than on sanctions;
- Providing data nationally, and providing more granular analysis to better allow us to understand reasons for non-attendance; this may require changes to the coding used by schools;
- Providing advice and sharing best practice between schools and trusts within the area;
- Providing support and challenge to schools.
- The availability of information and advice, including the role of SENDIAS services.

Setting a minimum level of expectation for all LA attendance services requires consideration of whether there is currently sufficient funding in the system to deliver these expectations. We believe that LAs should be sufficiently funded at a level where they can provide support for all schools in their area. This should replace the current process where schools are having to trade services and buy in.

A clearer more consistent national framework for the use of attendance legal intervention, including a new regulatory framework for issuing fixed penalty notices for absence.

The existing DfE guidance on attendance¹, as well as the recent Ofsted review², are clear that working with parents as partners and respecting their views are key features of a successful approach. Conversely, creating a punitive environment risks alienating parents or, even worse, adding to the distress and anxiety of both parents and children. Nevertheless, in the small number of instances where parents are unwilling to support a child's access to education, we recognise that sanctions may be an effective last resort.

NCB would broadly support greater clarity and consistency about when legal interventions should be used, provided the starting point for any regulations was on creating a more positive and accessible school environment, rather than the escalation of sanctions. Any decision about the use of sanctions must be on a case-by-case basis, and be informed by the evidence of when a sanction is likely to have the desired effect.

In the development of any new framework, NCB would expect to work with the Department for Education and Parliamentarians to ensure regulations set out:

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-attendance/framework-for-securing-full-attendance-actions-for-schools-and-local-authorities>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence>

- How the views of the child and their parents must be gathered and taken into account, including in the production of an individual attendance plan;
- What consideration must be made in terms of the circumstances of the particularly case, including
 - The ability of the school to meet a child's special educational needs;
 - Any mental or health physical health difficulties the child may have;
 - The experience of the child at school, including possible discrimination or bullying.
- Any steps that must be taken by schools and local authorities to further support attendance before any sanction is applied.

For further information please contact Dustin Hutchinson, Policy and Public Affairs Manager at NCB: DHutchinson@ncb.org.uk