Children missing education

Families' experiences

Dr Rebekah Ryder, Amy Edwards and Dr Katie Rix

About the team

About Lankelly Chase

Lankelly Chase seeks to bring about change that will transform the quality of life of people who face severe and multiple disadvantage. Our vision is of a society where everyone can live a rewarding life, where government and civic institutions respond with urgency and compassion to social harms, and where attitudes to those most disadvantaged are rooted in understanding and humanity. Lankelly Chase funded this research in April 2015.

About the National Children's Bureau

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) is a leading research and development charity working to improve the lives of children and young people, reducing the impact of inequalities. We work with children, for children to influence government policy, be a strong voice for young people and front-line professionals, and provide practical solutions on a range of social issues.

About the authors

Rebekah Ryder is a Senior Researcher in the Research and Policy Team at the National Children's Bureau (NCB). She has worked in this role since September 2015. Prior to this, Rebekah held research and policy roles in the third sector and central government. She has a PhD in Social Sciences from University of Northampton.

Amy Edwards is a Research and Policy Analyst at NCB. Amy joined NCB in January 2015 and has worked on a range of projects giving a voice to children, young people and their families. Prior to joining NCB, Amy spent a number of years working in the charity sector; from established housing associations to small grass roots, developing organisations.

Katie Rix is the Research Manager at NCB. Katie has been at NCB since July 2015 and is highly experienced at leading research projects with and for children and young people. Prior to starting at NCB, Katie lectured at the University of Essex where she supervised MSc and final year undergraduate projects studying attainment and behaviours in children and young people. Katie has a PhD in Psychology from University of Greenwich.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to thank all of our research participants: children and young people missing education, their parents and carers, and local authority staff and stakeholders.

We would also like to express our gratitude to:

- Officials at the three local authorities involved in the research, including children missing education leads and other colleagues.

- Community groups who contacted families to facilitate engagement in the research.

- Oliver French, the grant manager, and colleagues at Lankelly Chase.

- The project advisory group: Justin Cooke (Ambitious about Autism), Hilary Emery (University of Oxford), Helen Jenner (formerly of London Borough of Barking and Dagenham), Ian Norman-Bruce (Association of Education Welfare Officers), Alice Tawell (University of Oxford), and Simone Vibert (formerly of Ambitious about Autism).

Within NCB, we would like to thank:

- Members of the Research and Policy team for their contribution to the planning and delivery of the research, in particular Zoe Renton, Enver Solomon and Debbie Moss.

- Members of the NCB ethics committee: Cathy Street, Sophie Adams and Alison Penny.

- Former NCB staff and associates who worked on this research: Eliza Buckley, Puja Joshi, Berni Graham, Vijay Kumari, and Grace Trevelyan.

Icons in this report are from the Noun Project and are credited to:

- AFY Studio – Home

- Gan Khoon Lay – Girl; Father and Baby; Mum; Father and son

- Creative Stall – School

- Richard Wearn – Caravan

- Robert Bjurshegan – Separation

- Alfredo Hernandez – Home school

- Andrejs Kirma – Lorry bed

- Hea Poh Lin – No car

- Nicholas Vincent – No money

All photographs are copyright NCB or licensed for use under Creative Commons.

Contents

List of tables

List of figures

Executive Summary

This report summarises National Children's Bureau (NCB) research into children missing education, which was funded by Lankelly Chase and took place between September 2015 and January 2017.

The overarching aim of our research was to give voice to children[1] missing out on an education by **developing an understanding of the pathways children take into missing education and what might prevent this, including effectiveness of policy and practice.**

Research methods included a literature review and interviews with 17 families (child and carer[2]) from across three local authorities where the child had experience of missing education. Children missing education officers and leads at these three local authorities were also interviewed and focus groups were held with local authority stakeholders who worked with those missing education.

The research aimed to provide an in-depth exploration of the experiences of families affected by missing education. We undertook the research to raise awareness of this somewhat hidden population and improve policy and practice in supporting them. We cannot claim our research represents all those affected, but the experiences shared offer useful insight into the issue.

The definition of 'missing education' used in this research was based on the Education Act 1996 (as amended), and referred to instances when children were not on a school roll and not educated other than at school (such as in private institutions or at home).

What we already know about children missing education

Children who miss education are not only at risk of under-achieving academically, but also of abuse, exploitation and neglect (Cleaver, Unell and Aldgate, 1999; Botham, 2011; Ofsted, 2015). Legally, children missing education are defined as those not on a school roll and not receiving education other than at school, such as at home. Ofsted, however, uses a wider definition of pupils missing from education in their inspections, which includes those on a school roll but on unsuitable part-time timetables or unlawfully excluded (Ofsted, 2016b). Data on children missing education is not collected at national level, meaning there is no reliable figure for the whole of England (NCB, 2014). Carers, schools and local authorities all have responsibilities in preventing children missing education, which is set out in national guidance and procedures (DfE, 2016b).

1 Throughout our report, children refers to children and young people unless specified.

2 Throughout, carers refers to parents and carers unless specified.

Research has shown that children may miss education due to school, local authority or home related factors. These include bullying, moving house or lack of suitable/available school places (Malcolm et al., 2003; Broadhurst, Paton and May-Chahal, 2005; Local Government Ombudsman, 2011). Children who are known to be most at risk of missing education include: those from families who frequently move house; Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children; those who are excluded from school; children with carers in the Armed Forces; those with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; children with chronic health problems or disabilities; teenage mums; young carers; refugee/asylum seekers; young people affected by domestic violence or sexual abuse; those who have been bullied; looked after children; children with special educational needs (SEN); young offenders; and those forced into marriage.

Key findings from our research

Factors leading to missing education

Across our research, four main factors were noted as influencing routes into missing education:

- The child themselves;
- Family and home;
- School; and
- Wider systems and society.

Our research showed that specific experiences relating to each of these led to a break with education, either for a temporary period or on a more permanent basis. We found that families might experience more than one factor at any time and factors could be interrelated.

Within these pathways were the individual child's feelings and preferences, family breakdown, domestic violence, and different approaches towards education. In some cases children were not receiving appropriate support from schools around bullying, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or mental ill health. Families also lacked understanding of children's rights in the education system, and the procedures for upholding them.

These factors were often concurrent. Carers might withdraw their child while they resolved a family crisis or because they no longer felt school was the right place for them. Children might also refuse to go. In many cases, children were missing education due to a range of complex, interrelated factors. Often, missing education could be the culmination of a series of events, rather than precipitating any such events.

Experiences of missing education

A key consideration in understanding children's pathways was their experiences, and those of their carers, once the child was no longer in education. This included both their feelings about missing education and how children learnt when not at school.

When out of education, children generally spent more time with their carers, particularly in the case of younger children. Children and carers had mixed views about spending more time together. It was viewed more favourably amongst younger children. In many cases, children missing education impacted on their carers' ability to work. Missing education also led to limited social interaction between children and young people of similar ages, which could be quite lonely. In the case of older children, it might lead to them falling in with the 'wrong crowd' and becoming at risk of offending or child sexual exploitation.

Where children did learn when they were missing education, they used a variety of print and online resources. Many carers felt they took a leading role in helping their children to learn if they were not at school. They focused mainly on English and Maths as the basics, especially for younger children. As well as taking this approach, some carers took their child/children to learning groups, went on educational trips, bought books and online resources, and/or paid for private tuition. This had financial implications for carers, which added to existing financial burdens, especially if they had already given up employment.

Returning to education

We also spoke to families about how children returned to education after a period out; what enabled this to happen and what prevented it from happening. Receiving an education could mean that the child had returned to school or alternative provision, or that the carer was home educating their child.

Across the factors that contributed to children missing education, there were common barriers and enablers to returning to education. These related to the individual child, family and home, school and wider system and society factors.

Choice was important for engaging in education; both children's and carers' preferences shaped any route back into learning. Families' own circumstances affected any return. This included attempting to complete house moves, escape domestic violence, address family breakdown and resolve financial concerns before prioritising their child's education.

Schools had an important role to play in re-engaging children in learning. Children needed to be offered a school place in a timely manner with assurances that their needs would be met. This was not always possible given the number of school places or the quality/type of provision locally. Most children did not receive any alternative provision while they waited for a suitable place.

Certain aspects of the admissions process also hindered engagement in learning, as not all families understood the system. Delays in acquiring the requisite documentation also played a role. For example, following custody disputes, there were delays in demonstrating a child's residency and therefore securing a place at a local school.

Support around missing education

We asked families about their current and past experiences of any help they had needed and/or received when their child was missing education.

Again, the child's involvement in decisions about their education, and availability of support to make these decisions, was an important part of re-engaging with education. The support of wider family, involving the family in engagement where possible and a stable home and social support network were also found to be important.

Schools had many different support mechanisms for pupils at different stages of the missing education pathway, including: preventing children missing education, supporting them in the interim and successfully reintegrating them back into learning. The ability of schools to support children missing education was dependent on the quality of teaching, availability of (suitable) alternative provision, processes for tracking and addressing any changes in attendance, and planning for individual children and their needs.

Families' experiences of wider support from the local authority and other organisations were mixed. This largely depended on the local support landscape and the number of organisations families received support from. Families could know what support would have helped, but did not get it. Other families did not know what help was needed, available or how to get it.

Local authority activities and issues

Local authorities felt the definition of children missing education from the Education Act 1996 (as amended) overlooked the risks around safeguarding and educational outcomes for children who did not meet the statutory definition, but who were nonetheless missing out on education. This included children subject to illegal exclusions, non-existent elective home education, unsuitable part-time timetables and non-attendance.

Local authorities aimed to work closely with others, including schools, other professionals and carers. There were challenges around working together, due to different pressures, behaviour and relationships of all parties. Particular difficulties were identified around the (timely) sharing of information on children missing education. They also reported that resource constraints meant support for schools and carers around missing education was reducing or becoming less effective.

Conclusions and recommendations

From our research we have drawn the following recommendations with action in support of these needed from Parliament, Government, Government agencies, local authorities and schools.

1. The legal definition of children missing education should be expanded

2. Monitoring and awareness should be improved to tackle missing education

3. Data collection and information sharing should be improved

4. Everyone should have clear responsibilities for prevention

5. Lessons should be learnt from existing good practice

6. More must be done to (re)integrate children into education

7. Financial constraints must be considered and addressed

Advice for families

We also found, from doing this research, that families were often confused by the education offer in their local area and their rights and entitlements here. We would like to offer this advice to families:

- Children have a legal right to an education. Carers are responsible for ensuring children receive this (under the Education Act 1996). This is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28). To enable carers to fulfil this duty, local authorities must ensure there is enough education provision in their area (as set out in the Education Act 1996).

- Our research shows that children and carers need to be involved in decisions around education to increase their engagement. It is important for children and carers to agree what a suitable education is. If a child does not have a school place or is not receiving education in another way, carers should contact their local council with responsibility for education.

- If a child has special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), carers can contact their local council for information on the local offer for children with SEND. Carers can also speak to their local Information, Advice and Support Service for information on the offer.

Families can find more information in the Useful Resources section of our report (see p.88).

1 Introduction and methodology

1.1 Background to this research and key terminology

This report summarises National Children's Bureau (NCB) research into children missing education, which was funded by Lankelly Chase and took place between September 2015 and January 2017.

The definition of 'missing education' used in this research is based on the Education Act 1996 (as amended), and refers to instances when children are not on a school roll and not educated other than at school (such as in private institutions or at home).

Our research follows a Freedom of Information (FOI) request in 2014 by NCB to local authorities. The FOI sought to ascertain the numbers of children classed as missing education. From this data, we estimated that over 14,800 children were missing education across England at any one time. The whereabouts of approximately

3,000 of these children were unknown (NCB, 2014). More recently, the BBC completed a FOI request showing 33,262 school-aged children were recorded as missing from education in the academic year ending July 2015 (Talwar, 2016). Without national reporting of data, including around reasons for missing education, it is difficult to know what is driving this.

Children missing education are known to be at greater risk of failing academically and of being abused or neglected (Berridge et al., 2001; Malcolm et al, 2003; DfE, 2016b; DfE, 2016c). With apparently increasing numbers of children missing education, NCB wanted to increase awareness of the issue amongst decision-makers, professionals and carers, and develop a greater understanding of the causes, to inform policy and practice.

1.2 Aims of this research

The overarching aim of this research was to give voice to children missing out on an education by developing an understanding of the pathways children take into missing education. We wanted to understand what might prevent this, including effectiveness of policy and practice.

Our main research objectives included:

- Exploring children's views and experiences as to why they miss education;

- Exploring carers' views and experiences as to why children miss education; and

- Considering the views and experiences of key staff in local authorities about: the reasons for children missing education; the work taking place to support and track children missing education; and the different roles of staff involved with children missing education.

To meet our research objectives, we completed a literature review, and consulted with several families and key stakeholders in three local authorities.

1.3.1 Literature review

The purpose of our literature review was to develop a greater understanding of existing research and literature considering the experiences of children missing education.

Specifically, we conducted extensive searches of useful material online. We made use of a range of sources, including:

a. General database search, such as sources found by using Social Policy and Practice, Social Care Online, NFER, Ingentaconnect, British Education Index, ERIC, and Google Scholar, and a range of academic databases;

b. Regulatory and statutory sources across the UK;

c. Wider repositories of relevant research and information including the Early Intervention Foundation, the LGA Knowledge Hub, SCIE, ESRC, ChiMat and NICE;

d. Sources from 'grey literature' such as conference proceedings, unpublished manuscripts and working papers; and

e. Relevant, internal documents from NCB itself.

We developed a comprehensive list of search terms which allowed us to identify relevant literature in this area. Search terms included: children; young people; missing education; school absence; missing school; and pupil/school attendance. We limited our search to sources from 2000-2016.

After retrieving full texts, the focus was on three main activities: to describe the selected papers/studies in general; to summarise their findings; and to consider how these findings might be interpreted and applied. Evidence from the reviews was written up into one literature review, which has been included in the next chapter (Chapter 2), and used to inform our research and materials.

1.3.2 Recruitment of local authorities and participants

Our research took place in three local authorities. In order to recruit these local authorities, we emailed information about our research to a range of Directors of Children's Services, inviting them to take part. We aimed to select the authorities based on geography, level of deprivation and number of children recorded as missing education (from the FOI).

In order to recruit participants for our research, local authorities were asked to send out information on our behalf to families on the Children Missing Education (CME) register. The information explained the research before asking whether they wanted to take part. They could contact the local authority or NCB if they had any questions. If they did want to take part, they could ask the local authority to share their contact details with us. There were also details as to how families could contact NCB and volunteer to take part.

In addition, we approached a range of support groups[3] within the areas who might also be able to advertise our research, with details of the research and how families could participate.

---

3 Support groups included any charities or organisations working with families and children. This included, but was not limited to, charities supporting parents/carers of children with SEN, domestic violence refuges, local mental health support, youth offending services, teams working on the government's Troubled Families programme, charities supporting young carers, community centres, children's centres, and charities supporting specific communities (such as Roma) and homeless families.

All children who took part received a £20 high street voucher as a thank you for participating, and all carers taking part also received their own £20 high street voucher to show our appreciation.

Our research for this project was qualitative only. We focused on in-depth, descriptive information from families and local authority staff and stakeholders. Therefore, our work is accompanied by the caveat that our findings are not necessarily representative of the population of children missing education. Our research provides useful insight and learning around the experiences of 17 families, across three local authorities.

1.3.3 Interviews with families

Interviews were conducted with **17 carers**, and **17 children** (for one parent, her daughter was not included as the daughter did not give consent, and for another parent, two children were interviewed together). Six carers and six children were interviewed in two of the local authorities, and five in another. These participants fell into one of three main categories:

• Families where children were **currently** missing education (and appeared to not be on a school roll[4]);

• Families where children had **previously** missed education (and appeared to not be on a school roll[4]) as these families could provide retrospective comments on their experiences; and

• Families of **home educated children** who had been considered as children missing education during the transition from school to home schooling. Whilst families providing a suitable home education do not formally meet the definition of children missing education from the Education Act 1996 (as amended), we decided to include them because of their transition period and insight in their reasoning around removing their children. This decision was made in conjunction with our funder and advisory group.

Two researchers visited carers and their child in a public place, such as a café or restaurant. One researcher interviewed the carer for approximately one hour, whilst the other spoke with the child for approximately half an hour. Our interviews with children were designed to be child-friendly with options to draw out a pathway and label this with drawings, where appropriate. A breakdown of families interviewed is shown in Table .

Table 1. Breakdown of participants by local authority

Authority	Boys (no.)	Girls (no.)	Primary age (no.)	Secondary age (no.)	Parent (no.)	Carer (no.)
Local Authority A	3	2	3	2	4	1
Local Authority B	3	3	2	4	6	
Local Authority C	2	4	3	3	6	

4 We could not always check with the local authority or the school whether the child was on roll or not.

1.3.4 Interviews with local authority leads

To meet our research objective, we also spoke with local authority leads. These interviews concerned:

• The arrangements for supporting children missing education in their local authority; and

• Their experiences of which children are missing education in the local authority.

These interviews were conducted via the telephone, and lasted approximately one hour to one and a half hours.

1.3.5 Focus groups with local authority stakeholders

In addition to our interviews with families and local authority leads, we conducted focus groups with staff across the local authority. These were held in each of the local authorities, and organised with support from each local authority lead. They were asked questions about:

• Experiences and pathways into children missing education;

• Examples of practice in working with children missing education; and

• Barriers and enablers to supporting children missing education.

Each focus group was conducted by two researchers and lasted approximately two hours. Participants included a range of staff from across the local authority such as representatives from: safeguarding; youth offending; virtual schools; home education; children missing education; pupil referral units; and schools.

1.3.6 Ethics and quality assurance

Across all our research, our internal NCB ethical guidelines were followed, as well as Social Research Association ethical procedures. Where required we also underwent local authority research governance processes.

Throughout our research, we consulted our project advisory group which was made up of experts across universities, local authorities, charities and other groups as well as representation from our funder. Our advisory group met three times over the course of this research, and provided invaluable comments and support throughout.

Furthermore, our Young Research Advisors were consulted on our research tools and provided useful feedback on the appropriateness of our interview topic guides. We held a further session with them to discuss findings.

1.4 Report structure

In developing an understanding of the pathways children take into missing education, we have structured our report in the following way: whilst Section 2 and Section 7 present detail relating to the literature review and local authorities, the pathway experienced by families is the main focus of Sections 3 through to Section 6. Within these sections, there are also some reference to local authority stakeholder comments, as these enhance the understanding of different pathways that families may experience.

The report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2** presents a background of previous research and legislation related to children missing education. This informed our research tools and the key themes we explored with families and local authority stakeholders;

- **Section 3** includes a discussion of findings about the key factors that led to children missing education. Specifically, this focuses on aspects that relate to the children themselves, the family and home, school and educational institutions, and the wider community and society;

- **Section 4** explores the pathways further, and focuses on the experiences of children and carers, once children are no longer in formal education;

- **Section 5** continues our focus on pathways, and presents findings about the barriers and enablers experienced by families in re-entering education;

- **Section 6** considers the support that families both received, and would have liked to have received, in relation to their child(ren) missing education;

- **Section 7** moves away from the specific pathways experienced by families, and focuses on comments or views of local authority stakeholders, in relation to wider issues relating to children missing education; and

- **Section 8** presents conclusions and recommendations from this research.

Throughout this report, we have presented family examples and case studies. In some places, names have been used for ease, but these have all been changed to ensure anonymity.

2 Background

2.1 Introduction to chapter

This literature review provides an overview of a range of resources relating to children missing education in order to inform our research. It relates:

- The importance of studying children missing education;

- Definitions of 'children missing education';

- The number of children who are thought to be missing education;

- Relevant statutory guidance, policy, and procedures;

- Research relating to factors that may lead to a child missing education and who has been identified as being at risk of missing education; and

- Reintegrating children back into school.

2.2 Why children missing education is an important issue

Children missing education are often more vulnerable than their peers. They may not be accessing their right to an education, and may also be at risk of safeguarding concerns, including neglect, abuse, and exploitation. It is therefore important to undertake research into their experience of missing education and how to prevent it, with the aim of improving outcomes for children in the future. Government recognises these risks, with Department for Education (DfE) guidance stating:

"Children missing education are at significant risk of underachieving, being victims of abuse, and becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) later in life."

(DfE, 2016b, p.5)

2.2.1 Potential risks of not attending school

Sir Michael Wilshaw, who was Chief Inspector for the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) from 2012-2016, publically expressed concerns around the protection of children whose whereabouts are not properly recorded by schools and local authorities. In an advice letter to the then Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan MP, in 2015 he stated that where children are not properly tracked through school and local authority systems:

"We cannot be sure that some of the children whose destinations are unknown are not being exposed to harm, exploitation or the influence of extremist ideologies."

(Ofsted, 2015, p.2)

Children missing education are also more vulnerable to risks such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, and/or being or becoming victims of abuse (DfCSF, 2010; Botham, 2011). Furthermore, Broadhurst, Paton & May-Chahal (2005) found that one way in which children miss education is by experiencing a significant period of disadvantage or acute crises, such as domestic violence. This may result in temporary withdrawal from school. Such evidence suggests that children missing education may be experiencing problems within their home life that they may need support with.

Changes in attendance can indicate that a more acute crisis at home or more permanent break with education is about to occur. For example, research has found that teenage mums had issues with school attendance before they became pregnant (Smeaton, 2009). Children living on the streets had similar issues before running away from home (Evans and Slowley, 2010).

Cleaver, Unell and Aldgate (1999) found that regular attendance at school can actually provide a protective factor to limit the impact of parental mental health issues, domestic violence and parental substance misuse. Research into children living on the streets in the UK noted that many participants were unknown to other services. School was the only agency that they had contact with (Smeaton, 2009). Children not attending school may be invisible to services, putting them at potential risk of harm and of having unmet health needs (Botham, 2011). Schools and other services can provide the protection a child needs to safeguard them from harm or support them with issues in their family.

These studies indicate that, if a child is missing education, there may be a danger of abuse, exploitation, neglect or some other disadvantage. If they are unknown to schools or other children's services it leaves them at risk of less protection and support.

2.2.2 The impact of missing education

Missing education affects children's educational attainment, and can also impede socialisation and increase exposure to criminal activities.

Although there is no specific data on children missing education, there is a strong link between school absence and attainment (DfE, 2016c) and links between lower attainment and higher unemployment (ONS, 2014). DfE (2016c) reported last year that pupils from state-funded mainstream schools with no absence in academic years 2013/14 are 1.3 times more likely to achieve level 4 or above at key stage 2, and 3.1 times more likely to achieve level 5 or above, than pupils that missed 10-15 per cent of all sessions. For key stage 4, pupils with no absence are 2.2 times more likely to achieve five or more GCSEs or equivalent at grades A*-C including English than pupils that missed 10-15 per cent of all sessions. The negative link between overall absence and attainment holds true even after controlling for other factors known to affect achievement, such as prior attainment and pupil characteristics (DfE, 2016c). Children who are not absent from school are more likely to achieve their potential and secure employment in later life.

Malcolm et al. (2003) found teachers thought that children absent from school suffered a number of effects. These included academic underachievement; difficulty making friends; loss of confidence and self-esteem; engagement in premature sexual activity; stress (where they are young carers); and impaired socialisation for work. Data also shows a connection between school exclusions and a greater risk of perpetrating, or becoming a victim, of crime (Berridge et al., 2001; Youth Justice Board MORI, 2002; Khan, 2003; Visser, Daniels & Macnab, 2005; McAra and McVie, 2013). Children missing education may similarly be more likely to be affected by youth offending, as well as be at risk of safeguarding concerns and poor educational outcomes.

2.3 Defining 'children missing education'

The definition of children missing education (CME) is set out in Section 436A of the Education Act 1996 (as amended by the Education and Inspections Act 2006) as children of compulsory school age (five-16 years old) who are not registered on the school roll or not receiving a suitable education otherwise than at school. Such children may go unnoticed as they have never been on a school roll.

The Government has placed a duty on local authorities, through Section 436A and supporting statutory guidance, to establish (so far as it is possible to do so) the identities of children in their area who are not registered pupils at a school and not receiving a suitable education at home or by other means than at school. A suitable education is defined in Section 437 of the Education Act 1996 as:

"...efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have..."

(Section 437, Education Act 1996)

Electively home educated children who are not receiving a suitable education at home are defined as children missing education. Home education is one way carers can fulfil their duty to provide a suitable education to their children. Parents have no legal obligation to notify the local authority of their choice to home educate when they have never attended school (Morton, 2010). This means the numbers of home educated children are unknown (Badman, 2009). Schools may also encourage carers to remove their children in order to home educate. The Office of the Children's Commissioner estimated that at least one school in every local authority may encourage carers to educate their children at home to avoid permanent exclusion (OCC, 2013).

2.3.1 Children who may be missing out on education

Children missing education may not have ever been on a school roll and are differentiated from those children who are on a school roll but not receiving an education. The latter may include children who are absent (either authorised or unauthorised), excluded pupils and pupils on part-time timetables (Malcolm et al., 2003; Pellegrini, 2007).

Ofsted has previously raised concerns that all children missing out on education – not just those not on a school roll – are similarly at risk of not accessing an appropriate education and of physical, emotional and psychological harm (Ofsted, 2010; Ofsted, 2013a). They refer to children missing from education, which is wider than children missing education, as it includes children who have been excluded, unofficially (also known as illegally or informally) excluded pupils, children with social and behavioural difficulties who may not be attending full-time, and those who do not regularly attend school. As a consequence, Ofsted's framework for the inspection of local authority children's services now considers:

"...those children and young people who are missing from education or being offered alternative provision..."

(Ofsted, 2016a, p.7)

By focusing on children missing from education, the Ofsted framework is wider than the legal definition of children missing education set out in the Education Act 1996 (as amended).

2.4 Numbers of children missing education

The number of children missing education, and the reasons for them doing so, has been widely described as poorly recorded, conflicting and unreliable (Malcolm et al., 2003; Broadhurst, Paton & May-Chahal, 2005; Ofsted, 2015). Reasons for this include lack of national monitoring and confusing datasets, with children missing education (under the legal definition) being recorded alongside children missing from education (Vulliamy & Webb, 2001. Local authorities are required to establish identities of children in their area who meet the legal definition of children missing education (DfE, 2016b). There are no arrangements, however, within central government for the systematic collection, analysis and publication of data on the numbers of children missing education (HC Deb, 2014).

There have been a number of estimates of how many children are missing education since the issue was brought into focus by the death of Victoria Climbié. The lack of a national system of data collection means that the figures in these estimates vary. They include:

• The National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO, 2003) suggested between 50,000 and 100,000 young people were missing from school rolls;

• Visser, Daniels & Macnab (2005) summarised figures from a number of local authorities that lead them to conclude it could be as high as 100,000;

• Ofsted estimated that 10,000 children in England were missing full-time education (Ofsted, 2013a);

• NCB's FOI in 2014 estimated that over 14,800 children are missing education across England at any one time, with the whereabouts of approximately 3,000 of these unknown (NCB, 2014); and

• A recent FOI request by the BBC to 90 local authorities in England and Wales revealed 33,262 school-aged children were recorded as missing from education in the academic year ending in July 2015 (Talwar, 2016).

NCB's FOI request in 2014 revealed the different ways in which local authorities record information on children missing education, including the time period to which the information relates and the reasons given for their absence.

The lack of a clear picture is concerning given the potential numbers involved and the identified impact on children's lives from missing education.

Children missing education legislation is contained within the Education Act 1996 (as amended by the Education and Inspections Act 2006) and regulations on pupil registration (Education (Pupil Registration) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2016). Government guidance supporting this legislation sets out responsibilities and procedures around children missing education. Guidance on children who go missing from home or care is also relevant to children missing education, as is the Ofsted Inspections framework and local authorities' responsibilities for education provision.

2.5.1 Responsibilities in guidance and supporting legislation

DfE issued revised statutory guidance and supporting legislation on preventing children missing education in 2016. This sets out the duties of carers, schools and local authorities for children missing education. The revised regulations and guidance strengthen the duties on schools, academies and independent schools to record and share information about a child they take off roll. This revision follows criticism from Ofsted (2015) that the previous system for tracking and recording the onward destination of pupils' taken off the school register was not robust enough.

Earlier guidance on children missing education stated that local authorities should be identifying and **"dealing with"** such children in their area, but the latter was removed in the revised guidance (DfE, 2015, p.4). This may reflect strengthened guidance around what actions authorities and schools should take when making **"reasonable enquiries"** about where children are (DfE, 2016b). These reasonable enquiries consist of the local authority and the school completing and recording one or more of a number of actions, including contacting the carer, checking local databases, checking Key to Success or School2School systems[5] and checking with other local authorities if the child has moved.

Statutory guidance on children missing education says local authorities should appoint a named person that schools and other agencies can make referrals to about children they believe are, or are at risk of, missing education under the definition used in the Education Act 1996 (as amended). Every local authority will have a children missing education officer, who may be the named person. They are responsible for maintaining the register of children missing education, including tracing any child who is missing to ensure a suitable education is provided for them. In 2013, Ofsted found that children who did not attend school in the usual way had a better chance of receiving a good quality, full-time education when a senior officer within the local authority is held accountable for this (Ofsted, 2013a).

The guidance also notes a number of other duties and powers of local authorities to support their work on children missing education, such as arranging provision for permanently excluded pupils and safeguarding children's welfare (DfE, 2016b). Also of relevance is the guidance relating to children who run away or go missing from home or care (DfE, 2014). This notes that children who go missing from education are less likely to be reported as missing. The guidance encourages pro-active, multiagency working between local authorities and the police to address any underreporting of children missing from home or care.

The responsibilities of carers, schools and local authorities are set out in the box overleaf.

5 Key to Success and school2school are secure databases providing access to confidential pupil data.

Responsibilities of carers, schools and local authorities for children missing education

Carers' responsibilities

Carers have a duty to ensure their children of compulsory school age (five to 16 years) are receiving a suitable full-time education, whether this is at home or at school (Section 7 of the Education Act 1996).

Schools' responsibilities

Schools, free schools, independent schools and academies must notify the local authority when they are about to remove a pupil's name from their admission register and give the reason for this removal.

The guidance places a duty on schools to record pupils on admissions registers on their first agreed or notified day of attendance. Where a pupil does not attend, the school should make **"reasonable enquiries"** to establish the child's whereabouts and consider notifying the local authority at the earliest opportunity (DfE, 2016b, p.8).

In addition, all schools (including academies and free schools) cannot delete a pupil from their admissions registers without first making **"reasonable enquiries to establish the whereabouts of the child jointly with the local authority"** (DfE, 2016b, p.4).

Schools are also expected to monitor pupils' attendance through daily registers. They should make regular reports to the local authority of the details of pupils who are consistently absent from school or have missed ten school days or more without permission.

Finally, schools are required to keep a proper record on their admission register of pupils they add or delete. This includes the full name of the pupil, the carer they live with and a contact telephone number. They should also include any changes in home address or destination if they are moving school.

Local authorities' responsibilities

Statutory guidance notes that local authorities should have robust children missing education policies and procedures in place. This includes effective tracking and enquiry systems and appointing a named person to whom schools and other agencies can make referrals to (DfE, 2016b). The guidance states that: **"Local authorities should undertake regular reviews and evaluate their processes to ensure that these continue to be fit for purpose in identifying children missing education in their area."** (DfE, 2016b, p.6)

When local authorities identify children missing education, they should ensure these children return to full-time education **"either at school or in alternative provision"** (DfE, 2016b, p.5). 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).

2.5.2 The Ofsted inspections frameworks and children missing education

Under the inspections framework for early years, education and skills settings (Ofsted, 2016b) inspectors consider how effectively leaders and governors create a safeguarding culture, specifically:

"…the setting has clear policies and procedures for dealing with children and learners who go missing from education, particularly those who go missing on repeat occasions. Leaders, managers and staff are alert to signs that children and learners who are missing might be at risk of abuse or neglect…"

(Ofsted, 2016b, p.11)

Inspectors look for evidence of appropriate action being taken when children and learners stop attending or do not attend regularly. For schools, this includes informing the local authority when a pupil is going to be deleted from the admissions register. Inspectors also gather evidence on whether staff in all settings are sensitive to signs of possible safeguarding concerns, including poor or irregular attendance, persistent lateness, or children missing from education.

Ofsted's framework for the inspection of local authority children's services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers considers local authority performance in relation to their children missing education duties. This explicitly includes children missing from education or being offered alternative provision. Local authorities are likely to be judged 'good' in terms of experiences and progress of children who need help and protection if:

"Children and young people who are missing from home, care or full-time school education and those at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking receive well-coordinated responses that reduce the harm or risk of harm to them."

(Ofsted, 2016a, p.15)

The annual report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector 2015/16 found that 2% of maintained schools and 3% of providers in Further Education and skills were found to have safeguarding arrangements that were not effective (Ofsted, 2016c). This was much higher, at 15%, for independent schools. In both cases, weaknesses were linked to poor governance, leadership and management. The report stated that:

"When children go missing from education or have poor attendance, this can be an indicator that they are at risk of abuse or neglect. This is why it is so important for schools to keep accurate attendance records and take action when children go missing."

(Ofsted, 2016c, p.117)

It reiterates the importance of good attendance and admissions records, to monitor patterns and trends, to prevent pupils at risk going unnoticed.

This reinforces the importance of local authorities and schools having processes and procedures in place to meet their duties in addressing children missing education, as well as other children missing from education.

2.5.3 Education provision: the role of local authorities

Under the Education Act 1996, local authorities have an overarching duty to ensure that efficient primary, secondary and further education is available to meet the needs of their population. However, the changing role of local authorities in educational provision accompanied by the increased fragmentation of the school system has implications for local arrangements to identify and support children missing education.

The recent white paper, Educational Excellence Everywhere, states that local authority education duties in the future will be focused on three areas:

- Ensuring every child has a school place;

- Ensuring the needs of vulnerable pupils are met; and

- Acting as champions for all carers and families (DfE, 2016a).

There is a reduced role for local authorities in direct provision of school places through maintained schools following the growth of academies and free schools. In an increasingly fragmented system, there are weakened links between schools and local authorities (IPPR, 2014). This potentially has implications for the effectiveness of reporting procedures. The changing responsibilities of local authorities may weaken their ability to hold schools to account (IPPR, 2014).

Whilst guidance clearly sets out reporting mechanisms, challenges may still remain in sharing information effectively to prevent children missing education. Ofsted (2013b) found that eight local authorities visited by inspectors from September to December 2012 acknowledged difficulties in ensuring reliable data on missing children. Reasons given included:

> "...poor inputting of data by practitioners, the lack of connection between different recording systems in separate agencies, and unclear recording protocols for documents which made information difficult to retrieve."
>
> (Ofsted, 2013b, p.29)

Existing guidance indicates what may help authorities and schools to ensure a child receives a suitable education and is properly safeguarded. The literature shows how policy and procedures on recording missing children have not always been met in practice.

2.6 Factors influencing children missing education

There are a range of factors influencing the risk of children missing education, which can be broadly split into school related factors and home based factors. Where such factors are present, they may lead to a child disengaging or being prevented from accessing education.

According to Malcolm et al. (2003), Broadhurst, Paton & May-Chahal (2005), and Russell (2013), school related factors given by children include:

- Boredom;

- Bullying;

- Frustration at school;

- Fear of returning after a long absence; and

- Lack of a suitable school place.

Malcolm et al.'s (2005) study of absence amongst primary and secondary-aged children found that children and carers most often gave school related factors as the reason for non-attendance.

In a report from 2011, the Local Government Ombudsman gave examples of numerous failings by local authorities that had resulted in children missing education. These examples include:

- Moving into a council's area and finding no school place available;

- Being taken off the roll at one school, but not placed on another despite an application;

- Being unofficially excluded from school;

- Being on the school roll, but kept at home by a parent for a particular reason, such as bullying; and

- Having special educational needs, but no appropriate specialist provision.

The Ombudsman (2011) recommended that if a school place is not offered within a reasonable time, the council should provide suitable education in some other way, such as home tuition.

Factors may also be interlinked, such as special educational needs and (unofficial) exclusions. In a survey of 980 carers of children with autism in June 2016, The National Autistic Society (NAS) reported that one third of children had been informally excluded from school on at least one occasion. NAS also found that 12 per cent of enquiries to their School Exclusion Service in 2015 were about informal exclusions (NAS, 2016). This indicates a link between absence from school and special educational needs. DfE figures suggest that pupils with special educational needs in 2013/14 were seven times more likely to receive a fixed term exclusion than pupils without special educational needs and almost nine times more likely to receive a permanent exclusion (DfE, 2016d).

Children and families in other studies have named a number of home based factors for non-attendance. Home related factors from research by Broadhurst, Paton & May-Chahal (2005), Khan (2003) and Botham (2011) included:

- Domestic violence;
- Homelessness;
- Health problems or disability (affecting the child or the parent);
- Chronic poverty;
- Multiple moves and address changes;
- Trafficking;
- Forced marriage; and
- Children seeking asylum.

Multiple house moves may be linked to home difficulties. Khan (2003) found pupils miss education due to transience caused by family break up as a result of domestic violence and young refugees or asylum seekers living in temporary accommodation.

There may also be practical barriers that lead to children missing education. For example, teenage mums in research by Evans and Slowley (2010) said that childcare, transport and housing considerations all affected their engagement in education. Some young mums also found being a mum meant education was no longer a priority.

2.7 Identifying children missing education

Alongside research examining factors, other reports and studies have focused on identifying which children are particularly at risk of missing education. DfE (2016b) notes the following pupils are more at risk:

- Those at risk of harm or neglect;

- Children of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families;

- Families of armed forces;

- Missing children/runaways;

- Children supervised by the Youth Justice System; and

- Children who cease to attend school (despite having a school place).

Similarly, guidance on safeguarding children issued by the Government in March 2010 (DfCSF, 2010) notes that certain groups of vulnerable children are more likely to go missing from education. These include young offenders, children living in women's refuges, homeless families, young runaways, children with physical, emotional or mental health problems, migrant children and teenage mums, amongst others.

In research conducted during 2002-2003, Broadhurst, Paton & May-Chahal (2005) aimed to identify and represent the experiences and views of a sample of families in one local authority who had been 'missing' from education. Their study identified three distinct life-course groups amongst children missing education, those with:

- Problems at locus of home/school;

- Multi-dimensional disengagement (where external factors impacted on participation in education, including homelessness, domestic abuse or health); and

- Enduring multi-dimensional disengagement (where repeated and long-standing negative life events influenced attendance).

Over a decade on, there is scope to draw from and add value to this research by looking across a greater number of local authorities to understand the continued relevance of these groups as well as identify any improvements to policy and practice that better reflect the needs of families.

There is a substantial body of research on other vulnerable groups of children that highlights how these adversities may lead to disconnection from education. This includes:

- Looked after children (Hunt, 2000; Jackson et al., 2005);

- Young carers (Kennan et al., 2012);

- Gypsies, Roma and Traveller children (Derrington and Kendall, 2004; Wilkin et al., 2010; Foster & Norton, 2012, D'Arcy, 2014);

- Teenage mums (Evans and Slowley, 2010);

- Children suffering from social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties (Visser, Daniels & Macnab, 2005);

- Children of the Armed Forces (DfE, 2010);

- Those suffering from sexual abuse or sexual exploitation (Harper and Scott, 2005);

- Children who have been bullied (Malcolm et al., 2003; Broadhurst, Paton & May-Chahal, 2005);

- Those suffering from a chronic illness (Khan, 2003);

- Refugee and asylum seeking children (Khan, 2003);

- Those suffering from domestic abuse (Khan, 2003; Broadhurst, Paton & May-Chahal, 2005);

- Highly mobile/transient children (Botham, 2011; Khan, 2003; Broadhurst, Paton & May-Chahal, 2005); forced marriage (with an international perspective on the issue in the Plan UK study by Myers & Harvey, 2011 and statutory guidance issued by FCO and Home Office, 2014);

- Homeless children (Smeaton, 2009); and

- Girls at risk of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) (Home Office and DfE, 2014).

2.7.1 Experiences of missing education

The study by Broadhurst, Paton & May-Chahal (2005) particularly examined the child's experience of missing education. In this research, participants expressed feelings of isolation, hope and dislocation. Their situations were also reflected in their sense of agency. This included personal agency frustrated by structural obstacles, such as inadequate housing and limited or inflexible school provision.

Research by Contact a Family found that disabled children who are illegally excluded from school fall behind with school work, get depressed or upset and feel left out of friendship groups. It also affects carers, who may have to take time off work or give work up entirely (Contact a Family, 2013). Similar situations may befall children who are defined as missing education.

Young people are in danger of falling behind on learning while missing education. The young people in Khan's (2003) research on interrupted learning said that they could not remember receiving school work while they were out of school. Carers often had to insist on work being sent, and few could remember receiving home tuition. Young people feared going back into school due to catching up on what they missed, returning to a routine and having to maintain or make new friendships (Khan, 2003). Smeaton (2009) found that young people who do not attend school become friends with others who are not interested or too old for school. This opens them up to what may be more exciting alternatives, such as drug taking and committing crime. This again highlights the protective influence of education, either through home learning or in school.

2.8 Reintegrating children who miss education back into school

One of the factors that absent children identified as affecting their attendance, set out by Malcolm et al. (2003) and Khan (2003), was fear of returning to school after a long absence. In a qualitative study on interrupted learning by Khan (2003), young people saw the support they receive with their education while not in school as a crucial factor in facilitating their successful return to mainstream education. A 2004 report for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) examined current and best practice in the reintegration of pupils into the mainstream school setting, including those who were not attending school (GHK Consulting et al., 2004). Identified good practice for successful return and reintegration of children into schools were numerous. They included: effective collaboration, data collection and information sharing, specialist support, commitment from schools to returning pupils to education, maintaining contact with pupils and their peers, multi-agency working and co-ordination (including carers and wider family groups), the use of flexible and staged reintegration plans and use of ICT for distant learning (GHK Consulting et al, 2004).

Malcolm et al. (2003) found that most schools reintegrated poor attenders through the work of education welfare officers, pastoral systems and one-to-one discussions. Some schools they spoke to used learning mentors, social inclusion units, adapted timetables, clubs, group work, befriending and collection schemes (Malcolm et al., 2003).

In relation to education welfare officers, they continue to have statutory duties around supporting attendance (and issuing legal proceedings to support this), tracking children missing education and child employment. Reduced funding, as well as schools increasingly employing their own such officer, means that they cannot always support attendance or hold schools to account as effectively as they once did (Williams, 2012).

2.9 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has included discussion of substantial research and reports on children who are missing education. This has noted the following:

- Children who miss education are not only at risk of not achieving academically, but of being put at risk of safeguarding concerns, including abuse, exploitation and neglect;

- Legally, children missing education are defined as those not on a school roll and not receiving education other than at school, such as at home. However, Ofsted, uses a wider definition in its inspections which includes all children missing from education;

- A reliable figure for the number of children missing education in England is not known;

- Carers, schools and local authorities all have responsibilities in preventing children missing education, which is set out in legislation and national guidance;

- Children may miss education due to school, local authority or home related factors, including bullying, moving house or lack of suitable/available school places;

- Children who are at risk of missing education include:
  - families who frequently move house;
  - Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children;
  - those who are excluded from school;
  - families of the armed forces;
  - those with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties;
  - those with chronic health problems/disabilities;
  - teenage mums;
  - young carers;
  - refugee/asylum seekers;
  - young people affected by domestic violence or sexual abuse;
  - those who have been bullied;
  - looked after children;
  - children with SEN;
  - young offenders; and
  - those forced into marriage.

The following chapter will set out what our primary research found about families' experiences of missing education.

3 Factors leading to missing education

3.1 Introduction to chapter

This chapter sets out the factors that families we spoke to experienced as part of their pathway out of education. Our interviews with families uncovered four key factors that seemed to play a role in leading to missing education. The four main factors we noted as influencing routes were:

- The child themselves;
- Family and home;
- School; and
- Wider systems and society.

Our research with families and local authorities showed that specific experiences relating to these led to a break with education for these children, either for a temporary period or on a more permanent basis. Attendance at school could stop very suddenly (particularly when factors were unexpected), or be the culmination of deteriorating attendance. Whilst these are discussed as individual factors, we found that families may experience more than one factor at a time and that some of these factors may be interrelated. This chapter discusses each factor in turn.

3.2 Child factors

At the heart of missing education is the individual child: their learning, their needs, their health, their personality, their beliefs and their choices. Any individual child is affected by decisions and actions that result from all other factors we identify (family, school, and the wider system and society). Individual child factors, sometimes in response to these other factors, could also affect missing education.

Children's feelings or thoughts about school and education were based on their previous experiences and conceptions. Poor experiences at school or at home may have led to negative feelings, which resulted in children not attending school. For instance, 16-year-old Fatima experienced difficulties with a teacher at a previous school, and lacked confidence from having been a victim of abuse when she was younger. At age eleven years, she was determined not to go to high school **"under any circumstances"**; it felt like a big change to her. She asked her mum to home educate her instead. Fatima's mum said that she **"tried everything"** to get her daughter to accept high school, but Fatima was adamant she did not want to go. Eventually, her mum withdrew Fatima from school to try to build up her confidence. Fatima's pathway out of education was a combination of her previous, poor experiences at school and in her home life, her wishes and her mum's decision to home educate.

In another case, local authority stakeholders described a young man on a Child Protection Plan who had not been to school since Year 8 (aged 12 to 13 years). He was soon to reach the end of his statutory schooling (16 years). The local authority had **"exhausted"** education options in the area because he had **"broken them down"** by assaulting staff and threatening people. They were concerned he was at risk as he was now offending and his mother was not **"protecting"** him. Despite this, the local authority still had a duty to make provision for his education.

Younger children also expressed negative feelings towards school. Six year old Megan explained that she did not like going to school for five days a week and only having two days off. Megan felt it was **"too much learning"**, so her mum withdrew her from school.

In addition to children's thoughts and feelings, their needs in terms of their emotional wellbeing, mental health and special education needs and disabilities also played a role. For example, Jordan, aged 20, said her mental ill health during secondary school prevented her attending:

"I was terrified, there were days I couldn't even leave my room because I was so scared of the outside world and people, and just existing was really scary..."

Jordan, aged 20

The link between these needs and schools' ability to support children's individual needs will be discussed further in section 3.4.
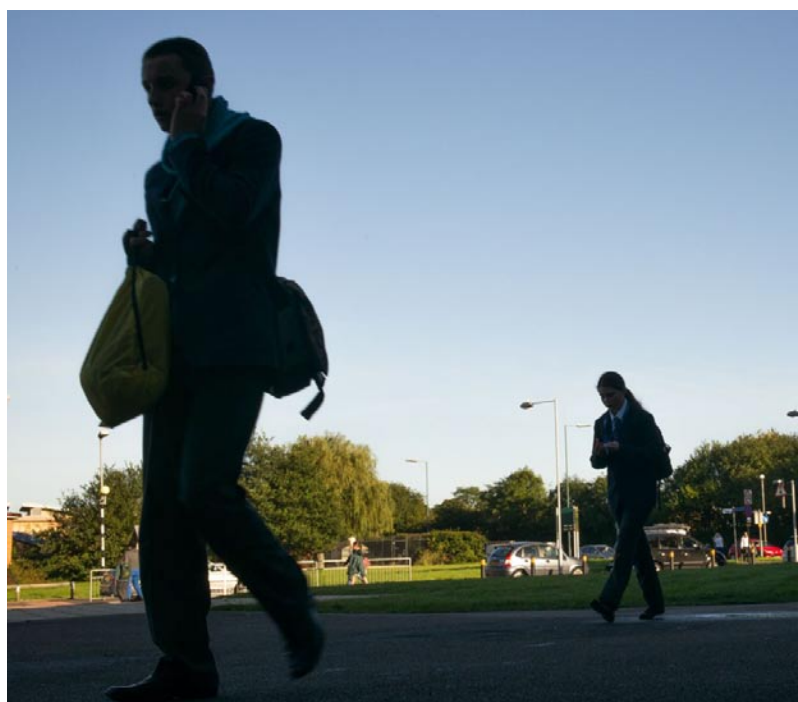
Family and home factors related to adverse events, moving home, and the impact of carers' needs on children's education.

3.3.1 Adverse events

Our research highlighted that adverse events occurring in the family home could lead to a break with education and/or it becoming a lesser priority. Adverse events included:

- **Domestic violence** – Where families were escaping domestic violence, this led to them moving to new accommodation, often temporary and in a new area:

One family we spoke to (a single mum and her three children) fled the area they had lived for over ten years to hide from the mum's abusive ex-husband. They spent seven weeks living in a refuge and then moved to a one-bed flat. Simultaneously, they were looking for more suitable, permanent housing. As a consequence of this sudden move and living in temporary accommodation, ten-year-old Louis missed school for six weeks.

Another mum and her six children moved seven times in six years, with some housing placements lasting less than two months. As a result, nine-year-old Amil, along with his seven-year-old brother, missed school on five separate occasions for weeks at a time. The longest period lasted twelve weeks. The family moved (or were moved by social services): due to eviction, to escape domestic violence, to be closer to family, and because their housing placement repeatedly changed. Amil had been to seven schools. He explained that he was surprised to be moving all the time, as he thought he would be "living in the same place forever". He found these moves difficult as he had to make new friends at each school.

- **Family breakdown** – For some families, children stopped school because of a family separation (see *figure 2*). The breakup led to changes in housing or finances, as well as custody or other disagreements:

One mum who had separated from her children's father found her immediate concerns were finding a more permanent place to live and stabilising her finances. These were initially more of a priority than finding a new school for five-year-old Ayesha.

> "It's been a mad six months to be honest. Me and her Dad broke up in the December, but I didn't move out until January because he was supposed to move and then he refused, so I had to. It was just a lot happening. So the school bit, it's only really started impacting me in the last few weeks, [now] I've got my routine, I knew we were staying, had somewhere to live."
>
> Ayesha's mum

- **Children in care, including unaccompanied asylum seeking children** – One local authority explained that young people who are looked after may not have been at school before or they may be moved on very quickly. These challenges could make it difficult to keep looked after children in education, despite additional checks and processes. Local authorities also reported that **unaccompanied asylum seeking children** were likely to miss out on education. It could be harder to get a school place when there were debates over the child's age as some schools refused to take them without a verified age due to safeguarding concerns.

Sam's case study in the box below and **Figure 1** shows how adverse events could affect schooling.

Case study

Sam is seven years old and lives with his dad and two siblings.

His mum and dad separated about three years ago and his mum moved 50 miles away with her new partner. It was a very difficult time, with Sam's mum accusing his dad of sexually abusing her and Sam's step-dad assaulting his dad.

When his parents first separated, Sam and his two sisters went to live with his mum. One weekend, when Sam was visiting his dad, **his dad found bruises on Sam's arm**. Sam explained that they were from his step-dad. Sam and his dad **went to the police** to report this abuse and Sam and his younger brother stayed with his dad from then on.

His dad **tried to get Sam a school place**, but Sam's mum was still claiming child benefit for Sam. **The local authority said they needed more evidence** that Sam was living with his dad before arranging a school place and granting his dad child benefit.

When he was not at school, Sam **spent a lot of time with his dad** and playing PlayStation and watching TV. While he was happy spending his days like this, it could also get **boring** and he didn't see anyone his own age. Sam's dad had to give up work while the abuse allegation was going on due to the number of meetings. His dad tried to teach Sam but he knew his **"level of teaching was nowhere near where he needed to be"**.

Sam's dad had a lot of contact with social services at this time, who put a lot of pressure on him to get Sam into school. **His dad felt like he was hitting a brick wall** as Sam's mum would not provide any of the information requested and he needed the paperwork to get Sam a school place.

It was only after his dad got **benefit fraud officers involved and the local authority threatened Sam's mum with a School Attendance Order that she handed over the information**.

It took seven months for Sam's mum to provide the information and then two weeks for Sam to get a place at school.

People were not very nice to Sam when he started school. They called him names at first, but he has made more friends now.
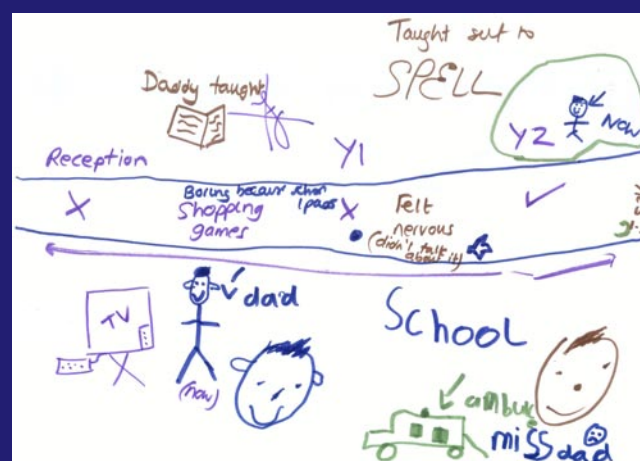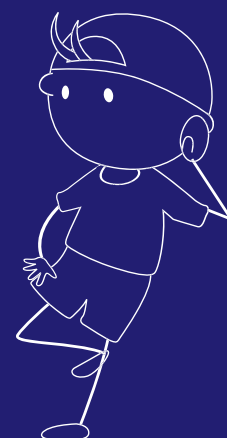

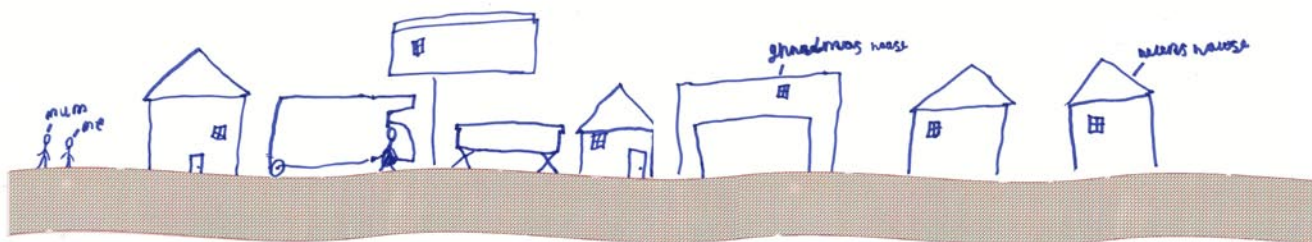**Figure 1. Sam's (aged seven) pathway through education.**

Figure 2. Robbie's (aged eleven) pathway showing the number of house moves he had made.

3.3.2 Moving home

We spoke to a number of families who moved house (sometimes repeatedly) (see Figure 2). For some, this contributed to their missing education. Local authorities frequently mentioned that a large number of children on their lists were those who had **moved into or out of the authority, or who had left the country altogether**. When families moved into an authority and delayed applying for a place, or moved to an area where there was pressure on school places, then children could miss weeks or even months of schooling. Harry, eight, and his sister Susie, eleven years, missed weeks of schooling when they moved to a new area during term time and there were initially no available school places. Moving home led to particular problems where there were a number of children in the family and the carer wanted them all to go to the same school. One local authority said where carers could not get all siblings in the same school then they:

"Sometimes actually keep their children out of school and just keep them at home... so that's an issue that we're trying to work on with Admissions to tighten that particular gap."

Local authority stakeholder

3.3.3 Local authority views of family and home

Local authorities raised a number of additional issues faced by carers they had worked with that might lead to a child missing education. These included:

- Experience of mental health problems and associated difficulties, which prevented carers from getting their child to school;

- Wanting to keep their child at home; and

- Carers who had difficulty reading and writing, so they struggled to apply for a school place.

One authority repeatedly stated that issues with attendance are a symptom of a wider problem. These problems might include **"family issues, mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, young carers"**. For these families, their needs are **"greater than making sure their son or daughter goes to school"**. This highlights how missing education and altered patterns of attendance may not be the cause of problems, but indicative of them.

Authorities also said that some carers did not realise their child was registered as missing education. This might be because their child was in a new school following a move to a new area and it had taken a while for the authority they moved from to 'find' the family. In addition, local authorities thought some carers reached a point where they could no longer engage in the daily battle with their child to get them into school, so the child stopped going.

One local authority in particular, explained the important role of carers in ensuring their children attended school. They commented on the importance of working in partnership with parents: **"we can't work without the parents"** (local authority stakeholder).

Our research also found that situations could arise at school that led to children missing education. The effect of such events meant that children no longer attended school, either because the school refused to have them, they refused to go, or carers no longer felt their child should be at school. Key school factors included a lack of appropriate support in terms of children's special educational needs and disabilities, lack of support for mental ill health, experience of bullying from teachers or students, and (unofficial) exclusions. Experience of school also affected whether a child became a child missing education. School transition, such as from primary into secondary school, were also noted as a key point at which children could start missing education.

3.4.1 Special educational needs or disabilities

Carers of children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) who we interviewed reported poor experiences of schools supporting their needs. This included eight-year-old John, who was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and social and emotional communication difficulties. He attended school from Reception to Year Two. John said he was told off every day for his behaviour. When his SATs occurred in January of Year Two, the school put John by himself into a room until he had completed the exam. He came out of school **"distraught"**; he stopped talking and his mum found pictures he drew of how he wanted to harm himself and other children. During the Easter holidays, he improved and the drawings stopped, but when he returned to school he regressed. When John's mum tried to get him to school, he lashed out and drew blood on her arms:

"It took me two hours one morning to get him through the school door. Two hours is a long time when you're supposed to be going to work that day. I just said, 'I can't do this anymore'. I took my maternity leave early, and that was it."

John's mum

She decided that she would withdraw him and re-enrol him once an education, health and care plan (EHC plan)[6] was in place. John explained that school made him feel sad:

"They didn't appreciate my behaviour, so I got out before it was too late, before I got kicked out. School didn't treat me properly, they didn't understand my behaviour... I want to be treated good and have someone who understands my behaviour. School's not my place."

John, aged eight

In another case, we interviewed 12-year-old Tim, who had been diagnosed with ADHD and Oppositional Defiance Disorder. By Year Six, Tim had been to four different schools. At his fourth school, which he joined in Year Four, Tim told us he was bullied by other pupils and **"yelled"** at by his teacher. His Headteacher changed in Year Six and many teachers left; he had three teachers that year. His mum heard reports that her son was grabbed by his teacher and had his desk moved away from other children. Tim ran away from home and from school due to the stress. He had no support for his special needs and the school told Tim's mum that he would not get an EHC plan because he was a high achiever. The **"final straw"** came when he ran away from school and the police found him, despite not being notified that he had run away. This, on top of the pressure from SATs, led to Tim's mum deciding to start home education. Tim agreed to his mum's suggestion; he was upset by the bullying and did not like it when lessons changed from the topic he was expecting.

Stakeholders from local authorities were also aware of the needs of children with SEN. One said the SEND population was growing and there were difficulties or delays in accessing provision. Provision was also breaking down. As a result, their education outreach team got **"overloaded with young people that we're still trying to decide what to do with"** (local authority stakeholder).

---

6 Education, health and care plans are for children and young people aged up to 25 who need more support than is available through special educational needs support. EHC plans identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support to meet those needs.

Staff from one local authority considered that some carers of children with SEND or behavioural challenges tended to be embarrassed or felt judged. They did not want their children to be assessed at key stage 2 and so they kept them off school to **"prevent drawing attention to this"**. This, in turn, could lead to the child becoming a child missing education. They also recognised that there were **"simply not enough places for those with additional needs in the area"**. Even in areas where they might be more provision, staff acknowledged that children with SEND or medical needs could miss out on education whilst waiting for an admissions panel to decide the best place for them. The children missing education lead in one local authority, also reported that SEND can be a big factor in a school's willingness to take a child and families getting a child to school. Despite potentially being in contravention of the Equality Act 2010, local authorities thought some schools refused to accept children with SEND as they said they could not meet their needs. This then meant children had to wait for a school place.

3.4.2 Mental health needs

Our research showed that a perceived lack of support from schools and other services for mental health difficulties could also lead to a child missing education.

Jordan (aged 20) suffered mental ill health during her time at school, which were possibly linked to her undiagnosed autism. Jordan's pathway out of education, which she drew when we met, is shown in *Figure 4* in section 4.2.2. She started feeling low in primary school, and this got worse when she went to secondary school. She found it increasingly hard to go to school, felt **"very weary"** when there and fell asleep a lot. This left her struggling to catch up and do homework. She began to miss days occasionally, but when she stayed home, she became afraid of going back. She felt unsupported by her school at this time and also by young people's mental health services, as will be discussed further in section 6.4. Jordan felt that school was **"one big system"** and she **"didn't matter as an individual"**.

She had always thought she would follow the path of **"primary school, high school, college, uni, job"** and now she felt she was not achieving what she should be. Her fear of going into school, combined with her own expectations, made her depression worse. She first attempted suicide at 13 years old and stopped going to school completely at the end of Year ten when she was 15 years old.

Speaking to both Jordan (aged 20) and also July (aged 14) indicated that undiagnosed or unsupported special educational needs and disabilities could be linked to mental health difficulties developing.

3.4.3 Bullying

Bullying was mentioned in many of the experiences reported by families. Carers and children reported bullying from teachers as well as other young people. It was a contributing factor in many families' decisions to remove children from school. This could be the potential threat or fear of bullying, continued bullying that families felt was not being addressed, or bullying when starting a new school. It was also what many children feared about attending school, particularly where they had trouble settling in to previous schools following moves. Bullying can be seen as a particular issue in the four case studies highlighted below.

Case study

Tim, twelve years old

Tim, who has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Oppositional Defiance Disorder, became a target of bullies in his last school. His mum speculated whether this was because he had been to four different schools. Tim said the bullying upset him, he would snap easily and get really angry at his mum. To hide from the bullies, he would climb up trees in break time and hide there during lessons, despite teachers' attempts to get him down. He started to hide under his table in class because his teacher **"yelled"** at him. This upset him more and so he would hide under the table more, leading the teacher to **"yell"** again. He would also run away from school when the teacher was **"horrible"** or he was bullied.

Robbie, eleven years old

Robbie was withdrawn from his last primary school because he had taken his mum's prescription drugs into school and offered them to his classmates. While his dad saw this as a cry for help, he thought it would mean Robbie got a reputation and children would stop inviting him round for dinner. He took him out of school due to this fear of bullying.

Fatima, 16 years old

Fatima was bullied at her second secondary school because family circumstances meant she was living in a lorry, not a house. The school also disciplined Fatima for what her mum called **"minor uniform offences"**. Fatima said teachers **"singled her out"** and she hated the way they treated her and others. She became very depressed and started self-harming. When Fatima was disciplined following a misunderstanding, her mum said she came home very upset as she was **"already being picked on"**. Fatima talked to her mum, who agreed to withdraw her and home educate for a second time, at aged 14 (half way through year ten).

Susie, eleven years old, and Harry, eight years old

Susie and Harry moved from the rural south of England to a large city with their mum, who explained that they had experienced racial bullying. Their mum felt teachers targeted her children due to their skin colour. She says they would **"come home every night crying"** and she would **"really struggle to get them into school in the mornings"**. In their old town, they changed schools three times due to experiences of racism. They never had to wait **"more than a few days"** for a place. When, however, they moved to a large city to overcome the racism and be closer to family, the pressure on school places here meant Susie and Harry were out of education for 14 weeks while they waited for a place.
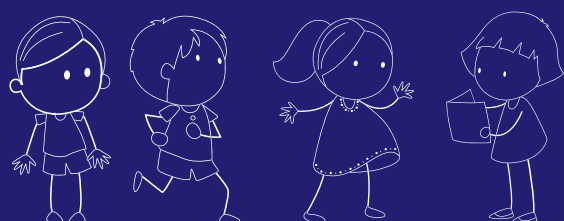
3.4.4 Unofficial exclusion

One of our participants, Matt, was currently unofficially excluded from school. This meant that his school had told him that he was permanently excluded, but had not gone through the formal exclusion process. Local authorities spoke of their concern over such young people who were illegally excluded from schools. One local authority talked about a child who was:

"...very naughty in school so [the school] didn't permanently exclude him, they didn't remove him from roll, all they did was told his mum that he was permanently excluded, but didn't actually officially go through the process."

Amil's mum

Such young people do not appear as children missing education (as they are on a school roll), but are not receiving an education. In one local authority, young people who were unofficially excluded from school only came to the attention of the authority once the young person offended and the youth offending team got involved. Stakeholders felt the **"biggest problem"** they face was children still on roll at school, but the school was not educating them and did not want them attending. These issues highlighted by local authorities are discussed further at section 7.2.

Some of these experiences are reflected in the case study of Matt and his foster carer, Mrs Lee.

Case study

Matt is 15 and lives with his foster mum, Mrs Lee, foster dad and foster sister.

Matt and his siblings went to live with his Nan when he was five years old. He described himself as a "**really good and polite boy who used to do well at schoo**l", but in Year nine (aged 14) he got involved with the wrong crowd. **He started to take drugs**, got into fights, his attendance got worse and he started to answer teachers back or turn up to class under the influence of illicit substances, such as marijuana.

He was excluded from three different schools for taking drugs, possessing drugs and taking a camping knife to school. **He was out of school for over a year** and went missing from home for months on end. **Matt said that being out of school was the "worst thing that could happen"; he had nothing to do**, which lead to an escalation in his risk taking behaviour, such as drug dealing, drug using and shoplifting. The police were involved and, through that, Matt came to the attention of the Youth Offending Service. In the end, **Matt put himself into care** as his relationship with his Nan had deteriorated and he could see he was a bad influence on his siblings. He now lives with a foster family.

Matt describes living with his foster family as a very positive experience; he has stopped taking drugs and stopped hanging out with his old friends who were bad influences. He was awarded a full time place at a secondary school and his foster carer, Mrs Lee, said he seemed to be settling into his place. His maths and literacy were improving as **Matt applied himself** more. His progress was disrupted when **a former friend came to the school gates and attacked Matt** and threatened the head teacher.

The school said they could no longer keep Matt or other pupils safe and Matt was told he could not come back, though the school did not officially exclude him. Mrs Lee says Matt was devastated at losing his place. A meeting was called by his social worker and youth offending team officer with the school, but the school **was adamant Matt could not come back**.

Matt now studies in the library with a tutor while he waits for an independent review meeting to see if he can go back to school. Matt and Mrs Lee both feel let down by the school, even though the school were initially supportive when Matt started there.

Mrs Lee feels it is critical the situation is resolved quickly and Matt returns to school as he is now in the last year of his GCSEs: **"This is the most important time for him because it's his last year, he needs this to make improvements and better himself"**.
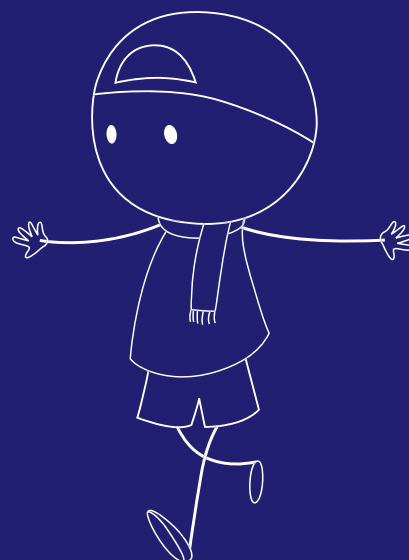
3.4.5 Influence of carers' experience of school or education

Our research also highlighted the effect of carers' experience of education, which influenced their opinions and decisions. Families did not always think that the education given by a school was what was best for their child. These beliefs were influenced by their own school experiences.

- Amil's mum, who grew up abroad, felt excited by the opportunities for education in England as she had only received one year of schooling when growing up:

"I just look at them, I'm excited about them and their future, I never had this, all this opportunity, so I look at them and I'm so proud that I'm in this country, and I'm proud for them, for the opportunity they are yet to have. It is open to everyone, so it's for you to work hard and get it. That's what I always tell them, education first and the sky will be your limit."

Amil's mum

Many of the carers we spoke to had not enjoyed school or had left school at or before 16 years of age. Despite (or because of) their experiences, they valued school. Others encouraged their children to go to school, even if they felt education was not **"the be all and end all"**. A third group preferred to teach their child at home.

Some carers explicitly stated that they wanted an education for their children so that they had opportunities and a better future; the could be successful, independent adults. One mum felt that **"education is knowledge and knowledge is power"** and that this power could bring independence. Another mum explained that school prepared you for the outside world. For others, education **"isn't just about getting a job... it's important for your own honour and pride"** (Amelia's mum).

In contrast, one dad felt that once you learn to read and write, it was then possible to teach yourself anything. While he believed education was **"a lifetime thing"**, he thought schools taught people what to think, not how to think. Subsequently, he chose to home educate his son, Robbie (aged eleven). Tim's (aged twelve) mum felt similarly; she thought tests undertaken by schools had **"no relevance to what children will go on to do in their life"**. Considering these views, there was recognition from some parents, including John's (aged eight) mum, that education could be done in different ways and did not always have to stem from schools: **"You can learn from being out and about... sitting talking to people"**.

Many carers reported that their other children had followed a similar path through education as the child who we interviewed. This indicates that any pathway into missing education for one child in the family might also be a risk for their siblings.

3.4.6 School transitions

Local authorities noted key transitions, such as moving from primary to secondary school, were linked to children missing education. One local authority reflected:

"Year 6 transitions is a big one, it's a big hole in the net for us...many children won't go to high school, but the systems that are or aren't in place don't quite catch those children and if parents don't make the application for high school they sort of just fall away really."

Local authority stakeholder

We found these transition points could also act as a trigger for children we spoke to, such as Megan (aged six), who found moving to five days a week in primary school very tiring, and Gillie (aged 13), and Fatima (aged 16), who did not want to move from primary to secondary school for reasons of bullying (Gillie) and previous poor experiences (Fatima). They all missed education as a result.

The factor of 'wider systems and society' relates to what families and local authorities raised as the influence of society on education. Specifically, it considers how education is organised and delivered, and what differences there are in terms of a suitable education for individual children (influenced by their age, culture, gender or social background). This is discussed below, in the following sections, with further local authority reflections in chapter seven:

• Gender and culture;

• Families moving to/from abroad; and

• How education is structured and delivered.

3.5.1 Gender and culture

Gender and culture may influence educational choices. In one of our interviews, a mum said that her daughter, Sophie (aged seven), used to be scared of men. When it came time for her to go to school, she felt the best place for her would be an all girls' school, run from the mosque close to her home, as **"girls are tender and need to be protected"**. Now she feels her daughter has grown in confidence and she can go to a mainstream school where her brothers go. While waiting for a place, she was being home educated.

Fears around a daughter being kidnapped or engaging in a romantic relationship, as well as bullying, influenced the educational choices of a Roma family we interviewed. Gillie's (aged 13) mum grew up in Poland and only received one year of schooling as her parents were afraid that she was going to be kidnapped by another Roma family for marriage.

Gillie completed primary school, but when her mum went to meetings at her potential new secondary school she saw **"many, many Gypsy boys"**. Gillie's mum felt the same fear for her daughter as her parents had for her; she was afraid that her daughter might be kidnapped or run away with a Roma boy if she attended the school.

Local authorities also made reference to gender and culture in our research:

• They felt that in some cultures, school education was not a priority as **"staying home with mum, or going to work with dad, that's their education"** (local authority stakeholder).

• Local authorities specifically mentioned Traveller families, suggesting that their culture and peripatetic lifestyle meant that children may only stay at schools for very short periods of time and very rarely go to secondary school. Local authorities thought that for some Travellers **"education is not part of their culture"**. They also reported Traveller carers generally did not want their children to go to school as they felt others may be judgemental and their child would be bullied for being a Traveller. Despite these overarching views, the Roma family we interviewed were committed to education. While Gillie's mum feared Gillie going to school due to the **"Gypsy boys"**, she felt education was of the utmost importance and had positive outcomes beyond the school years. Gillie's mum said that **"education is what you can give to a human to make their life better"**.

• Local authorities also referred to situations where girls had not returned to school after the summer holidays because they were a victim of forced marriage.

• Another case highlighted was a teenage mother of Eastern European background. When the children missing education officer visited her home, she found that the girl's mother was adamant she should not go back to school because she had to look after her baby. The daughter, however, when asked without her mum being present, said she wanted to go to school.

3.5.2 Families moving to/from abroad

Families who move to the United Kingdom from another country are also thought to be at greater risk of missing education. This could be because families did not understand the school system or admissions process.

For one Latvian mum, Mrs Roze, it was a struggle to find out how the system in the UK works. Her 16-year-old daughter had Downs Syndrome and moved to be with her mum in the UK in 2015. Mrs Roze thought the process for getting her daughter a school place would be organised via the doctor, the same as in her home country in Eastern Europe. She waited nearly four months for a doctor's appointment to register her daughter, only to find that the doctor was not responsible for arranging a school place. The doctor started the process of assessing her daughter's needs (for her EHC plan) and signposted Mrs Roze to the local authority to arrange a school place. It took a long time for her daughter's assessment to be undertaken. In the meantime, she turned 16, which changed the available options. As a result of the misunderstanding and delays, her daughter had been out of school for over a year.

Local authorities also reported that it could take longer to place families who had moved from abroad. They often had no access to the online admissions system as they had no internet at home (particularly asylum seekers or recent movers):

> "Many parents find that really difficult; it may be that they struggle to read or that the online environment is not familiar to them."
>
> Local authority focus group participant

They acknowledged that the form could be quite complicated and that sometimes carers struggled to complete it. This could result in a child being allocated what parents or children considered to be an unsuitable place. The child might then be withdrawn from school or have to go through an admissions panel to find a more appropriate school.

An additional factor for children becoming at risk of missing education was **moving abroad from the UK**. It could be difficult for local authorities to trace such children if they did not have all the details or contacts at the Border Agency to help them. One local authority explained that they had serious concerns about a child who they believed had moved to Spain. They made contact with a social worker in Spain, who did a home visit and confirmed the child had moved, but it **"took ages to track him down"**. They felt that if they had a better relationship with the Border Agency, the case could have been solved a lot quicker.

3.5.3 How education is structured and delivered

We spoke to a number of families who withdrew their children from school and then subsequently started home education because they did not agree with a school-based education or they saw no alternative as schools could not seem to provide for their child's needs. For instance, Robbie, had been home educated on three occasions. This is a reflection of difficulties his family has been through, but it is underpinned by his dad's belief that school was a **"mind factory"**. Robbie's pathway into missing education developed over many stages and is illustrated in **figure 3**.

These thoughts are also reflected by Fatima's mum, who said she was a strong believer in school, but did not think the structure worked for everyone. She felt the way school was structured did not work for her daughter (aged 16) and did not work for **"an awful lot of children"**. She thought the school system should change to embrace and support individualised needs:

> "We're trying to fit humans to a system, not systems to humans".
>
> Fatima's mum

3.5.3.1 Home education

We interviewed families who were home educating following withdrawal of their children from school. Local authorities said that they were satisfied that many carers gave a suitable education to their children, but were concerned that other carers found it difficult to home educate, and so the child missed education. One member of a local authority focus group said inadequate home education was **"one of the biggest categories of children who are missing education"**.

Carers home educating were required to show local authorities they were providing a 'suitable' education (see section 2.3 for what constitutes a suitable education). The lack of guidance over what constitutes a 'suitable' education, however, meant local authorities struggled to enforce this. One authority said they had only one officer at the authority who provided checks and gave advice to carers on the level their child should learn at. These checks were not followed up more than once, however, and no resources or additional teaching assistance were provided.

One local authority said that some carers withdrew their child to home educate because they felt the school was not meeting their child's needs. Carers realised in a relatively short space of time that **"they don't want to home educate"** and were not **"confident in the education they are giving them"**. Carers did not know who to ask for help. The authority thought carers were **"quite scared"** they were then going to be **"in trouble"** for having withdrawn their child. These children then missed education due to carers' fears in coming forward.

Echoing the findings of the OCC (2013) on illegal exclusions, local authorities also raised that carers may be coerced by schools into withdrawing their children for home education. This could either be because it would avoid any legal sanctions around attendance or, anecdotally, because the school threatened families with exclusion of their child and removing the child for home education would avoid this.

Officers and stakeholders from local authorities explained that they were particularly uneasy where home educated children were unknown to authorities. Carers were not required to register home education with the local authority. They only knew when a school told them a child had been withdrawn from school for home education. This lack of knowledge made it difficult to safeguard these children. One local authority said it was a particular issue in their area as the population was growing:

> "Four years ago there were 67 children on our Elective Home Education list. There are now 365! We're getting to know because schools now inform us if parents take them out so that seems to be working. But there are loads of children out there, we'd say there's at least double that out there, that we don't know about because they've never registered for a school, and nobody knows about them... there's a lot of Child Protection issues where we don't know what's happening to children."
>
> Local authority stakeholder

Another authority thought that inadequate home education was **"quite a hidden group"** and, while many carers were adequately educating their children, they thought **"probably like 70%, maybe more, aren't actually doing any education"**. Lack of registration and ability to monitor made it a **"massive safeguarding issue"**. In one extreme case, an authority reported a family in their area who had used home education to conceal their involvement in a paedophile ring.

3.6 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has introduced the main factors influencing missing education found in our research and the complexity of these factors. One local authority stakeholder summarised this complexity:

"Quite often [there are] complex relationships with education, quite often parents may have failed, or just don't know what to do with the children's education or may not believe in education…[also] intergenerational patterns of deprivation, the parents may have other life stresses, other children who have problems, so, when you actually put this whole picture together, we're not dealing with a single problem."

Local authority stakeholder

Specifically, the chapter has highlighted the following:

- There were multiple factors influencing a child's pathway into missing education, linked to the child, family and home, school and/or the wider systems and society.

- Children's own feelings, personalities, wishes and needs inherently influenced their ability or desire to go to school. They were also affected by decisions and actions from all other identified factors.

- Within the family and home, adverse events, including domestic violence, family breakdown and moving house were significant contributors to children missing education.

- School based factors also played a role in the pathways into children missing education for some families. These included families feeling the school did not provide appropriate support (in terms of SEND or mental health) or issues surrounding bullying or the fear of bullying. Unofficial exclusions also led to children missing out on education. Carers' own experiences at school were also identified as a factor.

- Lastly, wider systems and society factors were also contributing factors to children missing education. Some families had different culture or gender views which had a bearing on their view of education, whilst others did not understand the UK schools admissions process which hindered their child accessing a school place.

- Local authorities described parents increasingly home educating children as a result of many of these factors. One focus group member said elective home education **"is one of the biggest categories of children who are missing education"**.

- These factors could be concurrent and interrelated. Carers may have withdrawn children while they resolved family crises, withdrawn children because they no longer felt school was the right place for them, or because children refused to go. The factors reveal the complexity of the issues these young people are facing.

Robbie's parents **separated**

As Robbie's dad thought **school was a "mind factory"**, Robbie started being **home educated** at the age of seven

Later, he met Robbie's mum: **they had Robbie**

At first, Robbie's dad drove him to school, but he **could not pay for petrol** for work and school

He was **15 years old** when he **left home and school**

Robbie's step-mum was made **redundant**; the family were **evicted** and had to move home

Robbie's dad **moved a lot** when he was younger

At the age of six, Robbie went to **live with his dad**, step-mum and step-sister. Robbie attended the local primary school

Over the next four years, Robbie went to **four different schools**, was **home educated twice** and **moved home five times,** including living in a caravan and lorry bed
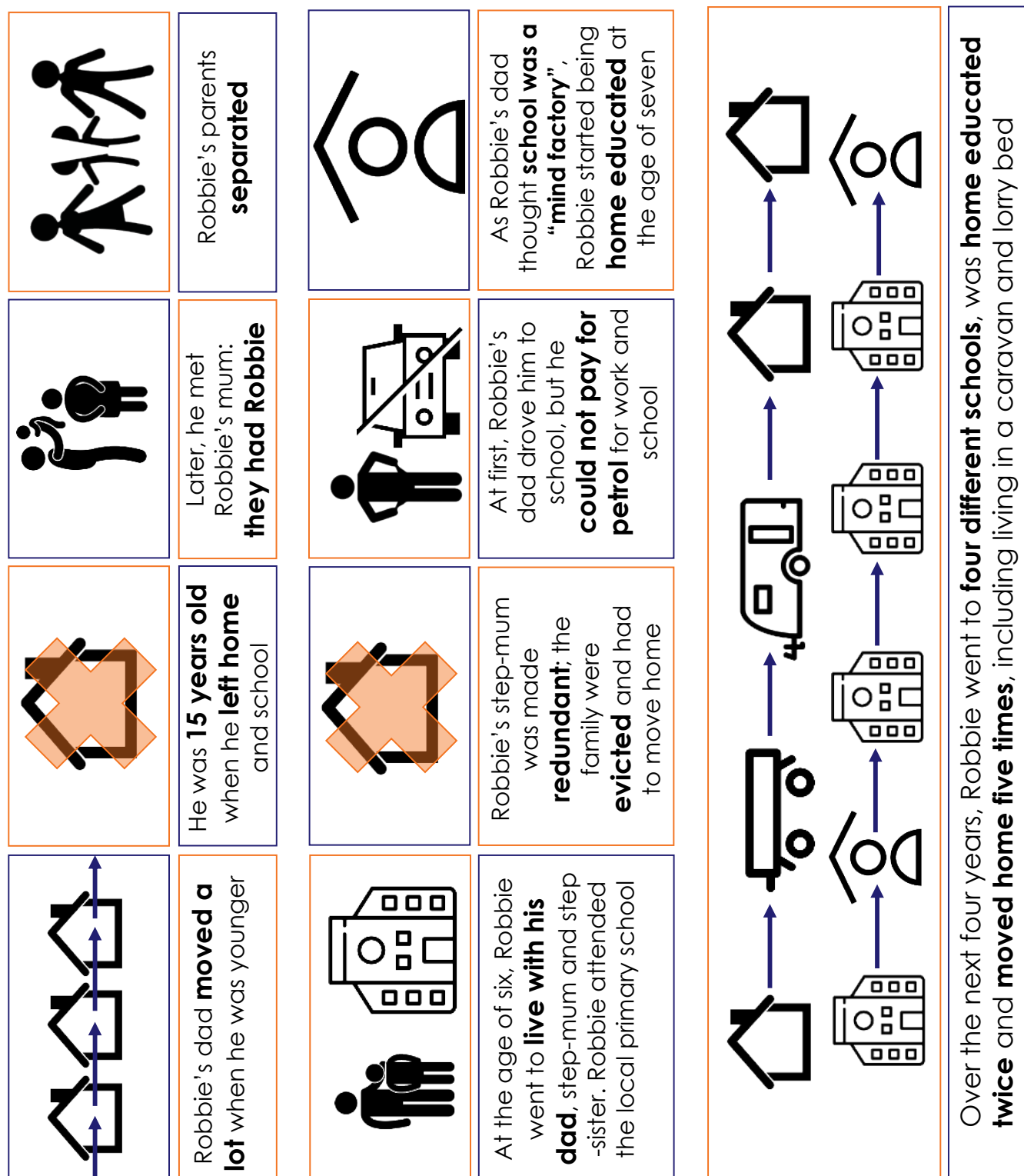
Figure 3. Robbie's (aged eleven) pathway through education.

4 Experiences of missing education

4.1 Introduction to chapter

A key part of pathways into missing education relates to the experiences of children, and carers once the child is no longer in education.

This chapter presents findings based on their reported experiences in two main areas:

• Their feelings about missing education;

• How children learn when not at school.

4.2 How children and carers feel about missing education

Within our interviews, carers and children were asked how they felt about the child missing education. Excluding responses relating to missed learning, which will be covered in section 4.3, their feelings concerned:

• Spending time with carers;

• Effects on carers' working patterns; and

• Lack of social interaction.

4.2.1 Spending time together

Families explained that when children stopped going to school, they inevitably spent a lot more time at home with their carers and with their siblings. Our interviews showed that younger children in particular spent much more time with the parent who was at home with them during the days. These children occupied themselves by reading books, watching TV, doing chores, playing games consoles, playing with younger siblings and accompanying carers on errands. Younger children in general enjoyed spending their days like this and valued spending extra time with their parent.

Carers, however, did not always share younger children's enjoyment of spending days like this. They sometimes felt that everyone in the house needed a **"break"** from spending so much time together as it could cause disagreements, especially between younger siblings. They tried to ensure children had stimulation. They took them to new places and did new activities, such as going to museums or the cinema, but it was not always easy or affordable to think of ideas.

For older children, some reported that they were able to spend time with carers during the day if they did not work, worked part-time or did shift work. Unlike younger children, this was not seen to be a positive experience and many reported that they would rather not spend their time in this way. This led them to leave the house and engage in risk-taking behaviour (see section 4.2.3).

4.2.2 Effect on carers' work

In some cases, carers explained that a multitude of pressures led to them feeling they had no choice but to give up their jobs. They felt they needed to be there to look after their children, as well as deal with other pressing issues that may have contributed to their child being out of education. Sam's (aged seven) dad had multiple concerns relating to arranging custody, pursuing child abuse allegations against Sam's step-dad and defending himself against an allegation from his ex-partner. He felt he had no choice but to leave work to give him the opportunity to address these issues. Other carers relied on wider family to help look after younger children who were missing education, to enable carers to continue working.

Despite being at an age where they could be home alone, carers of young people missing education still worried about how their children were. For young people with mental health problems, such as Jordan, whose pathway can be seen in *Figure 4*, carers were especially worried. This could sometimes affect their work. Jordan's mum was afraid for her daughter's safety and worried that she would try to commit suicide again. She kept her phone by her side when she was at work as she was her daughter's only source of support. This, however, led to difficulties at work for Jordan's mum.
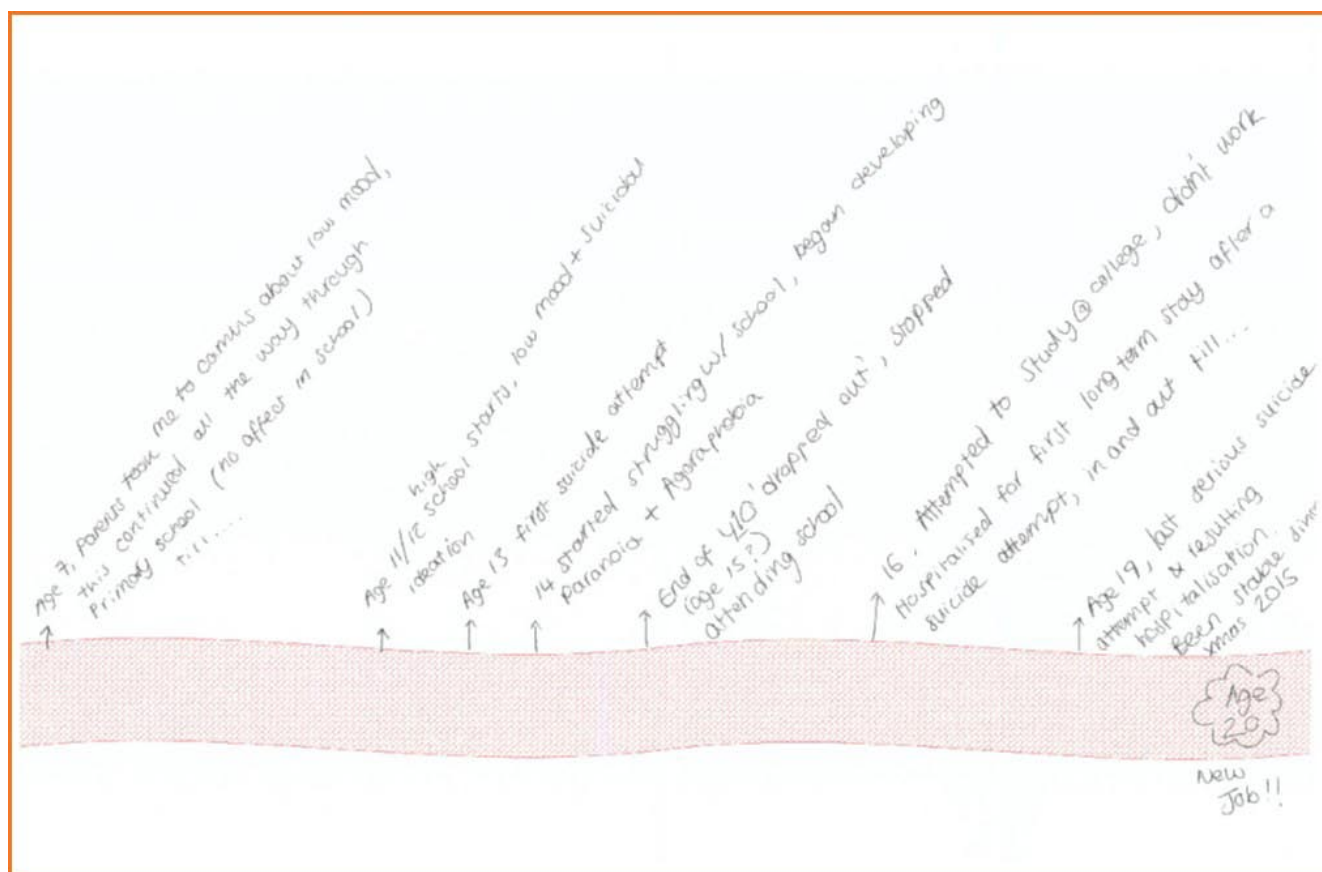

Figure 4. Jordan's (aged 20) pathway into missing education.

4.2.3 Social interactions

For children not at school, spending extended periods of time in the home could be boring. Initially, children enjoyed not going to school, especially following bad experiences. Often they enjoyed the freedom of being out of school. Eventually, however, this feeling wore off and children felt bored and lonely. Despite spending time with carers, they missed spending time with children their own age, such as their friends and siblings (if siblings went to school). Carers worried about the amount of social interaction their son or daughter got with other children as they were not socialising with peers at school.

Similarly, for older children their experience of missing education was largely shaped by feeling lonely, especially as their carers were less likely to take time off, or give up, work. Young people missing education spent long periods of time at home by themselves, often still having to face many of the issues that led to them missing education in the first place. July's mum, who worked full-time, described how her daughter (aged 14) spent her time:

> "[She] just sits in her room with the curtains drawn and makes lists and lists and lists. She gets up and comes down the stairs but closes the curtains. She knows every single person that ever existed in EastEnders, Hollyoaks; she can tell you the exact episode where someone got married, divorced."
>
> July's mum

For older young people missing education, spending time outside of their home was preferable. This was especially true if they experienced relationship breakdown within their families. This concerned their carers, who worried this could lead young people to get involved with a **"bad crowd"**, putting themselves in vulnerable positions. Two of the girls we spoke to were at risk of child sexual exploitation when they were off school, which Amelia's mum found more concerning than missing school.

For one young person we spoke to, being absent from school led to greater risk taking behaviour, including crime, drug-taking and going missing from home. Matt (aged 15), who was missing education for over a year, repeatedly went missing from home. He travelled the country, slept rough, and was on the police's radar for shoplifting. Looking back at the experience, Matt felt like he went down a bad path because, after leaving school, he had nothing else to do. The more detailed case study of Amelia below also shows how engaging with others off school can lead to deepening difficulties.

Case study

Amelia is 15 and lives with her mum, older brother and younger sister.

Amelia was a very bright and capable child who loved learning. Her mum described her as an "**excellent student**". Amelia had good attendance at school until **her parents separated** after a 20-year marriage, at which point **mental health problems** developed. Amelia was getting into fights at school and her behaviour deteriorated. She was **expelled from school**. Over the next three years, Amelia **spent a lot of time in and out of education**. She spent five months in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) (a school maintained by the local authority for excluded pupils) before returning to mainstream school. She did not settle as she found it hard to adapt to this way of learning, so she only went to this school for three weeks. A year later, Amelia tried attending another PRU, but did not like the people there so stopped attending.

Her mum was **threatened with an Attendance Order** but this pressure caused friction for the whole family and **Amelia's relationship with her mum broke down**. Amelia stopped **spending time at home** to avoid her mum and started hanging out with people she had met from the PRU, who were also not going to school. **Her mum felt Amelia was involved with a bad crowd**. She would not come home for days and the police identified her as **a child at risk of sexual exploitation** as she was repeatedly found in cars with older men.

Amelia's depression got worse and also **took their toll on Amelia's mum**. Looking back her mum reflected, "**It made my life hell for three years**". Amelia's mum sent her to live with her own parents abroad, where she volunteered as a cashier in a retailer. When Amelia came back to the UK after a few months, something seemed to have changed. Social Services and voluntary organisations were encouraging her to make a decision about going back to school. Amelia chose to go back to the original PRU, as it was an environment she was familiar with.

After a period of home tuition, Amelia is now back at the PRU and they are helping her to catch up with the work she missed. She is currently doing mock GCSE exams and feels hopeful for the future.
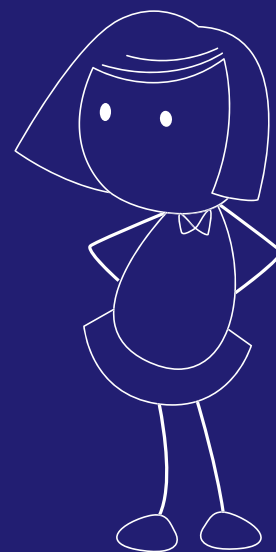
A key finding was that many children missing education were very aware of the consequences of falling behind at school and the impact this could have on their future. Awareness of missing education and commitment to learning was affected by the age, school experiences and learning preference of children. Older children were often more conscious of falling behind when out of education and were more likely to try to teach themselves. Younger children were less likely to be concerned about missing education, but missed social interactions.

In terms of older children, Gillie (aged 13), who made a choice with her mum not to go to secondary school, was particularly driven in directing her own learning at home. Jordan (aged 20) looked for papers online to help her study for her GCSEs. Matt (aged 15), however, who had been unofficially excluded, found it hard learning with a tutor by himself in a library. Amelia (aged 15) said missing a year of school meant she fell really far behind and her PRU were now providing her with additional work online to help her catch up. She had also asked them for more homework to help. For John (aged eight), he thought that his sister, who was at school, would "**be ahead of me soon, which makes me feel sad, like I'm dumb**".

Some young people, such as July (aged 14), were doing no learning when off school, as can be seen on the case study below.

Case study

July gets very depressed and self-harms. She was diagnosed with autism six years ago.

At her first primary school, July was prone to violent outbursts, which meant she spent most of break time with the Headteacher. When she moved primary school, she started hiding under the desks. Her mum said "**it was a small village primary school so they couldn't cope with her at all**". When she moved to high school, her Auntie and cousin moved out of the house they were sharing with July, her mum and grandma. July started missing lessons in Year 7 when they moved out; she felt this was a turning point for her. At the start of Year 8, she started the process of getting an Education, Health and Care Plan. It took a year for this to be completed.

When her EHCP came through at the beginning of Year 9, **her assessment said she needed one-to-one support**. Her mum said the school said they didn't have the resources and the local authority said they wouldn't pay for this. While this debate about who would pay for the support was happening, July stopped going to school altogether. The school wrote to the local authority to say July wasn't suitable for mainstream education. Her mum attended the SEN placement panel and July was placed in a specialist school. Everyone told her mum it was an ASD specialist school and specific help would be given, but "**they didn't do any of it...she's been constantly excluded from that school**".

July has attended half of school since being placed there in January 2016. She keeps getting suspended as she goes missing, walking out into the woods during lessons. July says she walks out because she does not understand the subject and gets frustrated, so she starts arguments with teachers. Her mum asked for an emergency review of her EHCP and, following this, the school say they cannot meet her needs and she cannot go there anymore.

July thinks her mum does not want her going back to school as the school is not meeting her needs in terms of her autism, despite it being labelled as a specialist school. **The school have said that they can't keep her safe so she can't go back**, which has "**come as a bit of a shock**" to July.

The local authority are looking for provision, but the school they have suggested is out of the area boundary and July would have to travel for 90 minutes each way to get there. "**Meanwhile**" her mum says "**she's not in school... she's in limbo, and I work full time, so she's at home all day by herself**".

Whatever children's views, carers tried to encourage their children to do some degree of learning while not at school. Children focused on basic reading and writing practice during the days and used key stage learning books, as well as online resources. In very few cases, children's previous school gave work for them to complete while they awaited a new school place. These activities were encouraged by their carer as many were concerned about their child falling behind.

Carers reported that they took a leading role in helping their children learn, either as teachers or by helping them access education. In terms of subjects, they focused mainly on English and Maths, especially for younger children. They supplemented books with learning programmes and online tasks. They also made use of their own individual skills; they taught children practical skills like sewing, cooking and gardening, and drew on the skills of their wider family members. The emphasis on learning increased when families were either a) unaware of when their child could go back to school or b) knew they would not return to school for an extended period of time.

For children who had a bad experience at school (e.g. bullying or schools not meeting children's needs), carers spoke of a process of **"de-schooling"**. For these carers, it was important to build their children's confidence, self-esteem and self-acceptance before they felt it was appropriate for them to engage in more traditional learning.

In some cases, carers were unable to provide the degree of attention needed to ensure their children were able to learn. For instance, Louis' (aged ten) mum stated that she used to give more attention to his education. She was, however, currently focused on finding permanent, suitable housing for the family after fleeing to a domestic violence refuge. This was in addition to the demands of looking after Louis' two younger siblings (both under three), worrying about Louis' change in behaviour and being diagnosed with depression. This was echoed by the mum of Amelia (aged 15) who stated that when her daughter went missing from home, she **"had a lot of problems, school was the minutest"**.

When it was felt children were ready to learn there were a variety of ways that carers chose to educate their children at home[7]:

- Taking this responsibility on themselves;
- Taking their child to learning groups;
- Paying for private tuition.

If provisions were unregistered, then the quality of their teaching and curriculum would not have been inspected by Ofsted. While the purpose of the research was not to judge the quality of education children received when they missed education, it is important to highlight potential risks around the unregulated routes carers took to educate their children outside of school. These three modes of learning are discussed in more depth below.

4.3.1 Carer as teacher

Carers who took the responsibility of teaching their child themselves made use of a variety of methods. Those with younger children especially saw the value in learning through play and other activities. They used a variety of books and online resources and some paid for home education computer packages to aid learning. Carers also tried to take children out as much as possible to the cinema, beach, swimming etc. to break up the days and reduce boredom.

7 It was unclear in many interviews with families whether the child was known to the local authority as electively home educated during this time.

Many children said that they enjoyed learning at home and preferred it to learning at school. Children said that they liked having a more flexible routine and the option of getting up later. In addition, many children reported that they enjoyed learning at their own pace and liked the freedom it offered in terms of subjects. For Tim (aged twelve), learning at home gave him the chance to ask more questions when he struggled to understand things. Fatima (aged 16) really enjoyed the independence of learning at home and self-directing her study to things she was interested in.

However, some carers explained that helping their children's learning was a large challenge for them, especially when they were going through a difficult time. Knowing what to teach children, and at what level to teach them was a fundamental concern. For Gillie's (aged 13) mum, whose first language was not English, she considered herself ill-equipped to help her daughter's learning at home. She could not check Gillie's work as she did not know herself whether it was right or wrong.

Further challenges around children viewing, or not viewing, carers as a teacher figure were also widely discussed by the carers we spoke to. The blurred boundary between carer and teacher could be problematic and hindered children's learning, particularly younger children. Carers reported that they found it hard to keep their children's attention when teaching, and that their child would not put in the same amount of effort as they would at school. For example:

- Megan's (aged six) mum found her daughter would often give up easily with her reading and Megan's mum would often just end up reading the book to her.

- Ayesha's (aged five) mum spoke about her daughter's habit of **"giving up before she even tried"**. Ayesha's mum hoped that returning to a routine with school would help to turn her back into the keen learner she used to be.

- To try to instil some level of routine to learning at home, Sophie's (aged seven) mum tried to recreate the school environment and turned one of the rooms in their house into a classroom; buying a teacher's desk for herself and a table and chairs for Sophie and her siblings. Despite this, she found her children viewed her as mum, and not a teacher figure.

Setting the home up as an environment for learning, buying learning resources and taking day trips were all costly expenses, especially if they were not working. Carers of children with special educational needs and disabilities in particular had concerns about their children not getting the extra financial or educational support at home that they would otherwise get at school.

4.3.2 Learning groups

Carers also chose to sign their children up to a variety of local learning groups. They felt like they had to put in a lot of research to find out about these **"secret communities"** though; often carers only heard about them through social media or word of mouth.

Local learning groups gave children and carers the opportunity to interact with other families in similar situations and form groups based on their children's interests. For Tim (aged twelve), his interest in mechanics and building led him and a group of other children to meet up once a week for a Lego learning group. Similarly, Megan (aged six) started going to a local learning group focused on the outdoors and nature. Having the flexibility to learn about subjects children enjoyed through different mediums was an important aspect of learning groups. This flexibility appealed to both children and carers, as did the social benefits it offered.

4.3.3 One-to-one tutoring

Some children we spoke to had private tutors hired at a cost to the family or provided through the local authority. For children who had missed extensive periods of time at school, or for families who found learning at home challenging, carers hired tutors at their own expense. Sophie's (aged seven) mum, for example, found that teaching her children at home was not a long-term solution. She hired a tutor to come every morning and teach her children Maths, English and Science. Such tuition came at a substantial cost, which could be hard for carers to fund.

In some cases, tutoring was provided by the local authority. This was as a stepping stone to get children back in school or alternative provision when they could not go to school. Such tuition was either at home or in the public library. Within the families we spoke to, it was generally only offered to young people in their GCSE years. This is despite local authorities being under a duty to arrange suitable full-time education for pupils who (due to exclusion, illness or for other reasons) would not receive suitable education without such provision. Although young people and carers appeared to value this support, young people generally did not enjoy learning in this way. They described feeling isolated and did not like the intensity of learning about one subject for an extended period of time.

4.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has specifically focused on the experiences of children and their carers in missing education. Our research highlighted that:

- Children and carers had mixed responses to spending more time together when out of school. Younger children saw this more positively.

- In many cases, children missing education impeded their carers' ability to work.

- Older children missing education experienced lack of social interaction with peers, or fell in with the 'wrong crowd'.

- If children were learning while missing education, carers reported playing a leading role in teaching. They focused mainly on English and Maths as the basics, especially for younger children. Older children were more likely to teach themselves.

- In addition to helping children learn at home, many carers also took their child/ren to learning groups, went on daytrips, bought books and online resources, and/or paid for tuition.

- All of these learning approaches had financial implications for carers.

5 Returning to education

5.1 Introduction to chapter

This chapter will focus on how children return to education after a period out, what enables this to happen and what prevents it from happening. Receiving an education could mean that the child returned to school, or alternative provision, or that the carer home educated their child. Across the factors that contributed to children missing education, there were common barriers and enablers to returning to education, which are discussed in more detail below. These relate to the individual child, family and home, school and wider systems and society factors.

5.2 An overview of local authority procedures for tracing a child missing education

The description below outlines the general procedures followed across local authorities, when identifying and tracing children missing education. Experiences of local authorities in negotiating these processes will be discussed further in chapter seven.

Before Referral

Child and their family will be experiencing factors identified in chapter 3 that influence their attendance at any school. Under statutory guidance (DfE, 2016b), schools are required to make reasonable enquiries (see section 2.5.1) to ascertain the location of children who have stopped attending school before removing them from the school roll. Attendance officers within local authorities may help schools trace children. If they are found to be missing, then they are referred to the children missing education officer.

Step One: Referral

Local authorities received a referral from many different services such as their admissions team, schools, the attendance team, health visitors, or concerned member of the public. These referrals could "be as little information as name, age, date of birth, and home address, and phone number, and that will be everything". When a referral was made, the children missing education officer entered the child onto the children missing education register. In the authorities we spoke to, these officers sat in the authority's attendance team.

One local authority also explained that they engage with Social Care, Health and SEND professionals to review vulnerable children; they **"cross check across teams to get a picture of those who are at risk"** and prevent any escalation. The lead also said they had a 'tracker list' of children who they knew were moving out of the area. They monitored these children until they received confirmation the child was on a school roll in their new area.

Step Two: Checks

Officers cross checked information from referrals against their existing databases, such as admissions or School2School, to see if they could trace the child. They also contacted other services to see whether they had information on the child. One officer explained that she passed between several local agencies to see if she could find the child. When the child was not found locally, officers contacted other authorities and put information about the child on the School2School site. Depending on the authority and the officer's contacts, those contacted included: local authority admissions team, local authority attendance team, local authority social care team, housing (to see if the family have recently moved or been rehoused), local authority revenue team (for Council Tax), National Health Service, the police, the Department for Work and Pensions (to request child benefit details), and the Borders Agency (if the family is thought to have left the UK).

Step Three: Home Visit

If officers had the address of the child missing education, they went to the house. This could be as a lone worker, or with another officer from the council. One local authority explained that they tried to accompany others, such as health visitors when doing these home visits. At one point, they went with the police, but found this created tension with families, so changed procedures. If Officers could not find the child, they might talk to neighbours and refer to the services mentioned in the checks in Step Two. One local authority officer said she had to make five referrals to child protection in one week following home visits. This reflects the urgency of finding children missing education.

Step Four: Support

When officers did trace a child, they worked with other professionals within children's services to get that child back into school or ensure they received a suitable home education. This included officers helping a carer complete a paper copy of the admissions form, referring families to social care, contacting the team who arrange EHCPs, or providing other support packages to address any challenges.

Step Five: Continual Monitoring

Only when a child was found to be on roll at school or receiving suitable education at home were children removed from the register. When this did not happen, regular checks were made until the child was found. One local authority completed an annual audit of school rolls to check information about pupils removed from rolls matched information the school had already provided (as recorded on the children missing education register).

5.3 Child factors

The child or young person and their own individual needs and personalities is one factor that may affect their learning and decision to return, or not, to school. The child's own choices and wishes were found to be a particularly important enabler for children returning to formal learning and appeared to centre on some key considerations including:

- **Boredom of being at home:** As discussed in section 4.2, not going to school could be a boring and lonely time for children. This experience could lead to them actively asking their parent if they could return to school. For example, Robbie (aged 11) wanted more variety in his learning and asked his Dad if he could go back to school, in time for secondary school. Although his Dad was not keen on this decision, his son's choices and wishes were important to him and he enrolled Robbie in the local school.

- **Impact on their future:** Children who had an awareness of the effect of missing school on their future also actively asked their carers if they could go back to school. For Gillie (aged 13), the prospect of sitting exams and the impact these could have on her future was a key driving force behind her decision to ask her mum if she could return to school. Gillie told us why she made this choice:

> "When I found out I needed to do my GCSEs... I decided, mum I want to go to school so that I can learn."
>
> Gille, aged 13

- **Fear of school:** Some children who had been bullied or had gone to a number of schools expressed fear in relation to going back to school. They worried about bullies and having to make friends at a new school.

All of these factors contributed to children's decision about whether or not to return to school. However, these things were not considered in isolation and were combined with factors relating to the family and home, school and wider systems and society, which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

The extent to which carers considered their children's decision was a key driving force in their return to school. Some carers, like Gillie and Robbie's, placed a large degree of emphasis on their children's choices in their own education. In contrast, other carers believed they were making the right decisions for their children's education, but the child did not always agree.

School was not the only way children could re-engage in learning. For children who had a particularly difficult time at school (including bullying and limited support for their needs), home education was sometimes their preferred route of learning. Choice was also important for this route, especially for those who had a fear of school. These children often asked their carers to educate them at home, rather than return to school.

5.4 Family and home factors

In addition to children's choices, factors relating to the family and home also had a bearing on children returning to education. These included the families' views of education, the extent to which they had overcome the situations that contributed to children missing education initially and the financial implications of the decision to return to school. These are discussed in more detail below.

5.4.1 Families' views of education

The decision for children to go back to formal learning was inherently affected by their wider families' views and opinions. This includes both carers' and siblings' views of education. For Robbie (aged eleven) and Gillie (aged 13), their choices to go back to school were also influenced by their siblings. Gillie had a positive older role model in her brother who had gone to University; whilst Robbie chose to go to the same school as his step-sister. The influence of an older sibling with a positive view of education could be an enabler for children returning to school.

Carers' views also played a large role in children's return to education. Families who we interviewed who no longer (or never) felt that school was the right place for educating their child often decided to home educate their child. This decision could change if they felt they had reached their limits of teaching or felt their child was not engaging in learning in this way. Children's choices also could play a part in families' decisions for children to return to school.

Carers and children did not always agree as to how education should be provided or their child should go back to school. Tim (aged 12) had been out of school for over a year and was being home educated by his mum. Tim felt like he might want to try going to school again and experience all of the extra-curricular activities high school had to offer. However, his mum felt that school would increase his stress and **"would all be too much for him"**. Carers, like Tim's mum, all believed their decisions around education were in the best interests of their children.

If it was decided that a child should return to school, local authority stakeholders felt that it was helpful for both children and carers to be committed to this decision for a successful reintegration. One local authority stakeholder said:

"The parents have to have a commitment to the kids going back to school, as much as the kids have to be committed to going back to school."

Local authority stakeholder

5.4.2 Overcoming difficult circumstances

For some families, missing school was one of a number of concerns, of which missing school may not have been the biggest. Disruptive situations, such as moving home or family breakdown, were just a few issues that families we spoke to faced. For children to return to education, the issues families had experienced needed to be somewhat resolved before families could focus their attention on the education of their children. This view was also supported by local authorities, with one saying that family crises could mean education was not a priority.

Housing was found to be one example of families' difficult circumstances that could hinder a return to school. For families who had difficulty finding or staying in a home either due to eviction, family breakdown, domestic violence or social housing moves, a more stable residence was needed before applying for a school place.

5.4.3 Financial considerations

Further considerations when families were thinking about children going back to school were the financial implications of this decision for families who were struggling. For some families, the cost of children returning to school, including buying their uniform and petrol for transport, could be a worry and act as barrier to children returning to school. This was especially true for families living in poverty, or where there had been a recent change in finances, following a house move or family breakdown.

In contrast, financial considerations could also deter carers from continuing to home educate their children and encourage a return to school. This consideration was twofold; some carers could no longer afford activities associated with home education. Others encouraged their children to go back to school to enable them to return to work or get a job to start earning more money.

As well as individual choice and the influence of the family and their circumstances, schools could also hinder or enable children to return to learning. Where children missed education because families did not feel their needs were met by schools, appropriate care and provision needed to be given to allow children to return to school. This included EHC plans, appropriate provision and available school places. A recurring theme appeared to be the timescales around these processes, which is highlighted throughout.

5.5.1 EHC plans

Families where children had SEND spoke of the importance of having an EHC plan in place. However, getting these plans in place could take extended periods of time and families often felt they were fighting for them. It took a year for John (aged eight) to have an EHC plan in place, as opposed to the 20-week deadline[8]. One local authority also experienced EHC plans taking significantly longer than 20 weeks. When EHC plans come through, we found that it could still take a significant delay of six to eight weeks to place the child in school. This may have been because the school refused to take a child until the EHC plan was in place, or in other cases may have been because families chose to keep the child of school until the EHC plan was in place. Whilst this process was on-going children were not at school. It was only when the EHC plan came through and an appropriate school place was found, that children could return to school. Quite often families also experienced difficulties in finding the right provision for children. This was related to the general lack of appropriate provision, discussed below.

5.5.2 Appropriate provision for children with SEND

Carers we spoke to believed that there was an overall lack of appropriate provision for children with SEND. This hindered or severely delayed a return to school and acted as a significant challenge for children who wanted to go back to school. For example, July (aged 14), who has Autism Spectrum Disorder, could not be found an appropriate school to meet her needs. The local authority found a school outside out of the locality which they deemed suitable, but would mean a 90-minute journey for July to travel to school every day.

Local authorities recognised the challenges in meeting the needs of children with SEND as this was considered a **"growing population"**. One local authority said that it could take longer to place children with SEND due to **"issues that sometimes take longer to sort"**, as well as difficulties in placing children in the most suitable and appropriate provision for that individual child and their needs.

For some local authorities, there was also an issue around lacking school places altogether. In some areas there were not felt to be enough places available for the number of children. Consequently, the waiting time to get children into a school could be significantly longer and delay a return to school. Some carers who did not get their first choice, could also keep their child from going to school, regardless of whether the child had SEND, until a place became available in the school of their choice.

---

8 Local authorities have 20 weeks from the date of the assessment to produce the final EHCP.

In some family circumstances and where this was available locally, alternative provision was seen as a particularly useful route for re-engaging children in education. Where children could not go back to their last school or attend a mainstream school, alternative provision was valued. Young people enjoyed the flexibility this offered them in terms of their learning although did express concern around how Pupil Referral Units (PRU) could be viewed by the general public as somewhere for **"bad children"**. However, the same challenges around delays were also true for alternative provision. It took over a month for Amelia (aged 15) to attend the PRU as they were waiting for her funding to be transferred.

5.5.3 School placements

Even in areas where there were enough school places, local authorities felt that there could still be difficulties getting children who had missed periods of education (particularly where they had missed long periods) back into school. Local authorities explained that there were explicit difficulties placing some groups of children:

- Children going into their GCSE school year (as schools may be mindful of their overall results being skewed by children who have missed substantial periods of education);

- Children who speak no, or minimal, English;

- Children who have a history of challenging behaviour; and

- Children whose age is unknown.

Placement issues could take time to resolve which could act as a barrier to children returning to school. While schools could not refuse to take children, they could place too much emphasis on Fair Access Protocol, which took significantly longer. For one local authority, they found that schools refused to take children once they **"hit their quota on the Fair Access Protocol"**. This could make it difficult to place children and impacted on children's education and motivation to learn.

Lastly, there appeared to be challenges and enablers to children returning to education stemming from society and the wider systems. These included having a thorough understanding of the UK admissions process and the documentation required.

5.6.1 Admissions process

For some families, the UK schools admission process could be confusing. Where this was an issue, it acted as a significant barrier to education and could delay the process of children going to school. Families who did not know the system needed help to understand the process. However, it was found that they often did not know where to go for this help. Mrs Roze arrived in the UK with no prior experience of the education system and spoke English as a second language, which made it difficult for her to seek help.

A better understanding of the admissions process was gained through talking to council officers, seeking help through the library and contact with other children's services professionals (such as social workers, health visitors, or general practitioners). Local authorities felt they worked hard with other professionals to help them understand processes for children missing education and applying for a school place, so they, in turn, could help families.

5.6.2 Documentation

Families not having the appropriate documentation could act as a barrier to children securing a school place. When carers applied for school places, they must provide supporting documentation, such as proof of parental responsibility or proof of home address. Recent house moves, or a change in living arrangements, could make it difficult to supply accurate documentation to apply for a school place. For example, Sam (aged seven) could not get a school place because his dad could not provide proof of parental responsibility while Sam's mum contested custody and continued to claim child benefit for him. It was only when Sam's mum was threatened with a School Attendance Order (and fine) that she agreed Sam could live with his dad. This meant the appropriate documentation could be processed. One local authority reported that some schools will admit children while checks on the necessary paperwork were being undertaken, whereas others will not offer children a place until all paperwork was in place.

5.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has outlined local authorities' procedures for tracing children missing education to return them to provision. It has explained what the research found helps or hinders children receive an education following a period out. The myriad pathways out of education are reflected in the many ways that children could re-engage. This, again, shows that children missing education is a complex problem and there is not one path to resolving it.

This chapter highlighted the following:

- Children could re-engage in learning by returning to school/alternative provision or being home educated.

- Choice was important for engaging in education; both children's and carers' preferences shaped children's route back into learning.

- Families own circumstances affected prioritisation of, and so return to, education. These circumstances included house moves, domestic violence, family breakdown and financial concerns.

- Schools had an important role to play in engaging children in learning; children needed to be offered a school place, in a timely manner, with assurances that their needs would be met. In reality, children's right to an education was often hampered by the number of local school places or the quality of local provision.

- Certain aspects of the admissions process also hindered engagement in learning as families did not always understand the system, or were hampered by administrative delays.

6 Support

6.1 Introduction to chapter

To explore what, if any, support was available for children missing education and their families, we asked families their current and past experiences in terms of help they had needed and help they received. Some families were very clear on the support that would have helped to prevent their child missing education. Other families often did not know what support was needed to overcome their situation.

Carers generally wanted timely intervention from a named professional, who could provide clear information. They reported varied experiences:

- Some families reported that they had been helped by a number of professionals from separate agencies;
  - Some families had a clear idea of who helped them and what organisation they were from.
  - Not all families had this understanding; many did not know where the support came from or how it was initiated.
- Other families reported that they could not get help from any agency because no one would take responsibility for helping with solutions.

This chapter includes a discussion of the support available for children missing education and their families in more detail around the four factors identified; namely, the child, home and family, school and wider system and society.

6.2 Child factors

The children we spoke to wanted to be involved in decisions about their education. Older children felt as though they had some level of responsibility and that it was important for **"kids to help themselves"** when they are out of education. Otherwise there was **"not a lot professionals can do"**. This was especially related to their choice as to whether or not to go to school, which was deemed to be a largely internal process.

Despite wanting to be involved in decisions about their own education, not all children felt listened to or involved. July (aged 14) did not feel involved; no one from the local authority came to talk to her when she was not attending school. Instead, all communication was done through her mum, which was frustrating for July.

Reflecting on her teenage years, Jordan (aged 20) also felt as though she communicated with professionals through her mum. However, both Jordan and her mum felt this was not a helpful approach for getting support and described it as **"detrimental"**. Consequently, Jordan had to find her own voice and stop relying on her mum. Jordan's mum felt that a contributing factor to her daughter missing education was a loss of her support network in the school, as she saw a change when a good friend changed schools. This shows the importance of informal support networks.

Where children did not feel listened to, this was found to have a negative impact on reintegration. Choice regarding which school they went to was important. Amelia (aged 15) wanted to go to a school where she knew people, but instead her mum chose a school for her at random. She did not know anyone at her new school and felt thrown in at the **"deep end"** and disengaged.

Involving children in decisions about their education was also reliant on the support of family and home, school and the wider system.

<div style="background-color:orange">

6.3 Family and home factors

</div>

The support of carers in a child receiving an education, and making sure the carer receives support to do so, was found to be essential. Despite all of the different support agencies nationally, Robbie's (aged eleven) dad described the support of services as **"as much use as a chocolate fireguard"**. Instead, he (and other carers) relied heavily on their own family and personal support networks.

Support from personal networks was particularly difficult for families who had recently moved house, away from family and friends. Amil's (aged nine) family was placed in a house outside of their home town, away from their **"help network and family"**, which left Amil's mum feeling very isolated. Amil also started having anger management issues, so his mum attended parenting courses organised by the local authority and family support. She felt these helped her to manage his behaviour better and become more assertive with her children. Without support, carers said it could be **"exhausting"**, **"isolating"**, and **"frustrating"** when their children were not attending school.

One local authority spoke of carers as a useful **"resource"** for getting children back into education. However, there was a risk that carers were seen as **"colluding"** with their children in some instances. Some professionals thought carers were sometimes a significant part of the reason why children were not in school and condoned or encouraged their child's choices. In these circumstances, local authorities felt carers as a resource could often get overlooked.
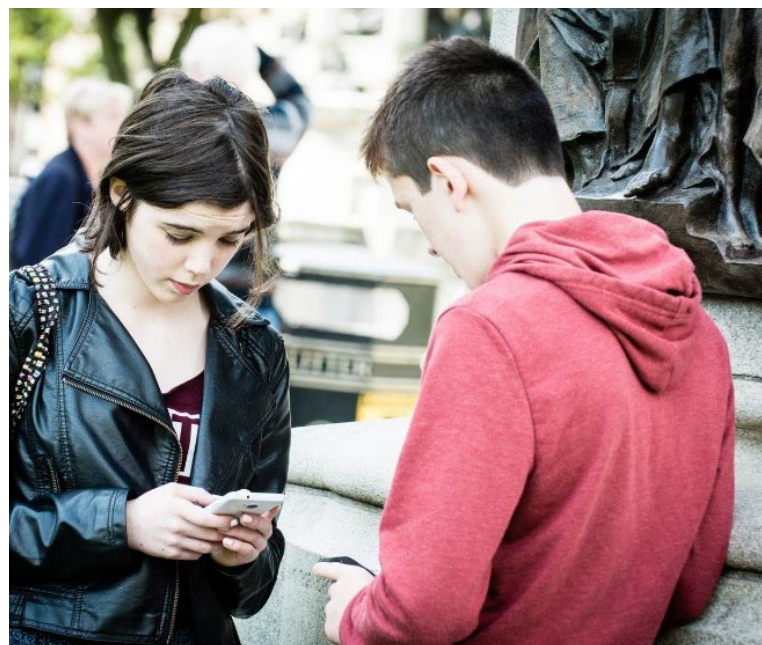
We found that the majority of support to prevent children missing education came from schools through three key phases of children's pathways into and out of missing education:

- If a child was at risk of missing education, prevention through monitoring attendance and early interventions;

- If a child missed education, schools could support maintained learning in the interim, through work sent home; and

- If children returned to school there was a need for sensitive, phased return, either by a reduced timetable or providing additional support.

6.4.1 Prevention

Schools were seen to have a large role in preventing children missing education through appropriately supporting children's needs. However, not all schools were felt to be successful in terms of this preventative support. Families felt schools needed to better embrace and support individualised needs **"rather than having everyone fit into a mould"**.

Support might include one-to-one support or smaller classes to give learners more attention and time for questions. The support of specific teachers within schools was also deemed as important for children. For children, their enjoyment of school often depended on the teacher. Carers felt the support of teachers helped to build their children's confidence. Ayesha's (aged five) mum did not feel her daughter would **"be the way she was"** without the support of one particular teacher. This points to the value of having positive support networks in school.

In contrast, other children felt badly treated by some teachers because they did not understand them (often linked to children with SEN). Other children felt victimised or bullied by teachers. This lack of support contributed to children's disengagement from school.

Early intervention was also found to be important to prevent escalation of issues that led to children missing education.

> "Heartbroken how I was treated and dealt with by my high school because I feel like if there had been a bit more support right at the start... I might have been able to keep up. "
>
> Jordan, aged 20

Local authorities believed schools held lots of valuable information about families, which placed them in a unique position to have conversations with carers and put support mechanisms in place before a child became persistently absent or at risk of missing education. In all authorities we spoke to, stakeholders felt **"attendance is everyone's business"**.

However, local authority stakeholders and families recognised the pressures schools were under in terms of attendance and results, and how this affected their decisions around the child, which could cause pressure to build on families and children to disengage:

> "It has a massive impact for schools on the fact that these young people aren't turning up for GCSEs, are really negatively impacting the schools scores..."
>
> Local authority stakeholder

One local authority considered the Ofsted inspections framework for schools created these pressures as it graded schools partly on their attendance. They thought changes to the Ofsted framework to reduce focus on attendance and results would better enable schools to support children at risk of missing education.

6.4.2 Interim support

Families told us that interim support from schools was helpful when their child was not attending school. Some families were sent work by their child's previous school for carers to go through with their child while they awaited a school place. The usefulness of this was variable. In partnership with local authorities, other schools helped to arrange for tutors for children. Matt's (aged 15) carer felt that extra learning provision in the holidays would be helpful for young people like him, who had missed a lot of school in their GCSE years:

"Even just an hour or so a day to try and bridge the gap and narrow how far behind he is..."

Matt's carer

Carers also reported paying for home tutors themselves to support their children as they were worried about the impact of missing education on their children's learning. However, this interim support was not felt to be a replacement for a full-time education. Whilst there was scope for schools to improve or expand upon the interim support offered to families, issues of engaging children in this interim education still persist.

6.4.3 Reintegration

Our research highlighted the importance of a planned reintegration back into school, after a period out of education. Local authorities felt that both they and schools worked hard to ensure successful returns to school for children. However, placements depended on a number of different things including:

• Children's educational needs;

• Children's socio-emotional needs; and

• The overall suitability of the placement.

6.4.3.1 Educational needs

Children who have been out of school for some time were more likely to be behind and to be out of any routine. Children might need more time and/or additional support to catch up with their peers. Megan's mum said her daughter (aged six) found it hard to go back to school after a year out as she had been learning different things to her classmates. The school put in place one-to-one reading and writing support for Megan to help her catch up.

6.4.3.2 Social-emotional needs

However, it was not just learning needs that schools should be aware of. Social and emotional needs also needed to be accounted for, recognising that the return to school could be a difficult transition socially and emotionally. Extra support from a pastoral member of staff or a 'buddy up' system with a peer were seen as positive steps for reintegrating children into school. In reality, a lack of resources and time meant schools could not always offer this individual support.

Families and local authorities agreed that personalised timetables could be helpful to engage children in learning again:

"More personalised timetables with personalised subjects and slowly introduce more hours and subjects... and not expect a child who has been out of school for a long time to come in and be fine."

Local authority stakeholder

A common worry for children returning to school after a period out was related to socialisation. Whilst some children were excited to make friends in new schools, they could worry about being bullied, particularly where they had prior experience of bullying from peers or teachers. Children were also anxious that they would not make friends upon their return to school.

6.4.3.3 Suitability of placement

Reintegration was also dependent on the overall suitability of the school to support children's individualised needs. We found that alternative provision was valued by families where the child had disengaged from education as their needs were better supported. Fatima (aged 16) reengaged with education through being on an alternative provision timetable at a local college. Fatima enjoyed the college as they gave her more freedom and altered their teaching style so it was relevant to her life and her career choices. Fatima's mum felt she had come on **"leaps and bounds"** since being there.

Despite the value placed on alternative provision in engaging learners, local authorities differed in their opinions and the quantity of alternative provision in their areas. One local authority felt they offered many alternatives to mainstream school, which could make it easier to find a suitable placement for a child. In other areas, however, they felt like they were not able to offer this level of support. Where alternatives were not available, local authority stakeholders felt like they were trying to put **"square pegs in round holes"**.

In some instances, where suitable placements may not be available locally, some families believed their children should be allowed to go to school in a different local authority. This was especially the case in families where they lived close to the border of other local authorities. For Matt (aged 15), this would have meant more choice after his exclusion from three different secondary schools in his local authority. For Louis (aged ten), it would have meant he had the opportunity to learn with friends after a very unstable period for him and his mum as the family fled from domestic violence. The lack of flexibility in local boundaries was frustrating for families who wanted their children in school.

6.5 Wider system and society

The wider system and society support families by providing information, resources, help and advice in relation to education and other problems that may prevent access to education.

Local authorities and other local organisations provided help to families around completing the admissions form, particularly in circumstances where families:

- Did not have access to the internet;
- Had poor literacy; and/or
- Spoke English as a second language.

Children missing education officers (whose role is explained in more detail in section 5.2) found themselves more involved with children's education than the responsibilities of their role indicated. The three officers we spoke to sat within the attendance teams of their local authority. They maintained the register of children missing education, including tracing children found to be missing education. When they found children, they had to make sure they received an appropriate school place. This could include helping families complete school admissions forms, which might mean carers saw them as part of the support around getting their child into school. This is highlighted by one children missing education officer:

"I have had a parent text me at 10 o'clock at night saying 'Can you tell him to go to bed because he won't get up in the morning!'"

Children missing education officer

Local authorities thought a real strength of the way they operated was through their integrated services. They said they tried to be flexible in the support they provided due to the complexity of the families they worked with. Matt's carer, Mrs Lee, thought Matt (aged 15) would not have received the support he was getting with his education if he had not been looked after by the local authority.

For Ayesha's mum, however, getting an education for her daughter felt like a 'fight' with the admissions system. For some families, the involvement of lots of different professionals or agencies could be confusing when they did not have a single, named point of contact. They found themselves continuously repeating their problem.

It might also be that the involvement of multiple agencies meant families felt no one organisation took responsibility. This was the case for Jordan (aged 20) and July (aged 14):

"Everyone talks about multi-agency working but I go round and round in circles. Agencies are aware of [her], but they just pass it round themselves"

July's mum

She also had difficulties in getting a special educational needs assessment and diagnosis for July as **"the school and health people don't work together"**.

When we spoke to families, they often did not know the name of the individual person or organisation who best supported them. This points to the complexity of involvement with multiple different agencies.

Other families felt like services did not have their best interests at heart and, at times, felt under pressure from them. Sam's (aged seven) dad felt social services were **"on his case"**, but he could not get Sam into school due to a lack of documentation. He did, however, value the pressure that the authority put on Sam's mum through issuing her a School Attendance as it helped resolve their dispute about Sam's child benefit.

Amelia (aged 15) similarly described involvement with, and pressure from, the police, social workers, and her mental health practitioners. Such pressure caused problems between her mum and her. Many children missing education are known to and involved with existing services, but, despite this, they still end up missing significant periods of learning.

Local authorities did discuss the difficulties around knowing when to support families, as sometimes support was offered by services that was not wanted. Other times, support was (unknowingly) wanted that was not offered. John's (aged eight) mum, for example, said she did not know what support they needed when John was disengaging from education. Not knowing what support was available could hinder families' seeking help or advice, which could delay children's engagement in learning.

6.6 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has described the support available to families when children are missing education. It also explored the gap between the support they received and the support they might want, focusing on the child, family and home, school and the wider system and society.

This chapter has highlighted the following:

- Children missing education benefitted from support that allowed them to engage meaningfully in decisions, such as whether or not to go back to school.

- Support from family members, a stable home and wider network of support could all contribute to a child returning to education.

- Schools could provide vital support for pupils at different stages of the children missing education pathway; including preventing children missing education, supporting them in the interim and successfully reintegrating them back into learning.

- Schools' capacity to support children missing education was dependent on the quality of teaching, availability of alternative provision, processes for tracking and addressing any changes in attendance, and planning for individual children and their needs.

- Families' experiences of wider support from the local authority and other organisations were mixed. This largely depended on the local support landscape and the number of organisations families were receiving support from.

- Despite potential support from the school and wider systems and society, some carers still felt unsupported and did not know where to go for support.

7 Local authority activities and issues

7.1 Introduction to chapter

Much of the information provided by local authorities (via interviews and focus groups), has been discussed within earlier chapters in this report. This chapter specifically focuses on the insight they offered into the policy, practice and legislative context surrounding children missing education.

This included some detailed discussion of particular cases. They gave their perspective on barriers or enablers to prevent children missing education and overseeing educational arrangements once they are found. The findings demonstrated the variation in practice within and across local authorities.

This chapter is structured around the key themes raised by local authorities, related to:

- Ambiguity, uncertainty and oversights in terms of the definition of 'children missing education';

- Identification of children missing education;

- Working with others to identify children missing education;

- Limitations of supporting legislation and guidance; and

- Challenges around resources.

7.2 Defining 'children missing education'

Each local authority maintained a list of children defined as missing education. This register was maintained by the children missing education officer, who was managed in their role by the children missing education lead (most often senior managers with responsibility for attendance).

All authorities said that they use the Education Act definition for children missing education: **"children who are not on a school roll and are not receiving education elsewhere"**. One local authority reported only six open cases of children missing education. Another reported 159 open cases. The third local authority reported 300 open cases of children missing education.

In some cases, children were also on a register for admissions, or on a list of those awaiting a school place. Authorities we spoke to maintained separate lists for children missing out on education, including non-attenders, those who had been excluded, and those on part-time timetables. They indicated this separation was due to different statutory responsibilities. One Local Authority said they wanted to keep separate lists as they were **"trying to keep blurred boundaries separate"**.

Local authorities reported widespread confusion amongst schools about what defined a child missing education. All spoke of delivering training and sharing information to raise awareness of what was meant by 'children missing education'.

One lead felt there was a lack of detail in existing legislation and policy on what defines children missing education. The lead thought guidance should be more prescriptive, such as specifying the number of days a child is off school roll before they are classed as a child missing education. Without this clarity, local authorities were developing their own terms, leading to differing practice. This in turn made it harder to share information. Local authority stakeholders spoke of policy becoming vaguer, which they considered led to more **"manipulation"** of the system:

"Schools and councils can sort of manipulate how they actually will get something to sound acceptable when actually it's not acceptable."

Local authority stakeholder

In addition, some local authority stakeholders, raised the point that there was also a safeguarding risk (and a risk to educational outcomes) for young people when they were missing out on education. As discussed, Ofsted inspect authorities on their arrangements for pupils missing from education, which is wider than the definition used in the Education Act 1996 (as amended). Local authority stakeholders felt these children were a hidden population and needed to be considered too, as will be discussed further in sections 7.2.1 to 7.2.4.

7.2.1 Unofficial exclusions

One local authority explained that their processes and procedures for children missing education are well developed. They faced challenges, however, around monitoring and supporting young people who were on school roll, but informally/unofficially excluded. Illegal exclusions meant pupils were on roll, but not going to school or learning elsewhere. They did not have the same strong legal rights for education provision that came with official exclusions. As such, the local authority felt they had very little legal standpoint to support them.

One stakeholder thought that the education system was **"incentivising"** schools to behave in this way through focusing on reducing exclusions and improving attendance. This issue of the unintended consequences of incentive structures was also raised by the OCC (2013) in their report on illegal exclusions.

Despite repeated guidance that schools should never unofficially exclude a pupil, a small number of schools continue to do so, as evidenced by Matt (aged 15), whose case study is on page 37.

7.2.2 Part-time timetables

A similar issue to unofficial exclusions was raised in relation to unsuitable part-time (or reduced) timetables by two local authorities. In one case, the children missing education lead felt that schools sometimes misused part-time timetables to address challenging behaviour. Monitoring students on part-time timetables was challenging due to the number of changes each week. This presented a concern as **"it's a big factor to children missing education and impacting [educational] outcomes"**. In another local authority, the children missing education lead explained that they thought part-time timetables were an issue because schools were not required to notify the local authority when they were putting a student on one. This created confusion about how local authorities should provide support.

7.2.3 Youth offending

Two local authorities also spoke about links between children missing out on education and youth offending, which was also discussed in section 3.4.4. One stakeholder said:

> "I think [those not attending] is a hidden problem... [my colleague] and I could name half a dozen children between us I'm sure that were on roll at a specialist behaviour school who are young offenders, or have been young offenders, and who are not accessing any realistic education... it's very timely, to raise with [government] these other issues which, although they don't fit that strict definition [of CME], there is probably far more [children] who are actually not on a school roll."
>
> Local authority stakeholder

7.2.4 Inadequate home education

As discussed at section 3.5.3, inadequate home education was an area of concern raised by all local authorities we spoke to. They learn about such children through neighbours phoning or a Health Visitor visit. Children being unknown to the authority raised issues for them and they felt the situation would be improved if carers were required to register: **"that is really a big concern for us and really we would like the government to say everyone has to register"**. Authorities felt this was a 'hidden population' of children missing education. They were anxious about families who did not engage with services. This led to children being hidden and potentially at risk as a result.

7.3 Maintaining a register of children missing education

Children missing education officers were responsible for maintaining the register of children missing education, in accordance with legislation in the Education Act 1996 and supporting legislation and guidance (DfE, 2016b). Keeping a register allowed officers to identify any education or safeguarding concerns. Data included on this register varied between authorities and was evolving as guidance changed or as particular trends were spotted.

The children missing education officer from one local authority explained that their tracking process was **"a work in progress"**. For example, this was the first year their children missing education referral form asked the reason the child was missing education as this gave a better understanding of why they were missing. Similarly, another local authority said they now requested information on ethnicity in their child missing education form. This helped them pinpoint any countries where the child may have moved to. As encouraged by statutory guidance (DfE, 2016b), the third local authority collected information on reasons children missed education as **"what we do depends on the nature of why somebody is off roll"**.

Local authorities said their register allowed them to monitor data on children missing education to analyse patterns or trends, as well as improve services. One trend specifically identified by two local authorities, was higher numbers of primary school children missing education than secondary-aged children. They were unsure why this was the case and were undertaking data audits to explore this in more detail.

Children missing education officers relied on joint working with other services within the local authority, external organisations and members of the public to identify and trace children missing education.

The children missing education officers all said that they would not be able to identify and trace children without the information and support of others. One officer explained that on their own, they **"wouldn't ever be able to do it"**. Missing education was **"everyone's issue"**.

Our research showed that a range of factors help in identifying and tracing children missing education. These include:

• Working in close proximity with other teams in Children's Services, including admissions, drug and alcohol, youth offending (such as the same office floor);

• Integrated services (where all those working with families are in the same Directorate);

• Sharing information about children, through involvement in safeguarding or admissions or Fair Access panels.

Professionals were also keen to work together to act early and prevent children missing education. For instance, one local authority had a newly formed Early Help team who **"offer and provide help to families to prevent safeguarding issues"**. Similarly, a primary school in another local authority reported that they liaised with their nursery provision to unofficially monitor and support attendance with families before children moved up to primary:

> "Our school has got nursery provision as well so although we don't provide any data for children in nursery we do unofficially monitor their attendance and try and address what we foresee might be problems as they go through school. We try and start addressing it then, getting the parents in, speaking to them, just to try and encourage good practice. The area that we work within it's quite a deprived area and a lot of the parents themselves had issues around education, so they don't necessarily prioritise it."
>
> Local authority stakeholder

When children were found to be missing education, local authorities reported working across teams to identify and put in place suitable support to help families overcome any barriers to accessing education.

7.4.1 Schools, professionals and families

As mentioned, local authorities relied on the help of schools and other professionals to report and trace children missing education. They also relied on families to make sure that, once a child was traced, they received an education. Poor attendance was felt to be a warning that a child may become a child missing education, so local authorities also needed schools to investigate and report issues early. Early action and reporting by schools helped prevent any escalation of attendance issues to missing education. One barrier to this mentioned by Local Authority A was the reduction in pastoral support staff in schools who monitored and addressed attendance issues. This limited early action in some schools. Local Authority A said they worked hard to keep schools up to date so they knew **"what they need to do"**. The challenge was getting the information to the right person:

> "Information is constantly sent out to head teachers, but they're not the ones who deal with the day-to-day."
>
> Children missing education officer

Local authorities considered there were differences with academies as their systems and ownership were not the same as local authority maintained schools. One local authority said that their relationship with academies had improved. Whilst they used to hear from them once a month about pupils taken off roll, it was now **"more frequent… and they provide access to their [attendance] systems"**. However, another local authority reported that academies' engagement was low. This indicates differing relationships across local authorities in a more fragmented education system.

Local authorities acknowledged the pressures that schools were under in terms of attendance, reducing exclusions, results and fewer staff monitoring attendance and providing pastoral support due to reduced resources. Attendance in secondary schools was described as a **"very large task"**. When budget cuts meant there were not staff to properly monitor then it could sometimes **"take weeks to realise there's a problem"**. Small primary schools, on the other hand, could be alert to attendance problems very quickly. Local authorities said the speed at which information on children missing education was shared was critical. This was not only for safeguarding reasons, but also because any delay meant the child was out of education for longer.

Despite recognising these challenges, local authorities thought more could be done to ensure schools and councils behaved 'fairly' around placement of children. One stakeholder thought that the Ofsted inspection framework should include how many 'hard to place' children a school had in order to incentivise schools to take them. Stakeholders in another local authority felt an improvement would be measures on outcomes, whether the network was pulling together and professionals understood what they were working towards rather than whether a child was or was not going to school. A stakeholder in this authority did say that involving different professionals could also cause some challenges in supporting children:

"Everyone is working from their different disciplines, such as from social work, they really feel they've got something they need to do, and that's risk manage and protect that young person. That's not necessarily at that stage thinking about what's going on with their education."

Local authority stakeholder

Local authorities felt professionals from services needed to work together, with schools, with carers and with young people, to get a child into education. In one local authority, all services working with families were integrated. They thought this was **"a key factor"** to better support children. Without working with others, children would remain out of education.

7.4.2 Sharing information

The timely sharing of information, and challenges around this, were raised by local authorities during our research, as mentioned in section 7.4.1 above. This related to receiving information from other agencies, other authorities, and, as discussed, from schools.

Nationally, local authorities reported data protection could limit the information that the Department for Work and Pensions was willing to share when attempting to trace children missing education through child benefit records. The lack of assistance or information available nationally from Government departments or others was felt to be a challenge to tracing children missing education. One local authority explained that the brief existence of Contact Point (before it was removed by the Coalition Government in 2010) helped them to find 30 children who had been missing for up to three years in **"no time"** and was **"the best thing ever"**.

Local authorities also discussed delays they often experienced in getting information when trying to trace children through another authority. When they requested information from the other authority, the other authority could take a long time to respond and, when they did, the information that they held (or had access to) would come from different sources, or record different information:

"Communicating with other colleagues in different counties varies hugely with regards to the speed that they all come back to you with the answer... and how thorough they will do their checks and also the way they work. We're office based, a lot of other CME colleagues in other areas go out and do home visits. We're very lucky and fortunate with the information that we have, data-wise we can tap into the admissions module, we've got Care First [social care case management system]... but other colleagues in other areas don't seem to have that, or they have different things with regards to who they can ask for information. We'll do an NHS check, we have council tax that we can ask. Other colleagues don't have that, but they might have benefits checks, which we don't have..."

Local authority stakeholder

Again, the delays wrought by different practices on data collection could mean that a child remained a potential safeguarding risk and missing education.

Many of our interviews and focus groups were conducted before DfE issued new guidance in September 2016 (DfE, 2016b) and amended related regulations strengthening the role of schools in recording and reporting information on children missing education. However, a common theme was authorities' concern over information reporting by schools and academies. They explained that this information varies. Some schools and academies monitored attendance closely and reported when children were removed from roll, but others did not. There was concern that support for schools and others over attendance monitoring was reducing. This included staffing cuts to education welfare officers, which meant they no longer checked registers, challenged register marks, or met school staff regularly to support them. Academies could choose whether or not to buy in these support services from authorities, with some choosing not to.

Local authorities also spoke to each other, even being involved in regional groups, to build relationships, aid information sharing and share best practice. Local authorities explained that they were **"constantly looking at [policy] and trying to make it better and systems better"** and were keen to learn from each other, as it is:

"…always good to listen to what other authorities are doing to see if you there's anything you could do to improve yours."

Children missing education officer

7.5 Legislation and guidance

As stated, many of the interviews and focus groups were conducted before DfE issued new guidance (2016b) and legislative amendments on reporting of children removed from roll. One local authority did consider the preceding consultation to have made:

"...schools sit up and take notice of when they're taking a pupil off roll, which should have always happened."

Local authority stakeholder

The officer for a different local authority who was interviewed after the guidance changed, felt it was too early to tell whether the changes had made any difference. The officer expressed hope that it would change attitudes to make schools feel more responsible for children missing education.

The clarity and detail of policy guidance was raised by all local authorities, as mentioned in section 7.2. They considered that former guidance on children missing education, as well as on admissions and exclusions, was more useful because of clear prescription and level of detail. Having been slimmed down following deregulation, they found it unclear, unhelpful and subject to interpretation. One authority reported that they still referred to old guidance for the level of detail.

Local authority representatives also raised issues associated with School Attendance Orders. These Orders are issued if a local authority cannot satisfy itself that a child is receiving a suitable education (at home or school). However, local authorities considered that this legal process could work against them as courts often ruled in favour of carers. Without an Order, they had limited alternatives to help children into education. Another local authority described the legal process as **"clunky"** due to the length of time that it takes to:

a Issue a warning to carers;

b Hold any formal consultation with schools;

c Respond to any challenges by schools at being named on the School Attendance Order (as the School Attendance Order means they have to admit the child); and

d The steps that need to be taken if a family breach any Order:

"It's the legal processes that's clunky...you have a first warning and you can't issue the order until you've got agreement from the school that they're willing to be the named school. That requires formal consultation with the head and governors and there are often delays in setting them up and if the school appeal against our intention to name them that will delay for months and months and months. In the meantime you have these young people who are out of education. So while it can be very effective as to get it moved on, you've really got to take it to the end result of issuing a School Attendance Order, and then they don't comply with it, and then you've got to breach them on it and take them to Court. You're talking about a very lengthy process."

Local authority stakeholder

Furthermore, one local authority detailed issues with the information provided for admission. There is no legal right of a school to share information on a child until they have a place. The admissions process requires minimal information from carers about their child's needs when applying. Fair Access, however, which sits within Admissions, expects schools to have information on children's needs and make judgements on their suitability. One local authority stakeholder said this creates a **"dilemma"** that DfE were aware of.

7.6 Resources

Local authorities spoke of challenges facing them and others in terms of resources. They said that staff in authorities who monitor attendance and children missing education have shrunk following the recession and the resultant budget cuts. This meant that there was less monitoring of school rolls. The number of children on the missing education register and the checks carried out on these children were also resource intensive, particularly home visits. One children missing education officer, who had only recently started her job described it as **"very full on"** and **"emotionally draining"**.

This was also true for schools, as mentioned in section 7.4.1. Some schools had cut staff monitoring attendance. One local authority also explained that resourcing difficulties led schools to encourage illegal exclusions because they continued to receive money for pupils even when they did not attend. They also thought some schools were unwilling to take hard to place children with SEND as some additional resources required had to be paid from their school budget. This authority thought it was **"almost like the school is penalised for taking that child"**.

7.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the activities and issues for local authorities to prevent, identify and resolve a child missing education. Specifically, it highlighted that:

- Local authorities, schools and professionals reported variations in how the definition of children missing education was interpreted.

- Participants considered the statutory definition (children not on a school roll and not receiving education otherwise) to exclude others who faced similar risks in relation to educational attainment and safeguarding. This related to children on a school roll, but missing out on education due to unofficial exclusions, unsuitable part-time timetables and non-attendance, and also those experiencing inadequate elective home education.

- It was too soon to assess the impact of revised statutory guidance (2016b), but the new provisions within it were broadly welcomed.

- Local authorities aimed to work closely with others, including schools, professionals and carers, to reduce the numbers of children missing education.

- There were challenges around working together, due to different pressures, behaviour and relationships of all parties. This included particular difficulties around the (timely) sharing of information on children missing education.

- There were constraints from resourcing, with fewer staff monitoring attendance in schools and authorities following budget cuts.

8 Conclusion and recommendations

8.1 Introduction to chapter

This report has set out findings from the National Children's Bureau's research on children missing education. The aim of the research was to give voice to children missing out on an education by developing an understanding of the causes, and the role of professionals and agencies in prevention and intervention. This chapter will summarise our findings and set out our recommendations for Parliament, national Government, local authorities and schools[9].

8.2 Background to the research

Children missing education are vulnerable: they may be unknown to local authorities, schools and other professionals. Not only does this put them at risk of underachieving academically, but also of safeguarding concerns, such as abuse, neglect and exploitation.

8.3 Outline of the research aims and methods

This research has sought to shine a spotlight on children missing education by voicing their experiences. It also sought the views of three local authorities who work to trace such children and return them to education.

We explored this through interviews with 17 families from three local authorities where the child had experience of missing education. We also interviewed children missing education officers and leads from across the three local authorities and held focus groups with local authority stakeholders in each of the three areas.

We wanted to understand the pathways that led to children missing education, identify what does and does not work to prevent missing education and the effectiveness of policy and practice. The research sought to highlight common themes and issues experienced by families and local authorities.

---

9 All recommendations for schools apply to maintained schools, free schools, academies and independent schools.

- We found that children missing education often experienced multiple, complex and interrelated factors and situations that led to them missing education. We identified these factors as relating to the individual child, family/home, school or wider society. They included children's desire to go to school, domestic violence or family background, support of schools for children with SEND or mental health difficulties, prevention of bullying by schools and knowledge of the school admission system.

- Experiences of being out of education differed. Some younger children valued the time they got to spend with their carers. Older children, however, fell in with the 'wrong crowd' or were facing mental health issues that meant they did not leave the house. Being out of education had an impact on children's engagement with learning and on carer's ability to work.

- Children re-engaged in learning through going back to school/alternative provision or being home educated. Choice was important for re-engaging in education; both children and carers' preferences shape children's route back into learning. We found any challenging family circumstances needed to be somewhat resolved before children returned to education. Availability of suitable school places, confidence in home education and successful navigation of the admissions system also influenced children's return to education.

- The individual agency of the child to make and be involved in decisions about their education and be supported to make these decisions was an important part of getting a child to engage with education. Support of wider family, schools and support from the local authority and organisations was also vital. Some carers felt unsupported in getting their child an education. Some did report good individual with completing school admission forms, but were unsure who had helped with this.

- Local authorities, schools and other professionals had issues with differing interpretation of the definition of children missing education. They felt there were a number of children who were subject to the same vulnerabilities and risks, but did not meet the definition. This included those on roll at school, but on unsuitable part-time timetables and children experiencing non-existent elective home education. They aimed to work closely with others, including schools, academies, other professionals and carers, to share information on children missing education and provide support required. There were challenges here, however, due to different pressures, relationships, behaviour and resources.

8.5.1 The legal definition of children missing education should be expanded

We found clear evidence that the statutory definition of children missing education is not fit for purpose. Section 436A of the Education Act 1996 (as amended) places duties on local authorities towards children of compulsory school age not registered at a school and who are receiving suitable education otherwise than at school. Crucially, this leaves a gap in respect of children who are registered at a school, but who are not receiving a suitable education, such as Matt (aged 15) or Jordan (aged 20). Their experiences illustrate that in many cases, children do not fall within the existing legal definition, but are nonetheless **"missing from education"** in the real-world sense.

Recommendation for Parliament:

• Parliament should amend Section 436A of the Education Act 1996 (as amended) to extend the definition of children missing education.

Recommendations for the Department for Education:

• The Department should extend the remit of existing statutory guidance to cover the extended definition of children missing education.

• The updated statutory guidance should include a duty on local authorities to maintain a register of children off a school roll and on a part-time timetable or in alternative provision. It should place a duty on schools, academies, free schools and independent schools to report to local authorities all children on a part-time timetable or placed in alternative provision.

• The Department should clarify that Ofsted must inspect schools and local authorities' performance in relation to children missing education (under the extended definition). Ofsted already inspect schools and local authorities on this wider definition. As such, legislation and guidance should be updated so that it is fit for purpose.

8.5.2 Monitoring and awareness should be improved to tackle missing education

Children can miss education for a range of complex and interrelated reasons. The result is that there is no one size fits all approach either to prevention, or supporting children to return to education.

The solutions for a child at risk of missing education when he/she or family do not feel school is suitable (such as Robbie, aged eleven, and Fatima, aged 16) are different from those where a child faces challenges such as neglect or exposure to domestic violence (such as Louis, aged ten). Solutions are different again from cases where children have unsupported special educational needs and disabilities (such as July, aged 14, Tim, aged twelve and John, aged eight).

Monitoring and awareness of any changing behaviour in children by those who work closely with them is an important part of prevention. Alongside tight monitoring of attendance, schools need to be alert to behaviour changes linked to problems in the home or bullying at school. All staff in all schools need to be better trained and supported to identify and support children with SEND and mental ill health.

Recommendation for local authorities:

• Local authorities should strengthen communications around their local offer for children with SEND to schools. They should inform schools of their statutory responsibilities and the need for Education, Health and Care Plans for all children with SEND where the school cannot support their needs. This would avoid high achieving children with SEN, like Tim (aged twelve), being withdrawn from school.

Recommendations for schools:

• Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) and other school staff with pastoral responsibilities should play a pro-active role in identifying children at risk of disengaging from education. They should alert all relevant carers and professionals, including the local authority when a risk is identified. Schools should prioritise allocating resources in their budgets to enable pastoral staff to do this.

• Schools should have clear policy and reporting structures in place to identify children missing education (under a wide definition) and those who may be at risk. A named senior staff member should be responsible for these policies and procedures and all associated action taken.

8.5.3 Data collection and information sharing should be improved

Throughout our research, we were told of the need for more consistent and timely sharing of information. If information was better shared, then children like Ayesha (aged five), Amil (aged nine) or Mrs Roze's daughter would move into a new area and already be known to the authority. The authority would be able to take a more pro-active approach to getting such children a school place or making alternative arrangements for their education.

Local authorities had different ways of recording information on children missing education (under the statutory definition), different allocation of resource, and different approaches to discharging their statutory and non-statutory duties.

They also had inconsistent networks for sharing information on children. Our evidence suggests that the quality of information sharing was often based on relationships between local agencies and professionals, rather than systems and processes. This, combined with confusion over what information about children could legally be shared under the Data Protection Act 1998, inhibited effective sharing of Information.

At the national and local levels there were challenges around the availability of data on children missing education. Revised guidance on children missing education strengthens information sharing between education institutions and local authorities (DfE, 2016b). It does not, however, address inconsistencies across local authorities in their collection and analysis of data on children missing education.

Similarly, there continues to be no comprehensive national picture of children missing education. Data is not routinely collected, collated and published. As a consequence, it is challenging to understand the overall extent of the problem, identify overarching causes or trends, or monitor performance of stakeholders. Similarly, the lack of data on children missing out on education is cause for concern, particularly where it may be masking children with SEND whose needs are unsupported.

There is also a need for more information sharing between schools on the needs of children who miss education prior to placement. This would enable support to be put in place for children before they start a new school place. Currently, the admissions process requires very little information on education history or need, while Fair Access Protocols require a full history and assessment of the pupils' educational needs prior to placement. The Department for Education should review any inconsistencies in these two systems and ensure they are aligned. We also recommend that admissions criteria for schools should prioritise admitting children who have missed education.

Recommendations for the Department for Education:

• To ensure consistent practice and rigorous systems that protect children, the Department for Education should collect and analyse data on children missing education, and publish an annual report.

  • This should include a review of elective home education numbers as our research indicates this is on the rise. We recommend the Department commissions further research to investigate this.

- The statutory guidance should be updated to contain clear, statutory duties for local authorities and other organisations on:
  - How to record data about children missing education (particularly reasons); and
  - How to share data in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and safeguarding law and guidance.
- To enable children to be more easily traced, the statutory guidance should state that a single identifier should be used for each child missing education across all agencies. We recommend this be the child's National Health Service number.
- The Department for Education should review information required by schools for the admissions process and any conflict with information required under Fair Access Protocol.

Recommendation for Government:

- The Government has recently announced the creation of a new National Missing Persons Register (HM Government, 2017), which will allow police to access data about missing people across force boundaries. We recommend that the Register is set up in such a way as to allow appropriate information sharing about children who are missing and missing education, and that it works alongside a national database of children missing education and local authorities' registers of children missing education.

Recommendations for the Border Agency and those supporting migrants:

- The UK Border Agency and other groups supporting migrants should work closely with local authorities to share information on children entering or leaving the country. They should work together to provide information and support on education provision in England and where they can access support with getting their child a school place.

8.5.4 Everyone should have clear responsibilities for prevention

Our research found evidence that schools, local authorities and others need clearer and more detailed guidance on their roles and responsibilities for preventing children missing education. Specifically, this should include the relationship between the role of local authorities and that of academies, reflecting new challenges arising from an increasingly fragmented education system.

There need to be clear responsibilities and means to hold agencies to account as not all schools and agencies are meeting their responsibilities around education. Similarly, sometimes the Ofsted inspections framework appears to have unintended consequences that harm the education of children. A small number of schools are behaving irresponsibly through encouraging unsuitable home education, using unsuitable part-time timetables and using unofficial exclusions.

Clearer and more detailed guidance on prevention would particularly help children like Jordan (aged 20) and July (aged 14) who were stuck in limbo, not receiving any education, after mental health problems and lack of support with (unidentified) special educational needs or disabilities. Similarly, if bullying of children such as Tim (aged twelve), Gillie (aged 13), Susie (aged eleven) and Harry (aged eight) had been prevented then they would have been less likely to disengage from school.

Recommendations to the Department for Educations:

The statutory guidance should be updated to include detailed information and further duties about:

- Local authorities' role in preventing children coming off a school roll and how their education welfare responsibilities apply to preventing children missing education (within the extended definition). This should include how local authorities must work with academies in their area, and vice versa.

- DfE should place a duty on all local authorities to set out a local education welfare 'offer', covering preventative and reactive support that is available and making clear to carers what they are entitled to.

- Local authorities' duties in relation to children missing education should be strengthened, requiring them to have a named senior officer with designated responsibility for children missing education.

- The role of schools, free schools and academies in preventing children missing education (within the extended definition) and how they should work in partnership with local authorities in this area. This should have a particular focus on their duties around education welfare support.

- Schools should be required to record reasons for all authorised and unauthorised absence on their register. Knowing the reason a child is absent will help professionals intervene early where there are issues, more easily find children if they are missing and better plan for support services to return them to education.

- Government is in the process of significantly revising local partnership arrangements for safeguarding children, replacing Local Safeguarding Children Boards with less prescriptive arrangements involving partnership working by local authorities, health commissioners and the police (Children and Social Work Bill, currently going through Parliament). Currently, local authorities are under a duty to ensure that the Local Safeguarding Children Boards include representatives of local maintained schools and special schools. Guidance relating to new safeguarding partnership arrangements must include detailed advice on responsibilities of safeguarding partners to children missing education and the engagement of local schools in safeguarding partnership arrangements. In addition, Government must monitor whether new local arrangements work better in terms of reducing incidents of children missing education and work to intervene early when a child is at risk of disengaging from their learning.

Recommendations for local authorities:

With reference to the recommendations for DfE to clarify and strengthen duties in updated statutory guidance to prevent children missing education, we recommend local authorities:

- Have a named senior officer with designated responsibility for children missing education as recommended in statutory guidance (DfE, 2016b).

- Clearly set out their local education welfare offer to carers and education establishments so they know what support they are entitled to.

Recommendations for schools:

With reference to the recommendations for DfE to clarify and strengthen duties in updated statutory guidance to prevent children missing education, we recommend schools:

- Clearly set out their education welfare offer to carers. They should work with the local authority to ensure carers know their entitlements and what support is available to them to ensure their child receives a suitable education.

- Record reasons for any authorised or unauthorised absence of children to better enable preventative support should any issues emerge.

8.5.5 Lessons should be learnt from existing good practice

Our research indicates that local authorities work hard to identify and trace children missing education. They welcomed revised guidance expanding responsibilities for schools in reporting children removed from roll, and investigating their whereabouts before and after doing so.

Success was uneven, however. As Ofsted (2013a) previously found, the local authorities most effective in working with children missing education had a senior member of staff responsible for those children and the authority's duty towards them. Local authorities we spoke to felt staff were effective in identifying and tracing children missing education because their senior leadership reinforced their responsibilities here.

Similarly, in some instances we found that children and their carers were not always made aware of their rights around education, such as unofficial exclusions, EHC plans or home education. John (aged eight), who felt school **"wasn't my place"**, ended up being home educated because his mum found out about local groups by word of mouth and through social media. Matt (aged 15) was receiving help from the youth offending and social care team at the local authority following his unofficial exclusion. If he had not already been involved with the authority' services, then he might not have received this help or have known he was entitled to it.

Recommendations to the Department for Education:

Reflecting best practice from around England, statutory guidance on children missing education should be revised to include:

- Advice for schools on setting out a local education welfare 'offer', covering preventative and reactive support that is available and making clear to carers what they are entitled to.

- Advice for schools and local authorities on appointing a named senior officer with designated responsibility for children missing education. This role could link with or report to the designated safeguarding lead.

- The Department for Education should bring together a group of local authorities delivering effective education welfare support to work with local authorities struggling in this area, sharing and building on good practice. We propose the group should be similar to DfE's Partners in Practice approach for social care services.

8.5.6 More must be done to (re)integrate children into education

Families and local authorities spoke of the need to reintegrate children into education sensitively after a period out. However, schools do not appear to be following guidance on making suitable allowances for children who have been out of school, such as using reduced timetables initially. Children such as Fatima (aged 16) and Amelia (aged 15) would have benefitted from a more careful reintegration so that they did not disengage from education for a second time.

Carers also need to be involved in the education of their child. This requires sensitive relationships and tailored support, taking account of literacy, culture, and any issues at home that may be preventing a child accessing education. For example, Sophie (aged seven) was educated at an all girls' school at the local Mosque because her mum felt she needed protecting. There was no indication that the school was registered or that, when she was removed from this school for home education, she was receiving a suitable education.

When children do disengage from education, responsibilities around providing interim educational provision need to be met. We found in our research that local authorities and schools often did not meet their duties to provide interim education.

Recommendations for the Department for Education:

The updated guidance should include duties on schools that improve reintegration into education:

• Schools should provide work for students leaving, as well as ensuring suitably tailored provision for children returning to education. The named senior staff member in the school responsible for children missing education should have responsibility for coordinating this.

• Schools should be under a duty to put in place a plan to promote and monitor a child's progress and wellbeing when he or she returns to education.

• Under the White Paper, Educational Excellence Everywhere (DfE, 2016a), it is proposed that schools maintain responsibility for pupils placed in alternative provision. A duty should be placed on schools to ensure they are responsible for the education of any child leaving their school until they are notified that the child is registered at another school. This should include providing any desired support to those choosing to home educate.

Recommendations for schools:

• A named senior staff should take responsibility for coordinating provision of interim schoolwork and support for the education of any child leaving their school where they have not yet been notified of the child taking up a new school place.

• Schools should commit to a reintegration plan for any child who has been out of education, no matter the length of time or reason for their being out. This plan should be developed with the child and their carer. Schools' commitment to creating a plan for reintegration should be published as part of their safeguarding and education welfare offer.

8.5.7 Financial constraints must be considered and addressed

Our research found that families with a child missing education were under increased financial strain as a result. This might be due to the carer having to give up work or because they had to pay for additional support with their child's education. This included Robbie (aged 11), Sam (aged 7), Ayesha (aged 5), Sophie (aged 7) and Amil (aged 9).

Local authorities reported that they were working with scarce resources to monitor what could be a very large population of children missing education, all facing numerous barriers to accessing full-time provision.

Recommendations for the Department for Education:

• The Department for Education should make dedicated resources available for the education of children who have been withdrawn from school. These could take the form of personal education budgets, which could be administered and monitored by the local authority.

• The Department for Education should assess the impact of reduced resources on the ability of schools and local authorities to identify and re-engage children missing education and prevent children from falling out of the school system. This should include a review of the impact of available funding on the effectiveness of local education welfare provision to prevent children missing education.

8.5.8 Advice for families

We found that families were often confused about the local education offer, how to access it and their rights around education. As such, we would like to offer the following advice to families:

- Children have the legal right to an education. It is carers who are responsible for ensuring children receive this (under the Education Act 1996). This is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28). To enable carers to fulfil this duty, local authorities must ensure there is enough education provision in their area for each child (this duty is set out in the Education Act 1996).

- Our research shows that children and carers need to be involved in decisions around education to increase engagement. It is important for children and carers to agree about what a suitable education is.

- If a child does not have a school place or is not receiving education in another way, carers should contact their local council with responsibility for education and ask to speak to the school admissions team. The council with education responsibility will be either the county council, unitary council or London borough. Carers can contact their local council through the local library, at any council office or through their website.

- If a child has special educational needs or disabilities, carers can contact their local council for information on the local offer for children with SEND. Carers can also speak to their local Information, Advice and Support Service for information on the offer.

- Families can also find more information in the Useful Resources section of our report.

Families we spoke to

This is a summary of the families we spoke to and their reasons for missing education.

Amelia

Amelia is 15 years old. She lives with her mum, older brother and younger sister. Amelia missed school on several occasions over a three-year period following the development of mental health difficulties after her parents' divorce. When she was out of school, Amelia starting to spend time with older people and became at risk of sexual exploitation. When we interviewed Amelia and her mum, Amelia was being educated in a Pupil Referral Unit and they are helping her to catch up with school work she missed.

Amil

Amil is nine years old. He lives with his mum and five siblings. He has been moved seven times in six years, due to domestic violence and temporary housing placements. As a result, Amil, along with his seven-year-old brother, missed school on five separate occasions for weeks at a time. The longest period lasted twelve weeks. Amil has been to seven different schools. He finds it hard moving schools as he has to make new friends. When we interviewed him and his mum, he was in school, but housing officers wanted to move the family to cheaper housing out of the area.

Ayesha

Ayesha is five years old. She lives with her mum and younger sister. Her parents separated and her mum had to move out of the family home and to a new area. The commute to Ayesha's old school was too much for her mum, so she withdrew her from the school. Ayesha's mum had to find a more permanent home before she applied for a school place, which meant Ayesha missed education. At the time we interviewed Ayesha and her mum, Ayesha had a place at a local primary school and was excited about starting.

Fatima

Fatima is 16 years old. She lives with her mum, step-dad and step-brother. She missed school when she refused to go to secondary school. Her mum withdrew her to home educate and build her confidence. When Fatima did go to a secondary school at a later date, she found integration hard and her mum withdrew her again. When we interviewed Fatima and her mum, Fatima was enthusiastic about her current course at college.

Gillie

Gillie is 13 years old. She lives with her mum, younger sister and brother. We interviewed Gillie and her mum. Gillie was bullied in primary school and did not want to go to the same secondary school as her bully. Her family is Roma. Gillie's mum was afraid that Gillie would elope with or be kidnapped by a 'Gypsy boy' at the secondary school. As a result of both their fears, Gillie was home educated for over a year instead. After this, she wanted to go back to school to study for her GCSEs. She is now happy at an all girls' secondary school, chosen by her and her mum.

Harry and Susie

Harry is eight years old and his sister Susie is eleven years old. They live with their mum, close to their older sister. Their mum moved them to a new area following repeated instances of racist bullying at school. They were out of education in their new area while waiting for a school place to become available. When we interviewed them and their mum, Susie was happy at a new school and Harry was waiting to start.

John

John is eight years old. He lives with his mum and his two younger siblings. John has been diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and social and emotional communication difficulties. He found it difficult in school. He thought his school did not appreciate his behaviour or understand him. His mum found pictures John had drawn showing him hurting himself and others in his school. She withdrew him from school and decided to home educate. We interviewed John and his mum. John would go to school again if they understood his behaviour.

Jordan

Jordan is 20 years old. She lives with her mum, dad and younger sister. She had a late diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Jordan did have good attendance at school, but her mental health deteriorated as she went through secondary school. She stopped going to school and attempted suicide twice. She still wanted to learn though and taught herself at home and took her GCSEs at her old school. She tried college, but her mental ill health prevented her from continuing. At the time we interviewed Jordan and her mum, Jordan was looking forward to starting her first job.

July

July is 14 years old. She lives with her mum. July has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. She also suffers from depression and self-harms. July started missing lessons in Year Seven and stopped going to school altogether in Year 9. After she received a diagnosis for Autism Spectrum Disorder, she went to a specialist school, but they did not help. Her behaviour got worse and she repeatedly ran away from school, which led to exclusions. When we spoke to July and her mum, July was spending all her time at home alone and was not receiving an education.

Louis

Louis is ten years old. Louis lives with his mum and two younger siblings. Louis and his family fled to a new area following experience of domestic violence. They lived in a refuge before being moved to temporary accommodation. Louis missed his old friends and did not want to go to any schools in his new area. At the time we interviewed Louis and his mum, they were still looking for a suitable house to permanently move to. Louis and his mum were both very unhappy. Louis had started school, but had yet to settle.

Matt

Matt is 15 years old. Matt lives with his foster carers, Mr and Mrs Lee, and their daughters. He used to live with his nan and younger siblings. His best years in school were Year Seven through to Nine, but then he started being bullied and fell in with the 'wrong crowd'. He began taking drugs, stealing and shoplifting. He was permanently excluded from school and missed education for over a year. During this time, he also went missing from home for substantial periods. He put himself into care as his relationship with his nan deteriorated and he saw she could not cope. He stayed in the same school when he went into care, but was unofficially excluded before the summer holidays. When we spoke to Matt and his foster carer, he was waiting for an independent panel meeting to decide whether he could go back to school. Meanwhile, he was being tutored in the local library.

Megan

Megan is six years old. She lives with her mum. We interviewed them both for our research. Megan found the start of school very tiring. She thought it was too much to go to school for five days a week and have two days off. Her mum found it hard to get Megan to school every day as Megan was so tired. She withdrew her from school and instead educated her at learning groups, taught Megan herself or asked her mum to teach Megan. Megan is now back in school and they have arranged extra help for her reading and writing.

Robbie

Robbie is eleven years old. Robbie lives with his dad, step-mum and step-sister. Robbie was living with his mum, but moved in with his dad when he was about six years old. Robbie's dad thinks that once you learn to read and write then you can teach yourself anything. He has home educated Robbie more than once. Robbie has moved house several times and that, combined with the changing finances of the family and other difficulties, has meant he's been to a number of different schools, as well as being home educated. Robbie and his dad spoke to us when Robbie was in his last year at primary school. He was excited about starting secondary school, but his dad thought he would get bored. Nevertheless, his dad would do whatever Robbie wanted in terms of his education.

Sam

Sam is seven years old. Sam lives with his dad and two siblings. Sam's parents' broke up and he went to live with his mum. When he visited his dad, Sam's dad found bruises on Sam's arm from his mum's new partner. They went to the police. Sam's mum also accused Sam's dad of sexually abusing her, which meant Sam's dad had a lot of court hearings and had to give up work. Sam's mum still claimed child benefit for Sam, so his dad could not apply for a school place as he could not prove Sam was living with him. It was only when Sam's mum was threatened with a School Attendance Order that she stopped claiming child benefit. Sam has now started primary school, but he misses his dad when there.

Sophie

Sophie is seven years old. She lives with her mum and five siblings. Her mum thought Sophie lacked confidence and was scared of men. She sent her to the girls' school at the local mosque as she needed protecting. She combined this with home educating Sophie and her siblings. She felt Sophie had grown in confidence and, at the time of interview, was applying for a school place at the mainstream primary where her brother goes. Sophie wants to be a family support worker when she grows up and says she needs to go to school for this. She's happy, but nervous, about going.

Tim

Tim is twelve years old. He lives with his mum and dad and two siblings. Tim has been diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and Oppositional Defiance Disorder. Tim was bullied at school by other pupils and his teacher shouted at him. He frequently ran away from home and from school due to the stress. His mum reported that the school did not give him extra support and did have a file relating to his special needs (despite him having been there for two years). This, on top of the pressure from standardised assessments, led to Tim's mum pulling him out of school and starting home education. Tim was involved in this decision; he was upset by bullying, his teacher "yelling" at him and did not like it when lessons changed from the topic he was expecting. When his mum asked him if we wanted to leave school, he said yes. When we interviewed Tim and his mum, he was learning at home and with learning groups. Tim does not want to go back to school because of the bullies. He also thinks he might get upset as he does not think school understand his needs.

Useful resources

For children and young people

If you're worried about anything, no matter how big or small, you can contact Childline on **0800 1111** or online at **www.childline.org.uk/talk/Pages/Talk.aspx**

Bullying

The Anti-Bullying Alliance has a page of advice on their website to help you with any experience of bullying. You can find this here: **www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/advice/children-young-people**

If you would like to speak to someone, you can call Childline on **0800 1111** or Bullybusters **0800 169 6928** for free support. Bullying UK (**0808 800 2222**) also offers practical advice and information about bullying and has a specific section on their website about bullying at school.

Mental Health

If you feel anxious about anything, talk to your parent or another trusted adult, such as a teacher. You can find information and advice about how to look after your mental health on Young Minds' website at: **www.youngminds.org.uk/for_children_young_people/better_mental_health**

For parents/carers

Education

As a parent or carer, you should make sure your child receives an education, though you can decide whether they would be better educated at school or at home.

Your local authority have a team who work to make sure every child in your area has a place at school. Contact your local council to talk about getting your child a school place or for more information about how you can home educate your child. You can contact your local authority through the local library, at any council office or through their website.

If you think a child you know is missing education, contact your local authority for advice. Each local authority will have a Children Missing Education lead officer, who is responsible for maintaining a register of children who are not receiving an education. You should ask to speak to them if you have any concerns.

ACE Education Advice provides a range of advice to carers on admissions, exclusions, SEND and bullying. You can find more information on their website: **www.ace-ed.org.uk/advice-about-education-for-parents/carers**

Red Balloon is a UK charity which specifically recovers severely bullied or otherwise traumatised children through the provision of short-term educational and therapeutic programmes. For more information, please call Yvonne Reddington on **01223 366052**, e-mail their Administrator on admin@group.rblc.org.uk or visit their website at **www.redballoonlearner.org**

Cost of attending school

Some local authorities provide help with the cost of school clothing, such as uniforms and PE kits. You can find more information online, or by contacting your local council: **www.gov.uk/help-school-clothing-costs**

Child protection

If you are worried about a child, contact the NSPCC helpline on **0808 800 5000**.

Bullying

The Anti-Bullying Alliance delivers programme work at a national and local level to help stop bullying and bring lasting change to children's lives, as well as offering training and consultancy to help stop bullying wherever it happens. You can find out more information about different types of bullying and how to tackle it on their website: **www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk**

Support for children with SEND

The Council for Disabled Children (CDC) is the umbrella body for the disabled children's sector with a membership of over 200 voluntary and community organisations and an active network of practitioners that spans education, health and social care. CDC works collaboratively, from policy into practice, to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people, with a specialist focus on education and learning.

As a parent or carer of a child with a disability or special educational need, you can find more help and resources on their website: **www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/resources-and-help/im-parent**

Each local area should also have independent Information, Advice and Support (IAS) and information about available provision and how to access it (called 'The Local Offer'). You can find out more information on CDC's website: **www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/independent-support/where-find-my-independent-support-provider**

If your child is autistic, you can get information and advice from Ambitious about Autism, a national charity for children and young people with autism. Through TreeHouse School and Ambitious College, they also offer specialist education and support.

Mental health

If you are worried about the mental health of your child, you can ring Young Minds' free and confidential carers helpline on **0808 802 5544**.

Domestic violence

For support, help and information on domestic violence, ring the 24-hour National Domestic Violence Freephone Helpline on **0808 2000 247**.

Financial or housing concerns

If you have any concerns relating to money, debt or your housing, you can contact any of the following:

• Turn2us – **www.turn2us.org.uk** – for help with accessing benefits, calculating what welfare benefits, tax credits and other support you may be entitled to, and information about grants you may be eligible for

• Debt Support Trust – **0800 085 0226**; **www.debtsupporttrust.org.uk** – for free, confidential debt advice

• Citizens Advice Bureau – **www.citizensadvice.org.uk** – for advice on debt, money or housing issues

For local authorities

Statutory guidance

Statutory guidance in children missing education issued by DfE is available here: **www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/550416/Children_Missing_Education_-_statutory_guidance.pdf**

For schools

Statutory guidance

Statutory guidance in children missing education issued by DfE is available here: **www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/550416/Children_Missing_Education_-_statutory_guidance.pdf**

Bullying

The Anti-Bullying Alliance has a self-assessment tool for schools to help prioritise areas for development in anti-bullying practice: **www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/resources/school-assessment-tools**

They also have free online CPD training for school staff on developing effective anti-bullying practice. This is focused on preventing bullying of children with SEN or disabilities, but includes more widely applicable modules on bullying and the law, cyberbullying, preventing bullying and responding to bullying: **www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/onlinetraining**

Bereavement/serious illness in the family

The Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN) is the hub for those working with bereaved children, young people and their families across the UK.

They have a number of resources and a search tool for sources of local support available online: **www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/what-you-can-do/schools-professionals.aspx**

Mental health

The Partnership for Wellbeing and Mental Health, which is coordinated by NCB, has developed a tool designed to help you assess and develop a whole school approach to wellbeing. You can find more information and a link to the tool here: **www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/Policy_docs/Briefings/NCB%20School%20Well%20Being%20Framework%20Leaders%20Tool%20FINAL.pdf**

NCB is currently undertaking research in partnership with NatCen and on behalf of the Department for Education looking at good practice in schools and colleges supporting students' mental health and providing character education. This is due to be published in 2017 and will provide case study examples of how to ensure students get the most from their education through supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing.

SEND

Focus on SEND (Nasen) is free online training for staff: **www.oln.nasen.org.uk**

Autism Education Trust provide a progression framework for pupils with autism. This is a free tool that allows progress outside of the national curriculum to be tracked: **www.aettraininghubs.org.uk/schools/pf/**

More information and resources are available from the Council for Disabled Children: **www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/resources-and-help/i-work-education**

References

Badman, G. (2009) Report to the Secretary of State on the review of elective home education in England. London: Stationery Office.

Berridge, D., Brodie, I., Pitts, J., Porteous, D. and Tarling, R. (2001) *The independent effects of permanent exclusion from school on the offending careers of young people.* London: Home Office.

Botham, J. (2011) The complexities of children missing from education: a local project to address the health needs of school-aged children. *Community Practitioner.* 84(5) pp.31-34.

Broadhurst, K., Paton, H. and May-Chahal, C. (2005) Children missing from school systems: exploring divergent patterns of disengagement in the narrative accounts of parents, carers, children and young people. *British Journal of Sociology of Education.* 26, pp.105–119.

Cleaver, H. Unell, I. and Aldgate, J. (1999) Children's Needs – *Parenting Capacity: The Impact of Parental Mental Illness, Problem Alcohol and Drug Use, and Domestic Violence on Children's Development.* London: The Stationery Office.

Contact a Family (2013) *Falling through the net Illegal exclusions, the experiences of families with disabled children in England and Wales.* London: Contact a Family.

D'Arcy, K. (2014) Home education, school, Travellers and educational inclusion, *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 35, 818-835.

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010). *Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.* DfCSF: London.

Department for Education (2010) *How schools secure the progress of children from the Armed Forces families: Good practice guidance.* DfE: London.

Department for Education (2014) *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care.* DfE: London.

Department for Education (2015) *Children missing education: Statutory guidance for local authorities.* London: DfE.

Department for Education (2016a) *Educational Excellence Everywhere.* London: DfE.

Department for Education (2016b) *Children missing education: Statutory guidance for local authorities.* London: DfE.

Department for Education (2016c) *The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4 2013/14 academic year.* London: DfE.

Department for Education (2016d) *SEN absences and exclusions: additional analysis.* London: DfE.

Derrington, C. and Kendall, S. (2004) *Gypsy Traveller students in secondary school: culture, identity and achievement.* Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books Limited.

Evans, J. and Slowley, M. (2010) *Not the end of the story: Supporting teenage mums back into education.* London: Barnardos.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office (2014) *The Right to Choose: Multi-agency statutory guidance for dealing with forced marriage.* London: HM Government.

Foster, B. and Norton, P. (2012) Educational equality for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children and young people in the UK. *The Equal Rights Review.* 28, pp.85-112.

GHK Consulting, Holden McAllister Partnership and IPSOS Public Affairs (2004) *Research Report 598: The Reintegration of Children Absent, Excluded or Missing from School.* London: DfES.

Harper, Z. and Scott, S. (2005) *Meeting the needs of sexually exploited young people in London.* London: Barnardos.

HC Debate (2014) 579 no. 155, cols. 706-707W.

HM Government (2017) Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: Progress Report. Published online: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/592588/Tackling_Child_Sexual_Exploitation_-_Progress_Report__web_.pdf. [Accessed 3 March 2017]

Home Office and Department for Education (2014) *Female genital mutilation: guidelines to protect children and women.* London: HM Government.

Hunt, R. (2000) *The Educational Performance of Children in Need and Children Looked After. Quality Protects research briefing No 1. Research in Practice.* London: Department of Health.

Institute for Public Policy Research (2014) *Whole system reform: England's schools and the middle tier.* London: IPPR.

Jackson, S., Ajayi, S. and Quigley, M. (2005) *Going to University from Care.* London: Institute of Education.

Kennan, D., Fives, A. and Canavan, J. (2012) Accessing a hard to reach population: reflections on research with young carers in Ireland. *Child and Family Social Work.* 17, pp.75–283

Khan, J. (2003) *Missing out on education: children and young people speak out.* London: Save the Children.

Local Government Ombudsman (2011) *Out of school... out of mind? How councils can do more to give children out of school a good education. Focus Report: learning lessons from complaints.* London: Local Government Ombudsman.

Malcolm, H., Wilson, V., Davidson, J. and Kirk, S. (2003) *Absence from school: A study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs.* London: Department for Education and Skills.

McAra, L. and McVie, S. (2013) Delivering Justice for Children and Young People: Key Messages from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime. In A Dockley (ed.), *Justice for Young People: Papers by Winners of the Research Medal 2013.* Howard League for Penal Reform, pp. 3-14.

Morton, R. (2010). Home education: Constructions of choice. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education.* 3, pp. 45-56.

Myers, J & Harvey, R. for Plan UK (2011) *Breaking Vows: Early and forced marriage and girls' education. London:* Plan UK.

National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (2003) *Missing Out.* London: NACRO.

National Autistic Society (2016) *School Report 2016.* London: NAS.

National Children's Bureau (2014) *Not present, what future? Children missing education in England.* London: NCB.

Office of the Children's Commissioner (2013) *"Always Someone Else's Problem"* Office of the Children's Commissioner's Report on illegal exclusions. London: OCC.

Ofsted (2010) *Children missing from education.* Manchester: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2013a) *Pupils missing out on education: low aspirations, little access, limited achievement.* Manchester: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2013b) *Missing Children.* Manchester: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2015) Advice letter to Rt Hon. Nicky Morgan MP, Secretary of State for Education from Sir Michael Wilshaw, *Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, on the latest position with schools in Birmingham and Tower Hamlets,* 14 July.

Ofsted (2016a) *Framework and evaluation schedule for the inspections of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. Reviews of Local Safeguarding Children Boards.* Manchester: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2016b) *Inspecting safeguarding in early years, education and skills settings Guidance for inspectors undertaking inspection under the common inspection framework.* Manchester: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2016c) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2015/16.* Manchester: Ofsted.

Office for National Statistics (2014) *Qualifications and Labour Market Participation in England and Wales. London: ONS.* Available online: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_367378.pdf [Accessed 3 March 2017]

Russell, L. (2013) Researching marginalised young people. *Ethnography and Education.* 8(1), pp.46-60.

Pellegrini, D. W. (2007). School non-attendance: Definitions, meanings, responses, interventions. *Educational Psychology in Practice.* 23, pp.63–77.

Smeaton, E. (2009) Off the radar and at risk: children on the streets in the UK. *Housing, Care and Support.* 12, pp.22-27

Talwar, D. (2016) *Thousands of Children Missing from Education,* BBC News. Available online: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-38145058 [Accessed 3 March 2017]

Visser, J., Daniels, H. and Macnab, N. (2005) Missing: children and young people with SEBD. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties.* 10(1), pp.43-54.

Vulliamy, G. and Webb, W. (2001) The social construction of school exclusion rates: implications for evaluation methodology. *Educational Studies.* 27(3) p.358.

Wilkin. A., Derrington, C., White, R., Martin, K., Foster, B., Kinder, K. and Rutt, S. (2010) *Research Report DFE-RR043 - Improving the outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils: final report.* London: DfE.

Williams, N. (2012) *Lessons to learn: exploring the links between running away and absence from school. London: The Children's Society.*

Youth Justice Board MORI (2002) Youth Survey. London: Youth Justice Board.