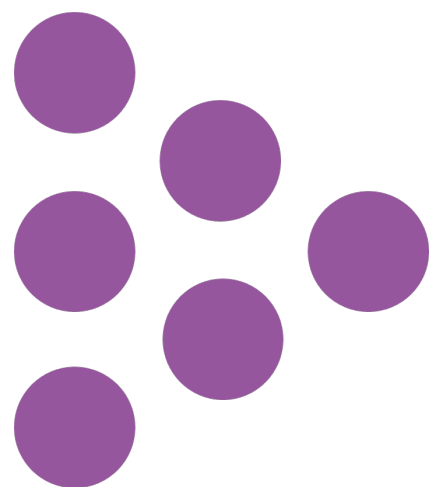


Report

Pupil wellbeing and persistent absence

Understanding the views of pupils, parents and carers,
and school staff

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)



Pupil wellbeing and persistent absence: Understanding the views of pupils, parents and carers, and school staff

Emma Moore, Kerry Martin, Rachel Classick and Stephen Welbourne

Published in July 2026

By the National Foundation for Educational Research,

The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ

<https://www.nfer.ac.uk/>

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Registered Charity No. 313392

ISBN: **978-1-916567-65-8**

How to cite this publication: Moore, E., Martin, K., Classick R., and Welbourne S. (2026). Pupil wellbeing and persistent absence: understanding the views of pupils, parents and carers and school staff. Slough: NFER.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the school staff, pupils and parents and carers who took the time to share their views and experiences with us. Without their contributions this research would not have been possible. We would also like to thank NFER colleagues Kathryn Hurd, Sobia Bonder, Shazia Ishaq, and Chirag Chitroda for their operational expertise in implementing the parent and carer survey, Chris Morton for undertaking the statistical analysis, and Julie Thompson for her administrative support.

We would also like to extend our thanks to members of the Strategic Advisory Board: Ruth Maisey, Dr Lesley French, Dr Markus Klein, Alan Passingham, Dave Thomson, Owen Carter, Daniela Grasso, Emma Lowe, Maggie Mitchell, Charlotte Edney and Amartya Menon for their guidance throughout the study.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of these individuals or their organisations.

This work is funded by a Research and Development Grant from the Nuffield Foundation. We wish to thank Ruth Maisey at the Nuffield Foundation for her support in managing the project and facilitating its delivery. Her guidance and coordination support are greatly appreciated.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds and undertakes rigorous research, encourages innovation and supports the use of sound evidence to inform social and economic policy, and improve people's lives. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. This project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Find out more at: nuffieldfoundation.org.

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Executive Summary

Aims

- To explore views about the nature of any relationship between pupil wellbeing and school attendance.
- To understand other factors that may have affected school attendance since the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To investigate views about the range of support approaches offered by schools, and their perceived effectiveness in enabling persistently absent pupils to attend school.

What did we do?

Undertook 10 case study visits with mainstream secondary schools, which comprised a combination of the following activities:

- Interview with a school senior leader.
- Interviews with pupils who had previously been persistently absent but had returned or were in the process of returning to school.
- Interviews with parents and carers of persistently absent pupils who had returned or were in the process to school.
- Pupil focus group with pupils in Years 8-10 who had not been persistently absent.
- A parent and carer survey which was sent to all parents and carers at the school.

Key findings



Pupil wellbeing was felt to be a major factor in declining school attendance rates, with online bullying linked to increased social media use suggested as a key reason for this decline.



Attendance is typically shaped by interconnected factors at the pupil, school, family and local context levels, with parents and carers indicating that the increasing cost of holidays outside of school term-time, and declining pupil mental health and wellbeing are key drivers of increased absence.



Pupils perceived poor wellbeing and mental health as legitimate reasons for absence, as they felt the pressures of school could negatively affect their well-being.



The relationship between pupil wellbeing and attendance was seen as bi-directional. School absence could support wellbeing in the short term but could also contribute to a reinforcing cycle of poor wellbeing and non-attendance, and lead to longer-term barriers to attendance and re-engagement.



Schools employed a wide range of strategies to support attendance including curriculum and timetable adjustments, pastoral support, specialist provision and whole-school approaches and processes.



Parents, carers and pupils identified relational aspects of support, rather than specific interventions or strategies, as having the greatest impact.



There were mixed views about government strategies for improving attendance, with fines for non-attendance generally considered to be unhelpful.



Schools are investing significant time and resources into improving attendance including efforts to overcome barriers that are often beyond their direct control.

Recommendations for government

- 1) Many barriers to attendance lie outside of schools' influence. Alongside school-led efforts to improve attendance, ensure that wider public services—such as family support and mental health provision—are adequately resourced and staffed to work in partnership with schools.
- 2) Ensure schools have sufficient funding for attendance staff and interventions.
- 3) Ensure that there is sufficient investment in mainstream school infrastructure and resources to ensure schools can meet the needs of an increasingly diverse pupil population with a growing range of needs.
- 4) Monitor the impact of the proposed social media restrictions for under 16s on attendance.
- 5) Carefully consider the use of fines and the extent to which their use may undermine attempts to improve school belonging and build positive relationships with the wider school community.
- 6) Consider the potential interaction effects of different policy reforms such as Schools' White Paper, curriculum review and social media restrictions and how they may collectively impact school attendance.

Recommendations for schools

- 1) Adopt a curious and supportive mindset when dealing with cases of persistent absence focusing on identifying and understanding needs and building positive relationships with pupils and their families.
- 2) Alongside delivering curriculum content, continue efforts to support pupils to build resilience through whole class and individual interventions.
- 3) Consider the impact of bullying (both in school and online) on pupils' wellbeing and attendance. Ensure that creating a safe, supportive school environment remains a priority.
- 4) Focus on positive transitions between primary and secondary school, including supporting pupils to build friendships, trust staff and become familiar with the school environment.

1. Introduction

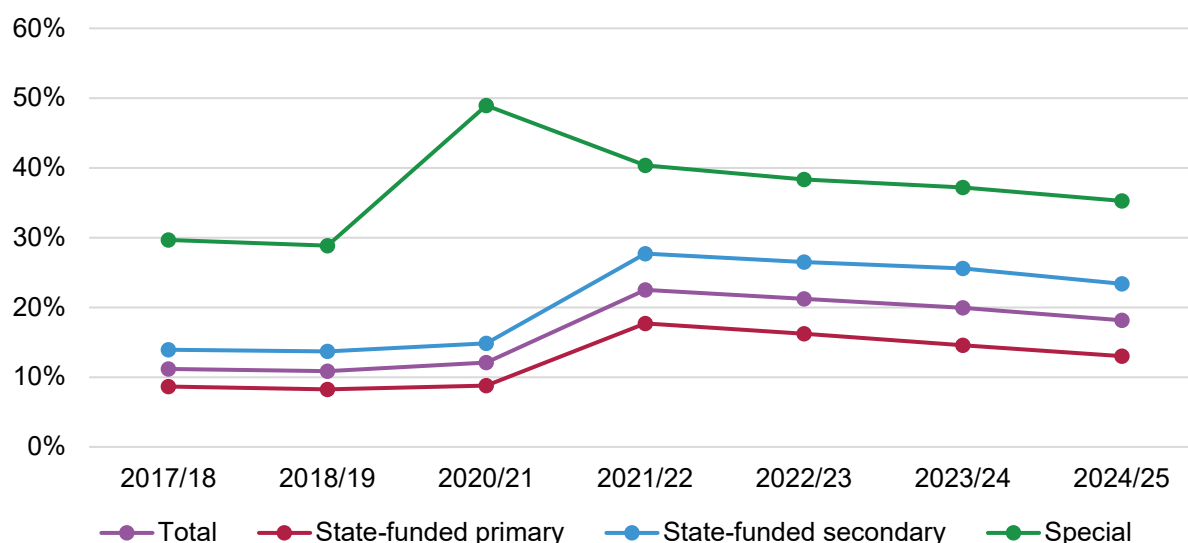
1.1. Persistent absence rates have dramatically increased since the Covid-19 pandemic

Persistent absence rates in English secondary schools more than doubled following the Covid-19 pandemic, rising from 13.7 per cent in the 2018/19 academic year to 27.7 per cent in 2021/22 (see Figure 1) (DfE, 2026c). This increase is a significant cause for concern, since previous research has demonstrated the negative effects of school absence on pupils' attainment and later life outcomes, including future earnings (e.g., Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2023; Long and Roberts, 2025). Consequently, improving attendance has become a key priority for both schools and the Government.

Recent policy responses, informed by evidence presented to the Parliamentary Education Select Committee inquiry on persistent absence (Education Committee, 2023) have included the introduction of daily attendance monitoring in schools; updated guidance for schools and parents (DfE, 2024b); the establishment of the Attendance Alliance; the appointment of a national attendance ambassador; and investment in targeted initiatives such as Attendance Mentors and Attendance Hubs. Early findings from the Department for Education's (DfE) Year 1 evaluation of the Attendance Mentors pilot provided some evidence promise, with around half of participating pupils improving their attendance during the intervention (York Consulting LLP, 2024). Similarly, the evaluation of Years 2 and 3 of the programme suggested that pupils were more motivated to attend school, and that some also felt their attendance had improved after receiving mentoring. However, there was considerable variation in outcomes across the different geographic areas involved in the programme, and concerns were raised about the sustainability of improvements after the end of the programme (DfE, 2024a).

However, despite substantial efforts to support pupils' return to school, persistent absence rates remain elevated. In 2024/25, nearly a quarter of pupils in secondary schools were still persistently absent (23.4 per cent) (see Figure 1) (DfE, 2026c).

Figure 1 Persistent absence rates by school type



Source: DfE attendance statistics from 2017/18 to 2024/25 (DfE, 2026c).

Research into persistent absence since the Covid-19 pandemic has primarily focused on documenting the scale of the problem, with significant increases in school absence observed across all pupil groups (such as male/female, pupils in different year groups, pupils with and without SEND) (e.g., Günter and Makinson, 2023; ImpactEd, 2024). Emerging evidence has also identified potential drivers of increased absence, including shifts in parent and carer attitudes towards schooling and a decline in pupils' sense of school belonging (Burtsonshaw and Dorrell, 2023; ImpactEd, 2024). However, the relative importance of these factors remains unclear, and the evidence base regarding effective strategies to improve attendance is limited (EEF, 2022). Moreover, much of the existing literature adopts a single-perspective approach—for example, focusing solely on parents' or carers' views—and insights into pupils' own experiences and perspectives are currently limited (Carr, Whitehead and Burtsonshaw, 2025). Consequently, there is a pressing need to develop a better understanding of the complex causes of persistent absence and how it can be overcome.

1.2. Increases in persistent absence have coincided with declines in pupil wellbeing

Alongside rising levels of persistent absence, pupil wellbeing in England is reported to have declined (Meiksane and Jackson, 2023; Montero-Marin *et al.*, 2023). Evidence from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 also indicates comparatively low levels of wellbeing among pupils in England (Ingram *et al.*, 2023). For instance, on a scale of 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), 15-year-olds in England reported an average life satisfaction score of 6.01/10, significantly below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 6.75/10 and the lowest among participating European countries. Consequently, there has been increasing debate about whether declining pupil wellbeing may be contributing to rising levels of persistent absence. However, the causes of

persistent absence are varied and complex, and the nature of its relationship with pupil wellbeing—particularly in the post-pandemic context—remains insufficiently understood.

The current study forms part of a wider research programme that seeks to address this critical evidence gap by drawing on data from multiple sources, including data from Education and Child Health Insights from Linked Data (ECHILD), case studies, and existing international literature and policy approaches. The results of this work will be published in a later report. By adopting this multi-method approach, this comprehensive research aims to deepen understanding of the complex drivers of persistent absence and to inform the development of more effective strategies to support pupils' return to school.

1.3. Research aims

In this initial study, we conducted a series of school case studies to gather the views of school staff, pupils, and parents and carers. The study aimed to explore:

- Views about the nature of the relationship between pupil wellbeing and school attendance.
- Other factors that may have affected school attendance since the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Views about the range of support approaches offered by schools, and their perceived effectiveness in enabling persistently absent pupils to re-engage with mainstream secondary education.

This work provides novel, in-depth insights into the drivers of persistent absence, the role of pupil wellbeing, and the types of support that may be most effective in addressing it. It also extends the existing evidence base by enabling the triangulation and comparison of perspectives across participant groups and school contexts, and by exploring how the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to shape the experiences of schools, pupils, and families. We hope our results will help inform more effective responses by schools and policymakers to the attendance crisis and support more pupils to attend school regularly.

2. Method

2.1. School selection and recruitment

We used k-means clustering¹ on school-level attendance data published by DfE to group English secondary schools into three categories based on how their persistent absence rates changed pre-Covid-19 pandemic (2016-2019) to post-pandemic (2021-2024). We excluded grammar schools and schools in the top ten per cent in terms of persistent absence rates pre-pandemic, as the characteristics of their pupil intake meant they were unlikely to be representative of schools more widely. Schools with low roll numbers ($N < 150$) were excluded as a small change in the number of pupils who were persistently absent would result in a much larger change in percentage absence rates than in larger schools. We also excluded schools with missing attendance data from the years 2016-2019 and 2021-2024 as this data was required for our sampling. This resulted in the following three groups:

- **Maintained:** in this group schools' persistent absence rates remained constant pre- and post-pandemic.
- **Increase-decrease:** These schools experienced an increase in persistent absence rates immediately post-pandemic, but persistent absence rates have since begun to decrease.
- **Elevated:** These schools experienced an increase in persistent absence rates immediately post-pandemic and absence rates remain elevated.

A random sample of 100 schools was selected from each of these groups, and a subset of these schools approached to participate in this research as case studies. We aimed to achieve an even split of schools across these categories, but recruitment proved challenging. In total 145 schools were approached to participate and ten schools agreed to take part (five in the 'maintained' persistent absence rate group, two in the 'increase-decrease' group, and three in the 'elevated' group).

2.2. Case study design

Each school case study comprised the following activities:

- An interview with a senior leader.
- Up to two interviews with pupils who had previously been persistently absent but had since returned or were in the process of returning to school.
- Up to two interviews with parents and carers of persistently absent pupils who had returned or were in the process of returning to school. This included parents and carers of the pupil interviewees but also some parents and carers where we did not interview their child.
- A focus group with up to eight pupils in Years 8 to 10 who had not been persistently absent.
- A parent and carer survey which was sent to all parents and carers at each case study school.

¹ K-means clustering is a method that allows us to group similar schools together by automatically sorting them into clusters based on how alike they are.

Interviews with school senior leaders took place online while the other activities primarily took place face-to-face. All interviews and focus groups used semi-structured topic guides. Interviews were designed to explore reasons for persistent absence, school-based strategies for successfully reintegrating persistently absent pupils into school, the potential relationship between school attendance and wellbeing and views about government policies for improving attendance. Pupil focus groups explored views about school attendance, views about why more pupils are missing school since the Covid-19 pandemic, the potential relationship between wellbeing and attendance, and views about what could be done to help more pupils attend school regularly.

2.3. Participants

Ten schools agreed to participate in this research as case studies. Of these schools, five were in the ‘maintained’ persistent absence rate group, two in the ‘increase-decrease’ group and three in the ‘elevated’ group. One school (in the elevated group) was later unable to accommodate a visit to the school, meaning data from pupils and parents and carers at this school could not be collected. Another school (in the elevated group) participated in the visit but was unable to arrange any interviews with parents and carers. The findings presented are therefore based on the following available data:

- **School staff interviewees:** 12 members of staff from ten schools. In some cases, senior leaders were joined by another member of staff from the school’s attendance team.
- **Parents and carer interviewees:** 14 parents and carers were interviewed from eight schools.
- **Pupil interviewees:** 62 pupils from nine schools took part in one-to-one interviews or focus groups.
- **Parent/carers survey respondents:** 399 parents and carers from eight schools completed the survey (Table 1). Of these, 21 per cent (N = 82) had experienced difficulties getting their child to attend school regularly, while 79 per cent had not, and 1 per cent preferred not to say². In addition, response rates varied considerably between schools, with 64 per cent of the responses (N = 257) coming from a single case study school. This means that the results of our survey are likely to be strongly driven by the responses of parents and carers from this one school. In other schools, very few participants completed the survey. Some schools reported that they experienced very low levels of parent and carer engagement, which may explain the low response rates in these schools. To help address the issue of varying participation levels across schools, we conducted a sensitivity check on responses by applying weighting to the survey responses. This revealed that the high number responses from one school appeared representative of the responses from the other schools and so are unlikely to have biased the results (see section 2.4 for more details).

² Note that rounding means percentages do not sum to 100 percent.

Table 1 Number of parents and carers who completed the survey in each school

School Number	Number of respondents
1	1
2	37
3	59
4	18
5	4
6	257
7	7
8	16

Source: NFER parent and carer survey

2.4. Analysis

2.4.1. Qualitative data

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded where participants gave permission and then auto transcribed and reviewed by a human reviewer. Where permission was not given to audio record, notes were taken instead.

A coding framework based on the research aims was developed to guide the qualitative data analysis. A combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis was undertaken using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. This involved initial coding of the data within the framework with additional codes added where needed to reflect emerging insights. The codes were then reviewed and grouped into broader themes. We also explored differences in themes by school type (including absence rate group), particularly in relation to schools' responses and support approaches for persistently absent pupils, but we did not identify any notable differences.

2.4.2. Survey data

Data from the parent and carer survey was analysed using descriptive statistics. This involved calculating the number and percentage of respondents who selected each answer option. To account for the vastly different numbers of parents and carers who completed the survey in each case study school, we conducted a sensitivity analysis where survey responses were weighted according to the proportion of responses that came from parents and carers at each school. Schools with more responses received smaller weights per parent or carer, so the weighted percentages should on average be more representative of attitudes across all eight participating schools than the unweighted percentages. This allowed us to check whether responses were being driven by a single school. Overall, we found that the results of the sensitivity analysis were broadly similar to the main analysis. For comparison, the weighted results are presented alongside those of the main (unweighted) analysis.

2.5. Limitations

Our dataset provides rich qualitative insights from multiple perspectives, but there are some key limitations that need to be considered for interpreting these findings.

Self-selecting sample: schools and individuals who agreed to participate in this research are likely to be more engaged with the topic and may have had more positive experiences, so the findings do not necessarily reflect the experiences of other schools, parents and carers, or pupils.

Focus on returning to school: this study was focused on learning about the experiences of pupils who had previously been persistently absent but are now attending mainstream school again. It is likely that the reasons for absence, and the experiences of these pupils and their families may differ from pupils who remain persistently absent, have withdrawn from school completely, or are receiving their education outside of a mainstream setting.

Small and uneven sample: our sample sizes are relatively small and there are uneven numbers of participants across schools and participant types. This is particularly evident in the parent and carer survey where response numbers vary significantly across schools. We were also unable to achieve an even split of case study school types (i.e. those in the 'maintained', 'increase-decrease', and 'elevated' persistent absence rate groups) which means the schools that maintained their persistent absence rates pre- to post-pandemic are more strongly represented in our data.

Early stages: these school case studies form part of a wider research programme exploring the potential relationship between pupil wellbeing and persistent absence. This means we can share the insights from these case studies, but we are currently unable to interpret them within the wider learning from the programme.

3. The perceived role of pupil wellbeing in driving non-attendance

Wellbeing and mental health exist on a continuous spectrum which ranges from positive wellbeing at one end to severe mental health difficulties at the other. This spectrum highlights the dynamic nature of wellbeing, with individuals moving back and forth along it at different times depending on their current circumstances, support, coping strategies and resources. This is reflected in the subsequent sections as participants described a wide range of different wellbeing and mental health concerns and their implications for school attendance.

Within our samples, persistently absent pupils and their parents and carers tended to talk more about significant mental health challenges, whereas the other pupils we spoke to in the focus groups more often described lower-level day-to-day wellbeing challenges. Meanwhile, school staff discussed wellbeing concerns across the spectrum, as well as the challenges that could arise from a lack of differentiation in how wellbeing and mental health are understood by pupils and, in some cases, by parents and carers.

3.1. There were mixed views among school staff about whether pupil wellbeing has declined since the Covid-19 pandemic

Among the school staff we interviewed, two distinct perspectives emerged regarding changes in pupil wellbeing post-pandemic. One perspective was that pupil wellbeing has declined, with school staff commonly reporting an increase in pupils presenting with symptoms of depression and/or anxiety. These staff attributed this perceived decline to a range of factors, including:

- increased awareness and recognition of mental health and wellbeing issues
- difficulties in managing friendships and social relationships
- academic challenges—particularly among pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or those who are socio-economically disadvantaged—and the associated negative effects on wellbeing and attendance
- reduced resilience in coping with the demands of a full school day and everyday school-related challenges
- limited access to external services for pupils requiring specialist support.

...kids who come from primary school with either undiagnosed SEND or SEN-K³...you end up with a child in a cycle of: doesn't attend school, then attends school and is unsuccessful, then doesn't attend school and you're never able to break the cycle... I find anxiety really sits within that because when you're dealing with SEND, they often come in pairs. You know, it's dyslexia and anxiety or it's ADHD [Attention-Deficit, Hyperactivity, Disorder] and anxiety. These things are amalgamated.

(School staff member)

³ I.e. students who have been identified by the school as having SEND but do not have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

The second perspective was that the apparent increase in pupil wellbeing concerns reflected greater awareness and reporting rather than a legitimate rise in prevalence. For example, some school staff reported that their school had encouraged greater vigilance among staff and openness among pupils in discussing any difficulties they were experiencing. In their view, this shift had led to increased reporting of concerns but did not necessarily indicate an underlying increase in the prevalence of more serious wellbeing issues.

It's difficult to say because I'm also the safeguarding lead and the number of concerns about students has gone up year-on-year. But then we're always asking teachers to be very vigilant and report anything that might be a possible wellbeing issue. So it could be that we've banged on about it so much that staff just report more. Do I see more stuff which rings massive alarm bells? No, not really...I think students are a little bit more open about it [their wellbeing] now.

(School staff member)

Individual school staff also reported an increase in instances of parents and carers stating that their child was experiencing mental health difficulties, such as depression and anxiety, without any medical evidence or formal diagnosis. Similarly, a small number of staff expressed the view that everyday stressors they perceived as relatively minor were, at times, being overstated and over-medicalised and used to justify non-attendance at school or specific lessons.

We have students saying, 'I can't go to drama lessons because they make me perform and my anxiety doesn't allow that'. When I was in school, the idea of standing up in front of other people to present and perform something, I didn't like it, but it didn't cross my mind that I could avoid that lesson or I could not come to school as a result of it, whereas I think now it does. Not only does it come into people's mindsets that little things can stop them coming into lessons, but they are also almost backed up because of that narrative from Covid about mental health and wellbeing.

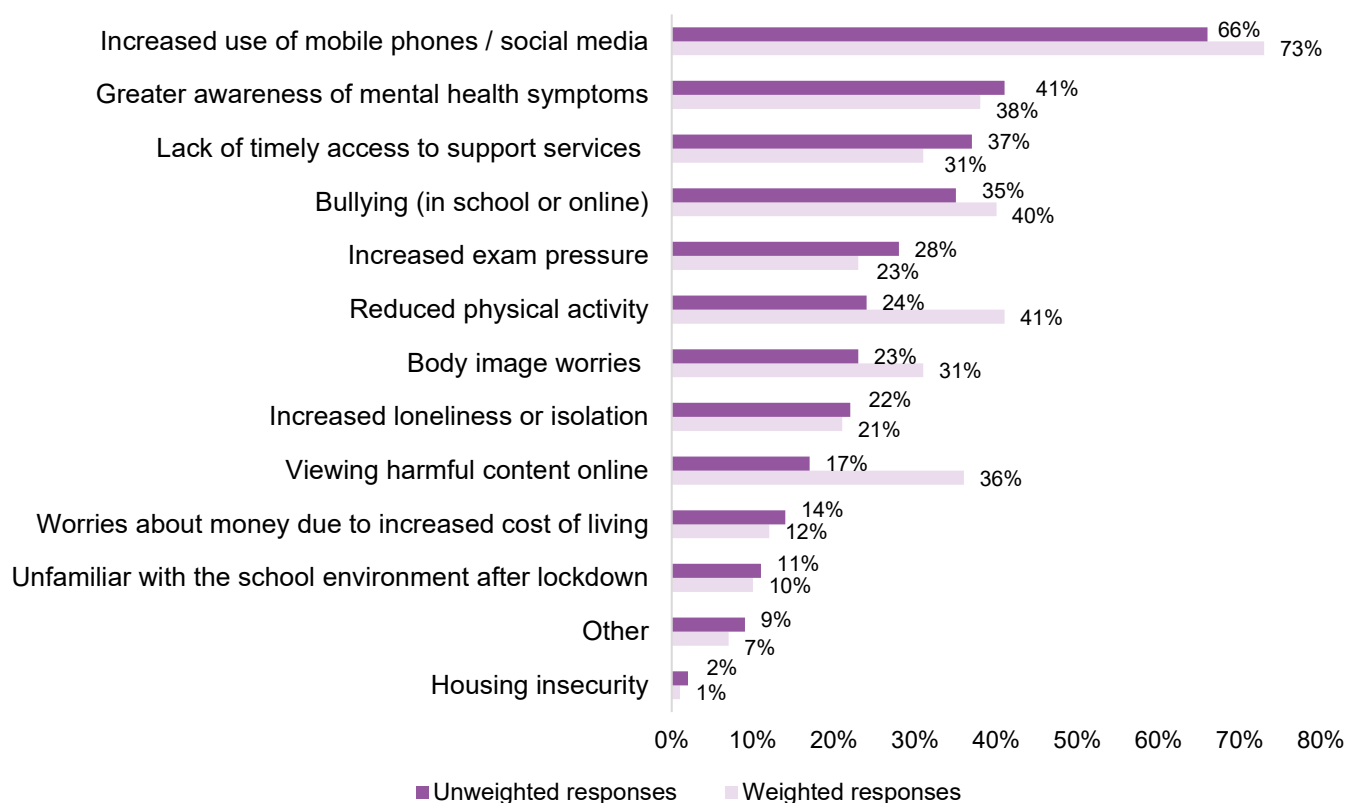
(School staff member)

Meanwhile, parents and carers who completed our survey attributed the reported declines in pupil wellbeing to increased mobile phone and social media use⁴ (66 per cent), greater awareness of mental health symptoms (41 per cent), lack of timely access to support services (37 per cent), and bullying (35 per cent)⁵ (see Figure 2). Similarly, pupils in our focus groups suggested that increased bullying on social media may have contributed to declining wellbeing since the pandemic.

⁴ This research was conducted prior to the Government's recent decision to introduce restrictions on social media use for individuals under 16 years of age.

⁵ Note participants could select up to five responses, so percentages do not sum to 100 per cent.

Figure 2 Parent and carers views about why pupil wellbeing is reported to have declined since the Covid-19 pandemic.



Source: NFER parent and carer survey (N = 399)

3.2. Pupils and parents and carers felt that poor mental health and wellbeing could be a legitimate reason for absence

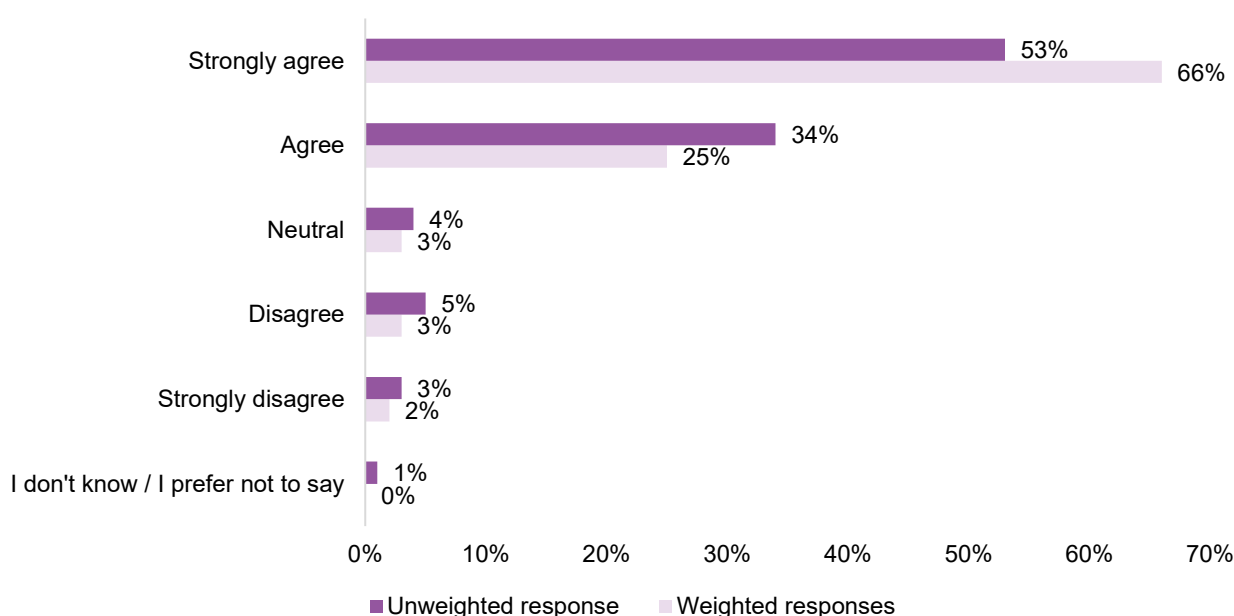
Across the pupils who participated in our interviews and focus groups, there was broad consensus that poor mental health or wellbeing was a legitimate reason for school absence. Pupils often viewed absence for mental health reasons as comparable to absence due to physical illness. This perspective was largely shaped by their experiences of school as a source of stress and pressure, with both academic demands (such as tests, examinations, and homework) and social challenges (including friendship issues and bullying) described as exhausting and sometimes overwhelming. Consequently, many pupils felt that taking time away from school was sometimes necessary to protect their wellbeing, as they felt they needed time to rest and recover.

I think whenever I have...a week off because of half term or in the six-weeks holidays, I'd feel at my best...But when I came back from the six-weeks holidays in September at the start of Year 10, I just cried for a week...it's just so draining to be here...why would I come into a place that makes me feel like that? I do, but it's hard to justify it.

(Pupil, focus group)

Among parents and carers who completed our survey, 87 per cent⁶ agreed that it was important for their child to attend school every day, while eight per cent⁷ disagreed and four per cent were neutral⁸ (see Figure 3). In addition, 92 per cent agreed that attending school was important for their child's future career (see Figure 4). When asked about legitimate reasons for school absence, one third of survey respondents (33 per cent) reported that it was acceptable to miss school due to poor wellbeing or mental health, with a further 39 per cent reporting that this was sometimes acceptable (see Figure 5). These proportions are comparable to the proportions of parents and carers who felt it was acceptable (34 per cent) or sometimes acceptable (40 per cent) to miss school due to long-term chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes or asthma. However, they are lower than the proportions of parents and carers who felt it was acceptable for pupils to miss school for medical or dentist appointments, or to attend family events, such as weddings and funerals.

Figure 3 Parent and carer responses to the statement 'it is important my child attends school every day'.



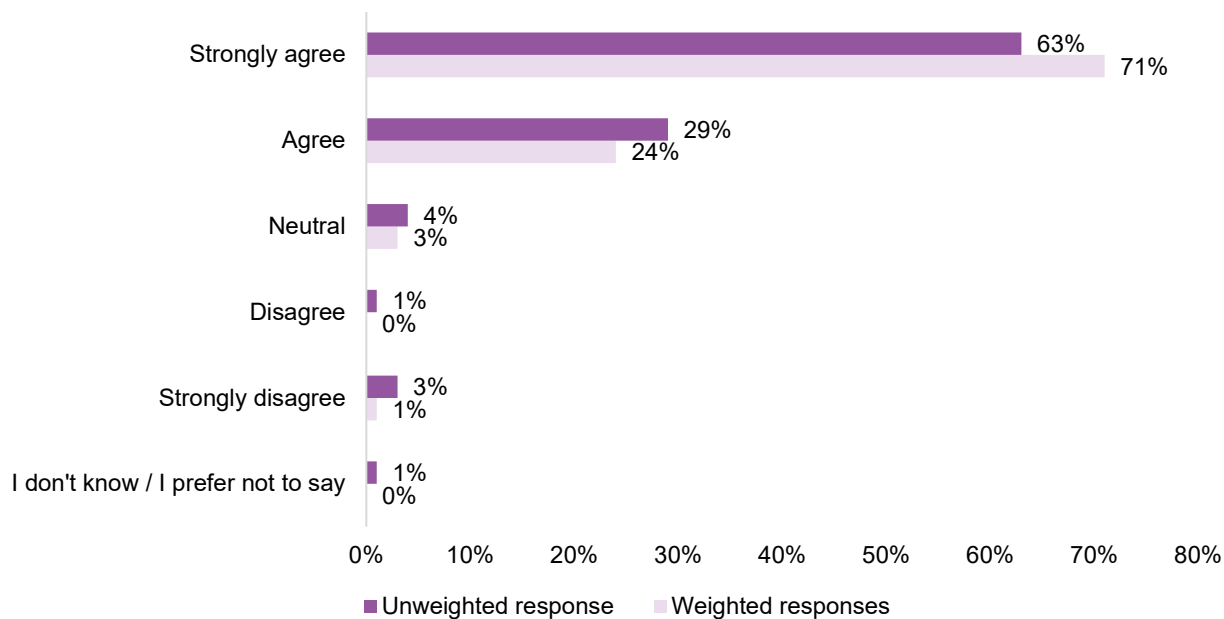
Source: NFER parent and carer survey (N = 399)

⁶ Combined 'strongly agree' and 'agree' responses.

⁷ Combined 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' responses.

⁸ The remaining 1 per cent 'did not know' or 'preferred not to say'.

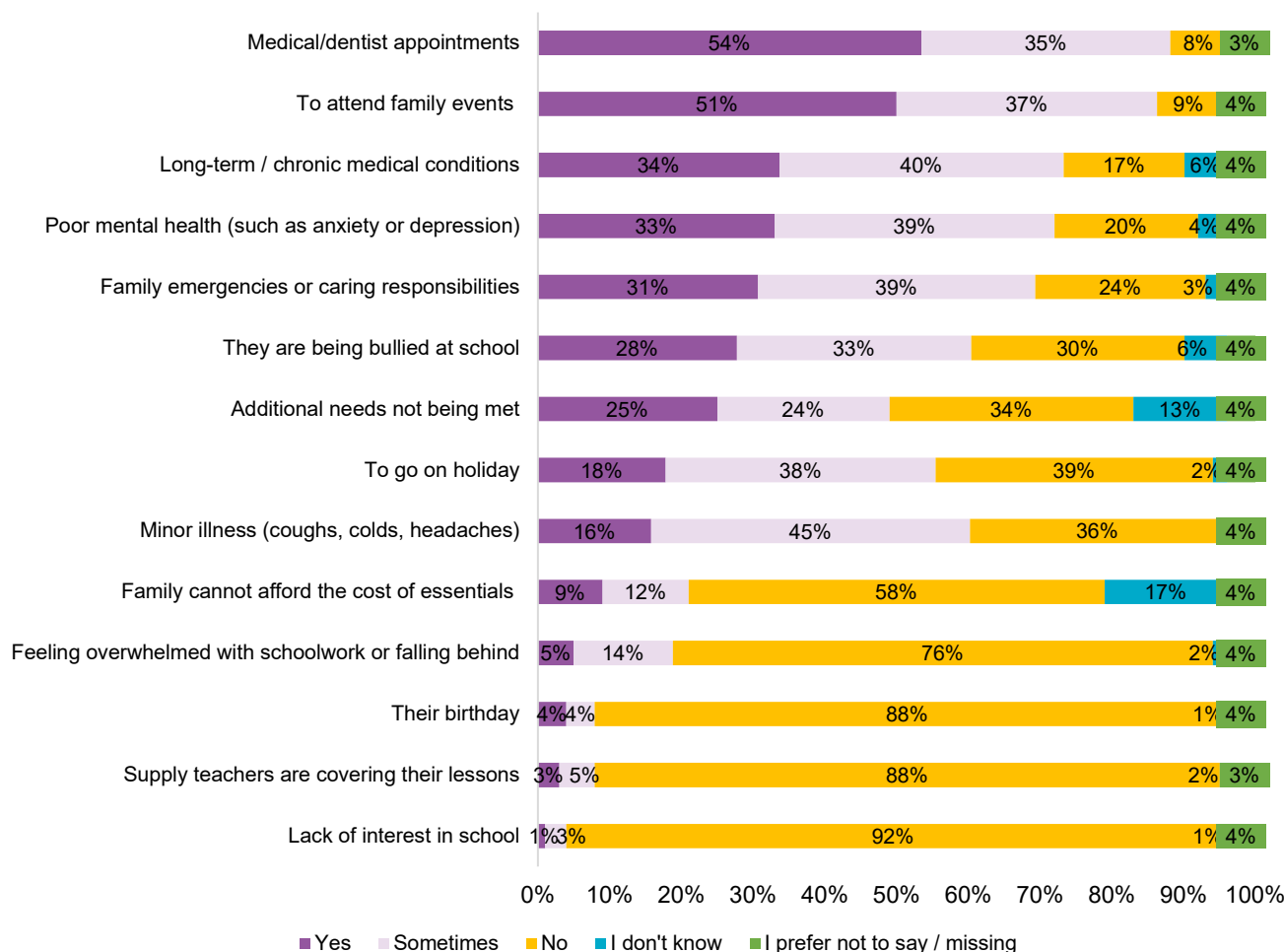
Figure 4 Parent and carer responses to the statement ‘attending school is important for my child’s future career’



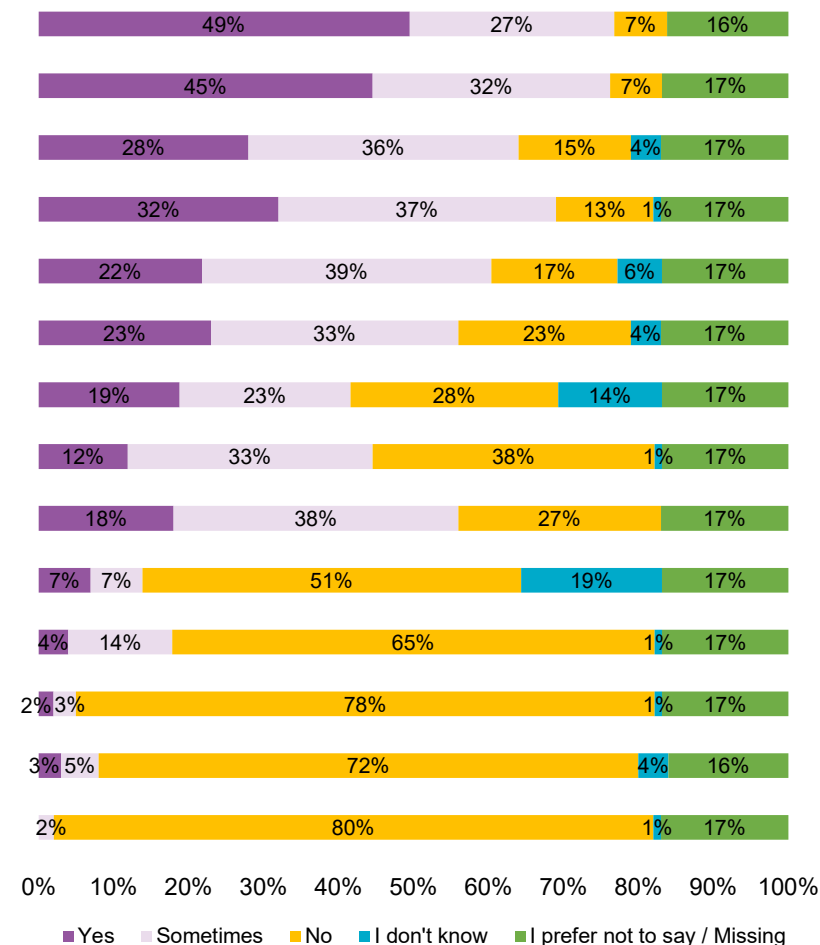
Source: NFER parent and carer survey (N = 399)

Figure 5 Responses to the survey question ‘do you think it’s ok for your child to miss school for the following reasons?’

Unweighted responses



Weighted responses



Source: weighted responses to NFER parent and carer survey (N = 399)

3.3. The relationship between pupil wellbeing and attendance was perceived to be bi-directional

Across school staff, parents and carers, and pupils there was broad recognition that pupil wellbeing and school attendance are interconnected. However, views differed regarding the nature of this association, and it was noted that this relationship could be bi-directional or in certain circumstances cyclical.

3.3.1. Poor wellbeing can make it more difficult for pupils to attend school

Just over half (51 per cent) of parents and carers who completed our survey identified poor pupil mental health or wellbeing as one of the main reasons they thought school absence rates have increased since the Covid-19 pandemic (see Figure 6). This was the second most prevalent response, after the increasing cost of holidays outside of school term time (52 per cent). These results indicate that from the perspective of many parents and carers, declining pupil wellbeing is associated with increased absences.

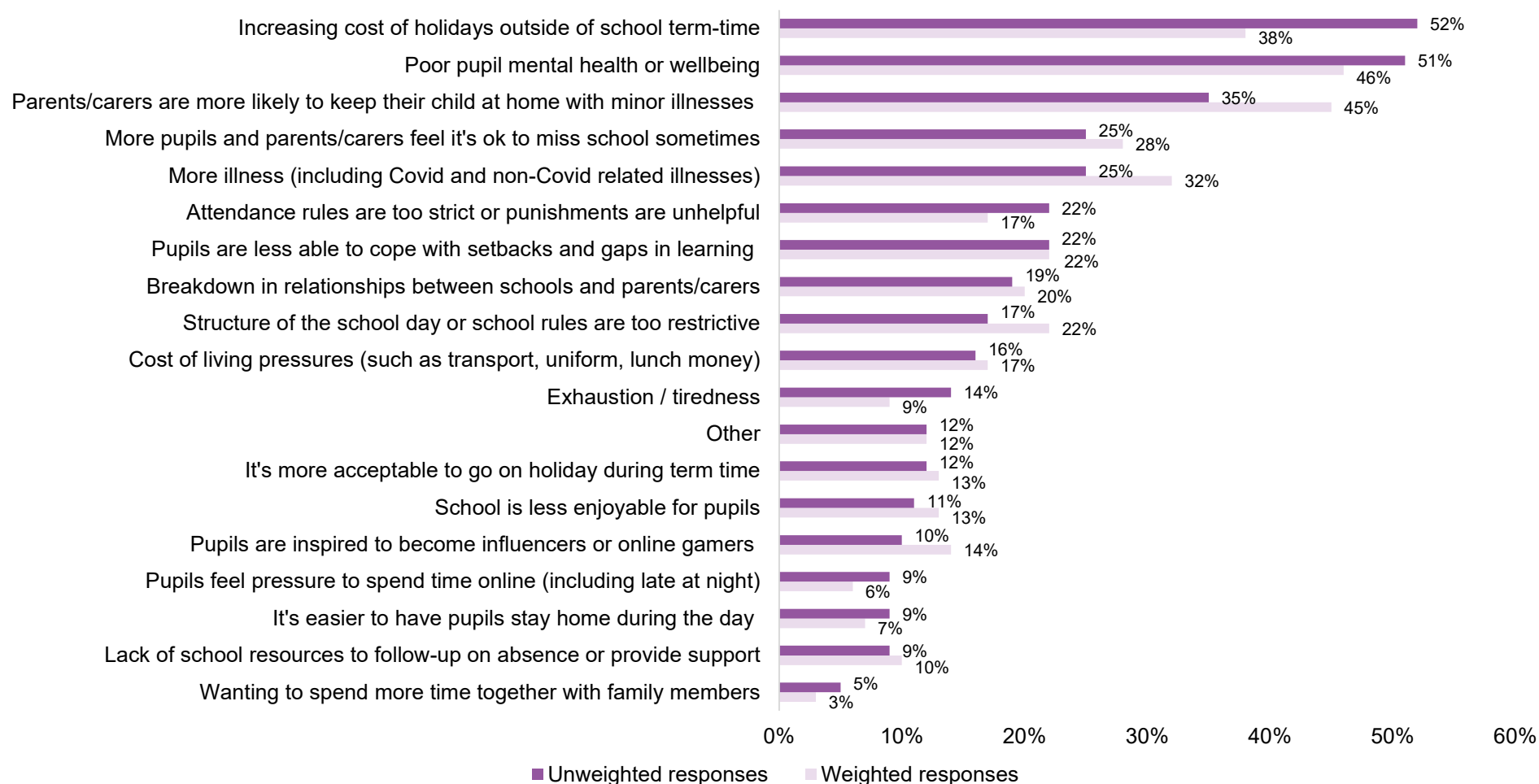
Across the school staff, parents and carers, and pupils we interviewed there was a shared recognition that mental health difficulties and poor wellbeing could negatively impact school attendance. Pupils described a range of ways in which mental health challenges made attending school more difficult. For example, some reported that the demands of preparing for school—such as waking early, particularly when facing long journeys—were already tiring and became more difficult when combined with poor mental health. In addition, pupils highlighted how academic and social pressures, including classroom participation and peer interactions, could exacerbate feelings of anxiety. For instance, some pupils noted that being asked to answer questions in class could feel particularly challenging when they were already struggling.

I have to wake up at 6.30am in the morning. It's the fact that you have to get yourself out of bed and it's the struggle of already being tired. But if you have like problems with your mental health or you have social problems, having tiredness on top of that makes it so hard to drag yourself out of bed every morning consistently...I think is why a lot of people don't come into school.

(Pupil, Focus group)

Furthermore, there were examples of where both pupils and parents and carers identified that aspects of the physical school environment—such as crowded corridors and busy lunch halls—contributed to heightened anxiety and made attendance more difficult. School staff also reported observing these challenges, particularly among pupils who were persistently or severely absent.

Figure 6 Reasons parents/carers think absence rates have increased since the Covid-19 pandemic.



Data source: NFER parent/carer survey (N = 399)

Note that participants could select up to five responses, so percentages do not sum to 100 per cent.

In some cases, pupils and parents and carers suggested that short periods of absence could sometimes have a positive effect on pupils' wellbeing. However, pupils also reflected that while time away from school could provide short-term relief, it could give rise to additional challenges. These included anxiety about the amount of work they had missed and needed to catch-up on, as well as worries about poorer performance on tests. Pupils who had experienced persistent absence also described feelings of loneliness and isolation while they were absent from school. In some cases, they reported that being absent had led to them losing friends, which then made returning to school more difficult. One of the main concerns among these pupils was the questions their peers might ask about why they had been off school.

I think because I wasn't seeing anyone, I was in my room the whole day just doing homework and trying to do the work on my own because my parents were obviously working... Yeah, it was just really difficult to come in [to school] when people were asking why I'm not there."

(Persistently absent pupil)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that absence may contribute to a reinforcing cycle, in which efforts to protect wellbeing in the short term can lead to longer-term barriers to attendance and re-engagement.

Similarly, school staff reflected that they had observed that poor pupil wellbeing can negatively affect school attendance, particularly among pupils who were persistently absent. By contrast, more positive wellbeing, characterised as feeling safe in school and thriving, was seen as a positive driver of attendance.

The children that I meet where there is persistent absence, severe absence, there is definitely a clear issue with wellbeing and it can be undiagnosed need, it can be low self-esteem, then it takes time for support to have an impact.

(School staff member)

... [wellbeing is] one hundred per cent linked to attendance because if the child is motivated and wants to do well, they're going to be there [in school]. If the child flourishes in school and school feels safe, they're going to be there.

(School staff member)

While individual school staff acknowledged that in some circumstances short-term absence may sometimes benefit individual pupils experiencing mental health or wellbeing difficulties, this was not viewed as universally helpful. This was largely because staff generally were of the view that absence typically exacerbates anxiety about returning to school, particularly in relation to missed work and concerns about staff and peers' perceptions, resulting in a cycle of poor attendance and poor wellbeing.

There's a perception with the students that have got bad mental health sometimes that coming to school is going to worsen matters. So, they stay away

with the perception that coming to school, [they think] 'I'll get bullied', 'I don't know what's going on in class'. There's a huge variety of reasons. They come in, they might dip their toe in the water, which scares them a little bit, so they back off again. So, consequently they're then caught in a cycle of their wellbeing gets worse.

(School staff member)

3.3.2. Pupils felt that academic pressures, social pressures and the school environment could negatively affect their wellbeing, while school staff emphasised the benefits of school attendance on pupil wellbeing

Although there was reasonable consistency across participant groups about how poor wellbeing might impact school attendance, views diverged between participants regarding how school attendance may impact pupils' wellbeing. As outlined in section 3.2, pupils generally perceived that there were aspects of school that could have a negative impact on their wellbeing. This was especially evident where pupils were experiencing exam pressures, such as those in GCSE years, and among pupils who had experienced bullying, which was a prominent reason for persistent absence among our participants. In addition, some pupils described how aspects of the school environment such as being in crowded corridors when transitioning between lessons, and high levels of noise within dining halls could contribute to feelings of stress and anxiety.

I don't really like being in crowds, it makes me really nervous because I feel really judged. I feel like when there's less people, it's just easier to go around places.

(Persistently absent pupil)

However, pupils also emphasised that experiences could vary. They suggested that pupils who excelled academically were more likely to enjoy school, and consequently that school might have a positive impact on wellbeing for these pupils. They also noted that school offered them the opportunity to spend time with friends and take part in extra-curricular activities which they enjoyed. In addition, while challenges at home were generally seen as barriers to attendance, there were some pupils who felt that school could offer an escape or refuge from difficult family circumstances.

School staff talked about how regular school attendance can offer a range of benefits for pupils' mental health and wellbeing including the structure of a daily routine, opportunities to learn new things, socialise with friends, and have time away from social media. They also highlighted that for pupils to want to attend school, the school environment needs to feel calm and supportive so that pupils feel safe and valued.

While most staff viewed school as beneficial for wellbeing, a small number noted that certain aspects of the school environment could have a negative impact on wellbeing for some pupils. For example, a school staff member described how limited space in the dining hall resulted in crowded and rushed lunch breaks, with insufficient space for pupils to socialise comfortably.

If the experience at school is not enjoyable, then they don't want to come to school, so you've got to ensure that the environments that they are exposed to

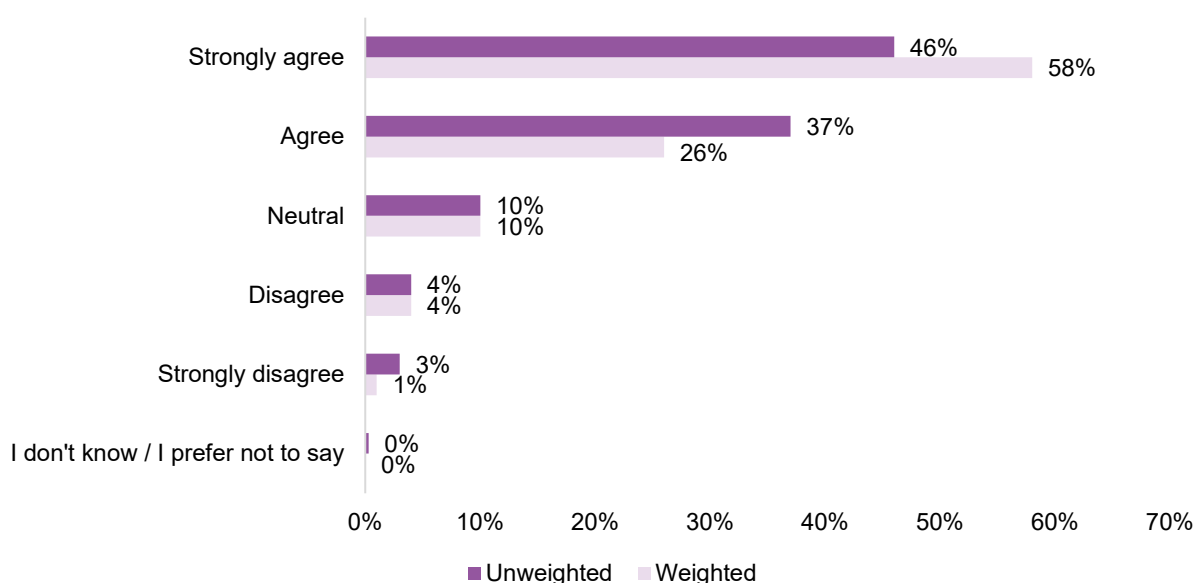
are supportive and calm. If you can't provide that, then they're going to be less willing to want to come to school.

(School staff member)

Parents and carers were also generally positive about the impact of school on their child's wellbeing. More than four-fifths (83 per cent)⁹ of parents and carers who completed our survey felt that attending school was important for their child's wellbeing (see Figure 7). Furthermore, two-thirds (66 per cent) of the parents and carers who completed our survey reported that going to school had a positive impact on their child's wellbeing, while 12 per cent¹⁰ believed that school had a negative impact on their child's wellbeing (see Figure 8).

Further analysis however, showed that there were differences in responses among parents and carers based on their experiences of getting their child to attend school. Among the 21 per cent of parents and carers who had experienced difficulties getting their child to attend school (see section 2.3 for details on the survey participant sample), a much higher proportion (39 per cent) reported that school had a negative impact on their child's wellbeing. This potentially suggests that where school is perceived to have a negative impact on a child's wellbeing, school absence is more likely.

Figure 7 Parent and carer responses to the statement 'going to school is important for my child's wellbeing'

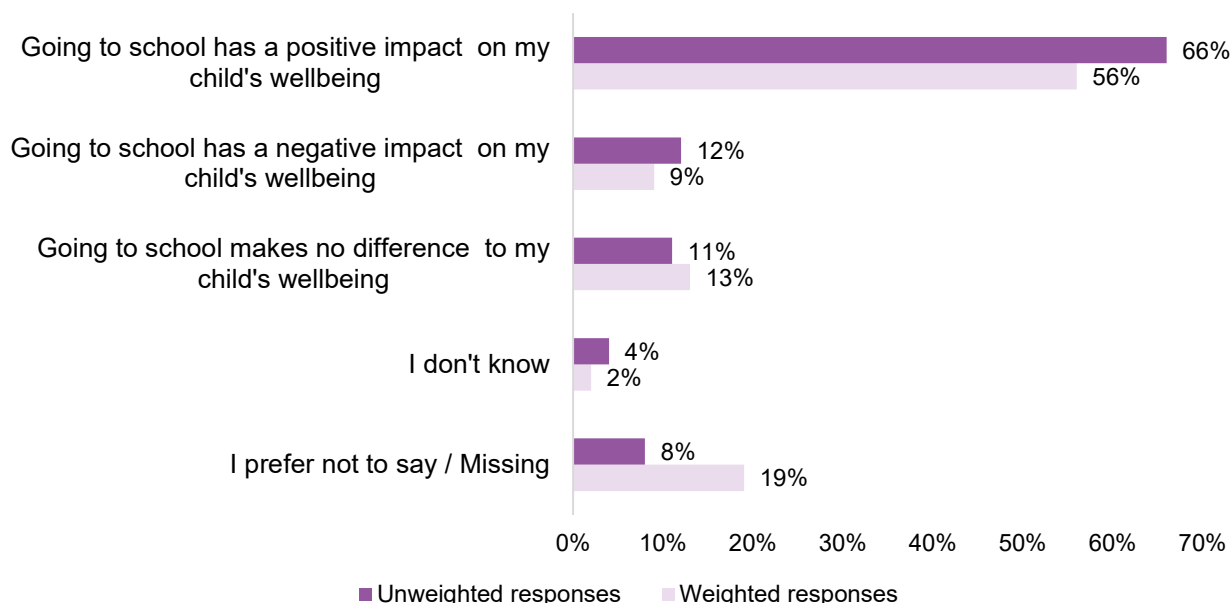


Data source: NFER parent/carers survey (N = 399)

⁹ Combined percentage of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' responses.

¹⁰ Combined percentage of 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' responses.

Figure 8 Parent and carer views about how school effects their child's wellbeing



Data source: NFER parent/carer survey (N = 399)

The views of parents and carers of the persistently absent pupils we interviewed also suggest that where school has a negative impact on wellbeing, absence is more likely. Many reported that their child had become persistently absent due to bullying or school-related anxiety and consequently felt that school had a negative impact on their child's wellbeing. In a number of these cases, pupils had begun experiencing anxiety as they began secondary school. For example, some pupils had moved from small primary schools to large secondary schools and struggled to adapt to the physical scale of the school environment, the increased pupil numbers, and higher academic demands. In some instances, these challenges were also related to previously undiagnosed SEND needs.

In hindsight, she didn't cope at all well with the transfer from junior to senior school. She's quite a shy, timid person and she fit in well at juniors. She found that easy to cope with, not moving classrooms, it was only a small school. And then when she got to seniors, we thought it would be the usual teething problems that everybody has but it absolutely blew her mind completely, the sheer numbers, the noise. She just didn't ever get used to it and she found it more and more difficult to cope.

(Parent or carer)

Similarly, some pupils that previously had strong friendship groups in primary school then struggled at secondary school due to bullying. In some cases, this was because friendship groups from primary school had broken down. Bullying was particularly detrimental to pupils' wellbeing where it was perceived that insufficient action had been taken to address it, as this contributed to pupils having heightened fear and anxiety about attending school.

Consequently, the bullying got worse. People [were] following her home, trying to push her in the road. I raised this consistently at school...It felt unsafe for her to be in school.

(Parent or carer)

He was there [at his previous school] until Year 9 and throughout those three years there was bullying. Quite prolific and towards the end he point-blank refused to go. And I understand that because when you're scared school's unpredictable. It was the fear, because nothing happened to the young man [doing the bullying] the bullying didn't stop. It carried on.

(Parent or carer)

However, these parents and carers still felt it was important for their child to attend school and access education. As a result, many described feeling conflicted about what was best for their child: while they often perceived that their child's wellbeing was better at home, they were also concerned about the opportunities their child might miss out on, including educational experiences and social interaction with peers, if they continued to being absent.

Parent or carer 1: *I think he seemed more happy [when he wasn't attending school]...he didn't stress out so much, he felt more relaxed.*

Parent or carer 2: *To be honest, if we could afford it, I'd let them be homeschooled. But on the other side of it, I disagree with it [home education] because they lose out on so much interaction with other children and friends.*

(Parents or carers)

Overall, there was broad agreement across pupils, parents and carers, and school staff that pupil wellbeing and school attendance are closely interconnected. However, the perspectives of the different participant groups diverged in important ways. Pupils often emphasised the pressures associated with school had the potential to negatively affect wellbeing, particularly in the context of academic demands, social challenges, and in some cases the physical school environment. Parents and carers of persistently absent pupils frequently shared these concerns, often describing the tension between supporting their child's wellbeing and ensuring continued engagement with education.

In contrast, parents and carers who completed our survey were generally more positive and felt that school had a positive effect on their child's wellbeing. Although, as highlighted, where parents and carers had experienced difficulties getting their child to attend school, they were more likely to report that school had a negative effect on their child's wellbeing. Similarly, school staff were more likely to highlight the positives of school attendance, emphasising the benefits of routine, learning new skills, and social interaction with peers for pupils' wellbeing. Taken together, these findings suggest a complex and sometimes conflicting set of perspectives, underscoring the need for support approaches that balance the importance of attendance with a nuanced understanding of individual pupils' wellbeing and circumstances.

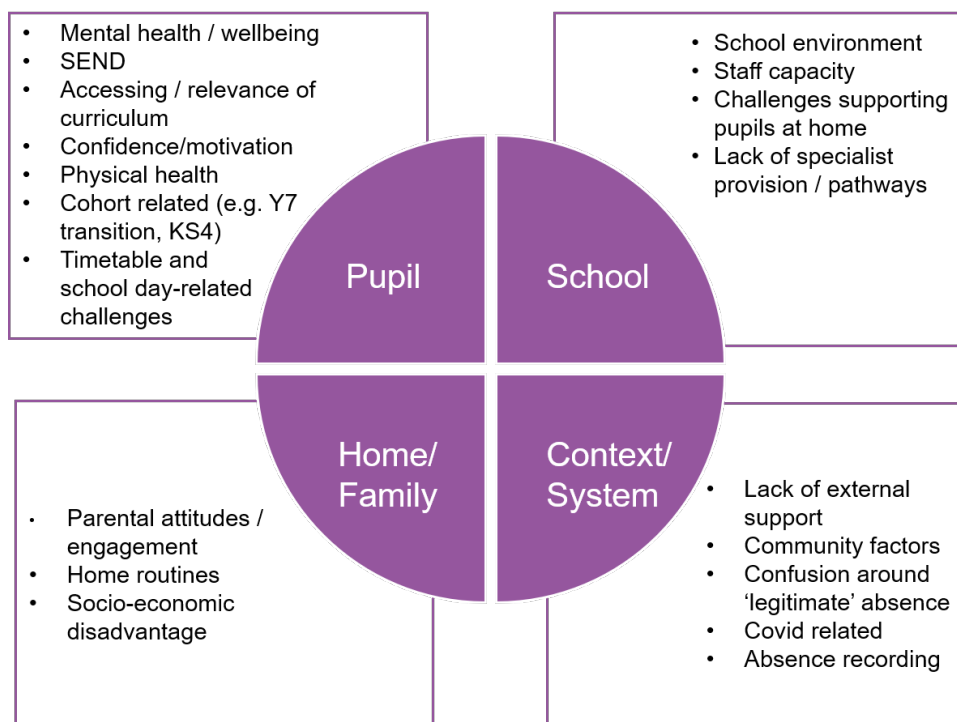
3.4. There are a wide variety of interconnected factors that influence attendance beyond pupil wellbeing

Across our participants, declining pupil wellbeing was felt to be a key contributor to the increased absence rates observed since the Covid-19 pandemic. However, participants also described the many different and often interconnected reasons that could lead to pupil absence. These reasons could be grouped into four key themes as shown in Figure 9. Views about the relative importance of these different themes varied but pupil wellbeing, SEND needs, mild illness and term-time holidays were frequently noted by school staff as being key drivers of increased absence, with parents and carers who completed our survey holding similar views. These results suggest that a multi-stranded approach that takes account of the different reasons for pupil absence is needed to improve attendance.

The biggest challenges, I'd say, a change in perception of the importance of school [since Covid 19], the contract was broken [between schools and families] and then it became almost like optional [to come to school]. Then you've got on top of that the impact on young people and their wellbeing and mental health which has dwindled... I think that world that's been created for children where they can be very isolated online was accelerated by Covid because we pushed them into it more. And then for this school... we've got a [school] community that's very multicultural. There are a lot of students here who've got families in other countries and there is the pull of students back for weddings, funerals, pilgrimages – there's a whole host of reasons. Holidays, just outright holidays, which were there before Covid. And then on top of that, you've got a layer of poverty because we're in quite a highly deprived area. So again, the pull to go on holiday or back home to see family during term time is massive. And the fines don't touch that. Plus, I'd say, a local authority that doesn't have the capacity to support like they used to. So, we work very hard to stand still, I would say, with attendance figures. I think we're doing a good job, but it's not going up.

(School staff member)

Figure 9 Intersecting factors influencing school attendance



Source: NFER case studies

4. Supporting pupils who are persistently absent to return to school

Across the case study schools, interviewees described a wide variety of approaches to support persistent absence. These ranged from universal, whole-school strategies to more targeted and personalised interventions. While the elements of school practice identified are broadly consistent with those outlined in government policy and existing research as set out in section 1, our findings also highlight how these approaches were operationalised by case study schools

It is important to note that this study did not seek to evaluate the effectiveness of the individual approaches described by case study schools to improve attendance. As such, these findings should be interpreted as a description of current practise rather than evidence of what works. However, we did ask pupils and parents and carers about the types and aspects of support they found helpful and less helpful, and this data is presented later in this section. As these data are anecdotal - comprising the views of individual participants, it is important to recognise that the quality and impact of individual forms of support are likely to vary depending on how it is implemented and the context in which it is delivered.

4.1. Whole school strategies created the necessary conditions for improved attendance

Several school staff emphasised the central importance of having a school ethos and culture where attendance is prioritised and supported. This included having clear leadership commitment in relation to attendance and ensuring that attendance is understood as a shared responsibility across the school. Case study schools' attendance strategies often involved providing regular communication to all pupils and their parents and carers about the importance of high attendance and to reinforce attendance expectations.

School staff also emphasised the value of having robust attendance monitoring systems and processes as a key component in their responsive approach to attendance issues. Some school staff and pupils participating in the focus groups reported, for example, that whole-school attendance rates were routinely displayed around their school to promote accountability and that all pupils were provided with personalised attendance information to keep track of their own attendance levels. Alongside this, many of the case study schools operated various school-wide reward and incentive schemes to encourage and maintain positive attendance habits. Together these strategies were considered to create the necessary supportive environment to reduce the risk of persistent absence and underpin more targeted support.

A senior leader outlined the following key elements of their whole school approach to supporting attendance:

We run social media to highlight good attendance. Every assembly every day talks about their year group's attendance. They always start with some praise slides, who has one hundred per cent [attendance] or who has improved, so it's just a day-to-day part of the conversation if you like, for staff and students. We'll share the attendance daily with our staff, so they keep on top of how well, or not well, we're doing and just share bits of information about what it is that's keeping some

students off. We have a praise points system swap shop, students get praise points for all sorts of things, good behaviour, good work and if they've got one hundred per cent attendance each week, they will get praise points for that. That feeds into our whole-school rewards system.

(School staff member)

4.2. Attendance support was delivered through a range of staff roles

In all the case study schools there were staff with dedicated attendance responsibilities. Typically, these were senior leaders, including those with, and without, teaching roles. Most schools also employed attendance support staff, such as attendance officers or administrators, education welfare officers, or family liaison officers. Attendance staff had a broad range of duties, including monitoring attendance data, identifying patterns and causes of absence, engaging with absent pupils and their parents and carers, and providing support and intervention to improve attendance. Some interviewees described how attendance-related input and support was embedded across the whole staff structure, for example where pastoral teams, including form tutors and heads of year, alongside school safeguarding, SEND, and behaviour support staff, played key roles through their regular contact with pupils. There was also an emphasis on effective communication and collaboration across staff and departments to ensure coordinated attendance support.

I think the reason we're doing well [with attendance] is because we've got a very committed team, who've got very tight processes in place. There is never a hint of 'that will do' about them, which I think is why we can stand still and not decline. On top of that, I think we've got very good pastoral teams with very good connections to the attendance officer. They work very well together.

(School staff member)

We've made it one of our school priorities this year to try and involve more staff across the board [to improve pupil attendance]...We've tried to feed it down to form tutors, so the people that see the students each day, they do something we call academic mentoring. They look at the students that have got the worst attendance and the best attendance, to try and praise the ones that are getting it right and to try and pick apart things that are going wrong for those that haven't got good attendance.

(School staff member)

4.3. Persistent absence was addressed through both supportive and compliance-based interventions

School staff described a range of approaches which they implemented in relation to attendance when individual pupils' absence rates were considered a cause for concern or had moved into the threshold for persistent absence. Two distinct pathways of support emerged from the data:

- **Formal compliance pathways** (for example, for managing term-time holidays without school approval, for repeated time off for illness without medical evidence and/or for persistent lateness).
- **Support-based pathways** (such as those aimed at supporting the underlying needs of pupils, including those relating to wellbeing, mental health difficulties, health conditions, SEND, motivation and engagement issues, and safeguarding concerns).

Schools might move from a more formal response to a more supportive needs-based approach, for example, as the underlying causes for pupil absence become clearer. In some cases, **both pathways might operate concurrently** where schools maintain formal processes with parents and carers while also addressing individual pupils' support needs. The following quotes from school staff from different case study schools provide examples of the different intervention pathways they followed in response to persistent absence which were perceived to lead to positive outcomes for pupils.

There is obviously the kind of 'the stick', the letters, the warnings, the fines, there is all of that process that's applied, which does the job for the majority.

(School staff member)

We were trying everything to get [the pupil] in. [Last year her attendance was eight percent]... Her current attendance is sixty percent and she's in every day... that is a real good example of listening to the family, not pushing the button by getting the local authority and the punitive measures involved, its working with the family, understanding the need and that's really worked.

(School staff member)

Some differences emerged in the extent to which the case study schools appeared to approach absence through compliance-oriented processes or through more supportive pathways. As described in section 3, among some school staff, there were sometimes questions raised about the legitimacy of some pupil absences. Absences associated with lower-level wellbeing or emotional issues for example, were sometimes understood by school staff through a lens of personal responsibility, resilience and needing to adapt to school expectations. Within these contexts attendance appeared to be framed as a requirement to be maintained. In other cases, school staff appeared to interpret persistent absence as indicative of unmet support needs. These individual perspectives, together with the school ethos, likely influenced how absence is understood, but also the kinds of responses that were considered appropriate.

4.3.1. Formal compliance pathways

Formal compliance pathways described by case study interviewees generally involved processes and procedures that schools follow to meet national statutory requirements typically in order to fulfil their legal responsibilities in relation to pupil absence, as well as to respond to local authority and/or multi academy trust (MAT) level expectations. These involved for example:

- recording and monitoring attendance rates and reasons for absence
- issuing formal emails and letters to parents and carers

- holding structured attendance meetings
- formulating attendance action/improvement plans and conducting reviews
- undertaking home visits (such as for absence verification and safeguarding checks)
- the administration of penalty notices for unauthorised absence.

One senior leader described the stages involved in the formal compliance pathway followed by their school:

So we're tracking those children rigorously and the attendance officer has an idea of the figures and the pastoral support staff have the information when it comes to the reasons for absence... In the first instance we send out a letter [to parents and carers] ... they've got a four-week window to improve and if we don't see an improvement, we then invite parents in... where we say, 'do you realise that your child's attendance is so low and, what can we do to support?' And those meetings have been really powerful in some cases... But then sometimes we've had that meeting, and we then have to refer over to [the local authority] student attendance service and then they then hold their own meetings and parents are at risk of being penalised.

(School staff member)

4.3.2. Support-based pathways

Unlike the formal compliance pathways, which followed a more defined sequence of steps, the supportive needs-based pathways were broader and more flexible. They often included a range of possible support options depending on individual pupil circumstances and the resources available within different schools. These could range from low-level and short-term challenges requiring limited interventions, to complex high-risk situations requiring intensive support. Support included:

- timetable, curriculum, and learning related adjustments
- emotional, relational, and pastoral support
- family focused support
- specialist and external support.

The following sections expand on these thematic elements of attendance support.

Timetable, curriculum, and learning related adjustments

Most of the case study schools reported making adjustments for persistently absent pupils through the use of part-time timetables¹¹, where they attended for certain lessons or for certain parts of the school day or week. These were typically used as part of a phased return where schools provide gradual (re)exposure to school. Case study schools also made minor changes to the school day for some pupils, through adapted school start or finishing times (such as arriving

¹¹ Further information on the use of part-time timetables can be found in the DfE's statutory guidance for schools: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66bf300da44f1c4c23e5bd1b/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance_-_August_2024.pdf

later or leaving earlier) or, through authorised time out of lessons for short breaks, to reduce causes of stress or difficulty at key periods.

Case study schools also made a range of adaptations to the learning environment for some pupils to help them to remain in, or return to, school. This included for example access to 'safe'/dedicated support and/or learning spaces (including within pastoral, SEND and behaviour support departments, in 'quiet' spaces such as the school library, or in dedicated separate internal units within the school), offering pupils an alternative environment for some, or the entirety of, the school day. The separate units varied across the case study schools in terms of their purpose, staffing, support offered and educational provision provided. Staff and pupils also reported a range of responsive curriculum adaptations, including changes to subject choices and class placements to support peer relationships and engagement with learning.

The best thing is getting them in [to school] and seeing it's not as bad as they perhaps think. That sounds like an easy sweeping statement, but more often than not, once they start getting in, getting into that habit, that routine is the best medicine so to speak.

(School staff member)

Emotional, relational, and pastoral support

Case study schools offered a broad range of support and interventions, from formal counselling and mentoring to more informal support. Interviewees described how school staff dedicated time to building positive, supportive relationships, to help persistently absent pupils feel valued and understood. There were examples of staff finding small, everyday opportunities to show pupils that their presence in school was appreciated, through regular greetings and check-ins, personalised encouragement or incentives and showing minor flexibilities around school rules. In addition, some case study schools provided practical pastoral support where staff met pupils on arrival in order that they felt supported to enter the building and/or accompanied pupils to lessons, where needed. In some cases, school staff visited pupils in their homes during periods of absence to build relationships. In one school, specialist attendance workers collected pupils from their home each day by school minibus to ensure their attendance.

Schools also supported pupils in building positive peer-to-peer relationships. This included facilitating group work activities and opportunities to spend time with supportive peers during the school day. In some cases, schools provided pupils with identified attendance issues in primary school with additional transition support, through extra visits to reduce anxiety, foster relationships and build familiarity with the new environment.

I would say the best way you can get a child to come into school, that's persistently absent, is to have the time and the capacity to forge a trusted relationship with them, so that they actually believe you're going to do what you say you're going to do, and the parent believes it too, so that they come in and try it. If they're prepared to stick with it, I'd say that's the best thing you can do.

(School staff member)

We do what we call check-ins, so there's the attendance officer and her deputy, and they don't make a big deal, but they'll go out, and they'll catch the student at an appropriate time and just pull them aside and say, 'how's things, everything all right?' And they're very skilled at doing that, so it's not a formal sit-down meeting, it looks to the student a bit ad hoc, it's a chance encounter in the corridor, but it's not. It's a deliberate plan, bump into them, 'everything all right?' off we go. And sometimes if it's as innocuous as that, it doesn't cause the student to overthink.

(School staff member)

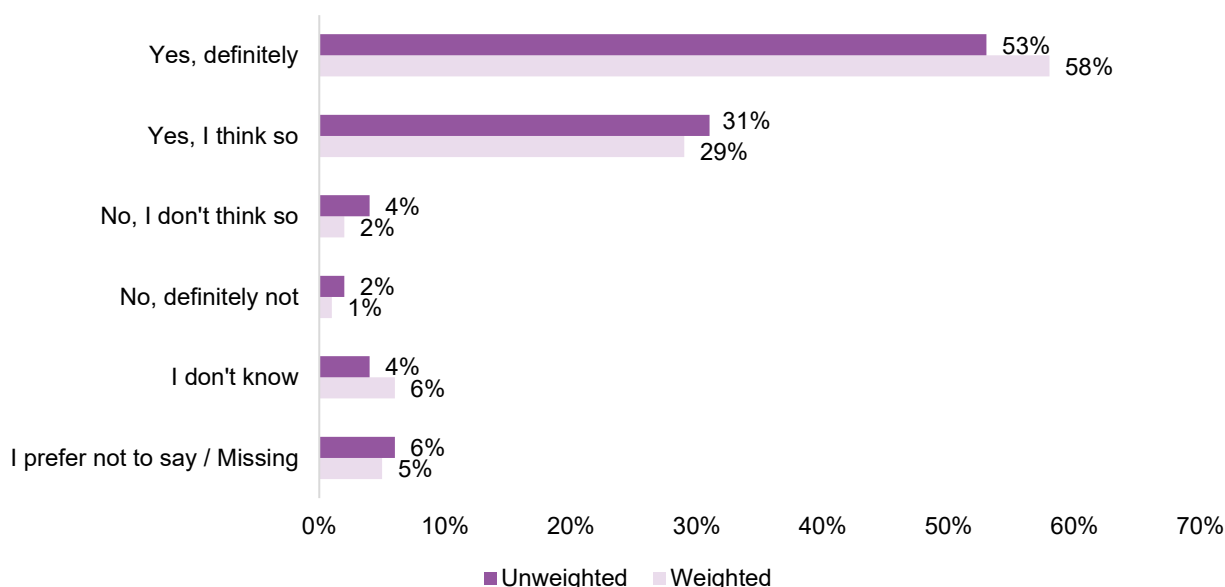
Family-focused support

In addition to the formal attendance procedures schools are required to follow with parents and carers, many of the case study schools used regular, more informal communication approaches to build and maintain positive and constructive relationships with families. These approaches included phone calls and face-to-face meetings as well as regular and ongoing pastoral contact aimed at understanding the underlying needs of the child and family. A few interviewees reported that establishing effective two-way relationships had enabled school staff to provide supportive challenge to parents and carers, helping them to reflect on possible alternative perspectives and solutions. A few schools also reported providing parents and carers with practical guidance and signposting to support, for example, to external agencies to access assessments, diagnosis or specialist intervention for their child.

Survey data also provided insights into how comfortable parents and carers felt approaching schools about attendance concerns. Most parents and carers (84 per cent¹²) felt able to talk to their child's school (Figure 10). There was, however, a very small minority of respondents (2 per cent) who indicated they could 'definitely not' talk to their child's school, which could suggest the presence of barriers that may affect some families' willingness to engage.

¹² Combined 'Yes, definitely' and 'Yes, I think so responses'.

Figure 10: Proportion of parents and carers who felt that they could talk to their child's school about attendance concerns



Data source: NFER parent/carers survey (N = 399)

Specialist and external support

Some of the case study schools also described a range of external and specialist support that was in place to help address persistent absence. This included support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and other mental health providers; as well as assistance provided by MATs and local schools, including pupil referral units (PRUs) and alternative providers that offered placements for pupils alongside, or instead of, mainstream school. Interviewees also referred to support from their local authority, such as early help services, attendance teams and SEND teams and children's social care, as well as input from voluntary sector and charitable organisations. Schools typically sought involvement from these external services to help improve attendance for pupils with higher levels of need, particularly where schools did not have the equivalent specialist expertise or inhouse support available. However, it was generally recognised that external specialist support was limited or there were long delays in accessing it.

4.4. Consistent and empathetic communication was important for understanding pupils' individual needs and providing the right kinds of support

Across the case study schools, there was a clear emphasis on the importance of communication and relationships for supporting persistent absence. These features cut across a range of support approaches, and it was often the relational aspects of support, such as being treated with patience, empathy and understanding, rather than a specific intervention or strategy, that appeared to be most valued among pupils and their parents and carers.

Pupils who had experienced persistent absence particularly appreciated having peers and school staff who would check in on them, ask if they were ok, and create opportunities for them to talk openly about the issues they were experiencing. Reflecting on advice they would give to others with attendance difficulties, a few pupils emphasised the importance of ‘talking to someone’ and not keeping concerns to themselves. Pupils also highlighted the significance of staff helping them to feel valued and wanted in school and treating their concerns, such as bullying, fatigue, or problems with uniform seriously, rather than dismissing them.

For parents and carers, empathetic and collaborative communication from schools was also seen as highly important. Families responded positively when schools provided clear avenues for communication, took time to listen to their concerns and experiences and adopted a non-judgemental, solution-focused approach. Parents and carers also appreciated when schools recognised that families were often trying their best to support attendance and avoided placing any additional pressure or blame on them.

4.5. Providing flexible support that was responsive to pupils’ needs was felt to be helpful for enabling pupils to return to school

Support was often viewed as beneficial by pupils and parents and carers when schools adopted flexible and responsive approaches that could be adapted to individual circumstances. This flexibility took a range of forms, particularly when adjusting aspects of school that pupils found especially challenging. This included examples such as, pupils who struggled with busy crowded corridors being allowed to arrive at school slightly later or leave earlier, so they could avoid the busiest times of the day, pupils with sensory needs who were given uniform adjustments, and allowing pupils that were finding particular lessons challenging to attend preferred subjects for a limited time. Schools’ willingness to adapt to individual needs was viewed as an important factor in supporting pupil engagement overall.

Aside from school-based support, pupils also highlighted the importance of broader family support for overcoming persistent absence. This support took a variety of forms depending on the needs and circumstances of individual pupils but included providing encouragement to return to school, listening to their concerns and worries and sharing advice and guidance on managing aspects of school that they found challenging. For example, family members supported young people by sharing strategies for preparing for exams, dealing with social situations and breaking the school day in smaller manageable stages (i.e., one hour at a time). Families also helped to establish routines that supported attendance such as reducing screen-time to promote better sleep as well as adopting more active forms of support, including transporting or physically accompanying their child into school.

4.6. School support was not always perceived as meeting pupils needs effectively

Overall, wholly negative experiences of school support for persistent absence were relatively uncommon. However, some pupils and parents and carers across the case study schools described mixed experiences where aspects of support were considered helpful while others were seen as inconsistent or missing, in some cases resulting in unmet needs.

Some interviewees felt that the initial responses of schools focussed too heavily on attendance compliance rather than gaining an understanding of the underlying reasons for pupils' difficulties. As a result, support from schools was sometimes perceived as initially inadequate or delayed. Some parents and carers felt they had to repeatedly advocate for support before their child's needs were fully acknowledged. In some cases, parents and carers highlighted the need for improved understanding and more responsive absence support in relation to incidences of bullying and broader pupil wellbeing related issues.

I think in the beginning, possibly because she is reasonably clever and toes the line and isn't disruptive, I think that they [the school] didn't possibly take it seriously or they didn't understand the full situation. So, they just tried to get her back into school with the attendance officers, as if she was just being disobedient. Then it escalated and escalated and she absolutely utterly refused to come back into school at all. They then started to look at other solutions, and they've come up with so many different plans to help her get back into school.... In the beginning, it was just meetings to attend where we were just sort of berated for not attending. There wasn't really any solutions. It was just like, 'you have to come in, it's the law, you're going to be fined'. That's not really very helpful.

(Parent or carer)

A key area of support perceived to be lacking by parents, carers and pupils across several schools was the removal of school-related barriers to attendance and engagement. Parents and carers described a range of challenges that made it difficult for their child to attend and participate fully in school. These included anxiety or distress related to busy or overwhelming school environments or being around peers or situations they were fearful of, which increased the need for access to separate 'safe' spaces in school. They also highlighted barriers for their children related to their difficulties accessing the curriculum, often due to SEND and felt teaching approaches, curriculum content or individual reaching styles were not sufficiently adapted to meet their child's needs. A small number also highlighted disruption to learning when schoolwork was not provided during periods of absence, or where there was a lack of catch-up support on returning to school, which made it harder for pupils to both maintain engagement with learning and successfully reintegrate into lessons.

However, parents and carers recognised the practical schools faced in addressing these barriers, including staffing and budgetary constraints alongside the physical limitations of school buildings. Some parents and carers also acknowledged that some changes required to meet their child's needs, for example, more inclusive approaches or specialist provision, would require to broader educational reform, which are beyond the scope of individual schools.

There is a limit to what mainstream schools can offer.... I feel like the elephant in the room is that unfortunately, for some of our young people, the mainstream school is not suitable, but the options and alternatives are very, very minimal.

(Parent or carer)

There were also concerns that some aspects of support and interventions provided by schools, for example, timetable adaptations or use of support staff, were short term, withdrawn too early or not clearly communicated as temporary measures, leading to uncertainty and some challenges for some pupils in maintaining their attendance.

There were also a few examples where the support experienced was perceived as unsuitable or in some cases was felt to have a negative impact on pupils' wellbeing or education. Concerns were raised by a small number of pupils and parents and carers about changes to the school environment to encourage attendance, where pupils were placed in separate rooms or units within the school, where they perceived there was limited educational input and support and little to no opportunities for interaction with peers. While these support measures, in some cases, were considered to have led to increased physical attendance by reducing stressors on pupils, they sometimes had unintended consequences, including social isolation from supportive friends and reduced access to subject specialist subject teaching and broader learning opportunities.

I tried to ask [my child] what lessons she managed to get to. Most of the time it's one, I'd say one or two per day, so the rest of the time she's in the [support unit], which is not suitable because it's a really small space and she's not obviously accessing the learning.

(Parent or carer)

From the school perspective however, they faced a range of challenges, not least the difficulty of identifying pupils' support needs and providing interventions, in the context of high levels of demand. This included the volume of pupils experiencing attendance-related difficulties and the complexity of their needs. School staff also highlighted challenges in providing support when pupils were physically out of the school setting, limiting opportunities for direct engagement and intervention.

You find yourself often going down the route of penalty notices and you will be meeting with parents who will be saying, 'the kid's got this, or this, or this'. And you're like, 'well I can't do anything about that because you're not bringing them into school to help me.'

(School staff member)

A small number of school staff described challenges in working with families when views on how best to respond to persistent absence were not aligned. For example, where parents or carers believed that anxiety, bullying or other wellbeing concerns needed to be addressed before attendance could improve and school staff thought that strategies aimed at building resilience through maintaining attendance and supporting pupils to face challenging situations were required.

Parental attitudes are the biggest [challenge], because if the parent and the school are on the same team you make better progress.

(School staff member)

5. Policy and practice approaches for improving attendance

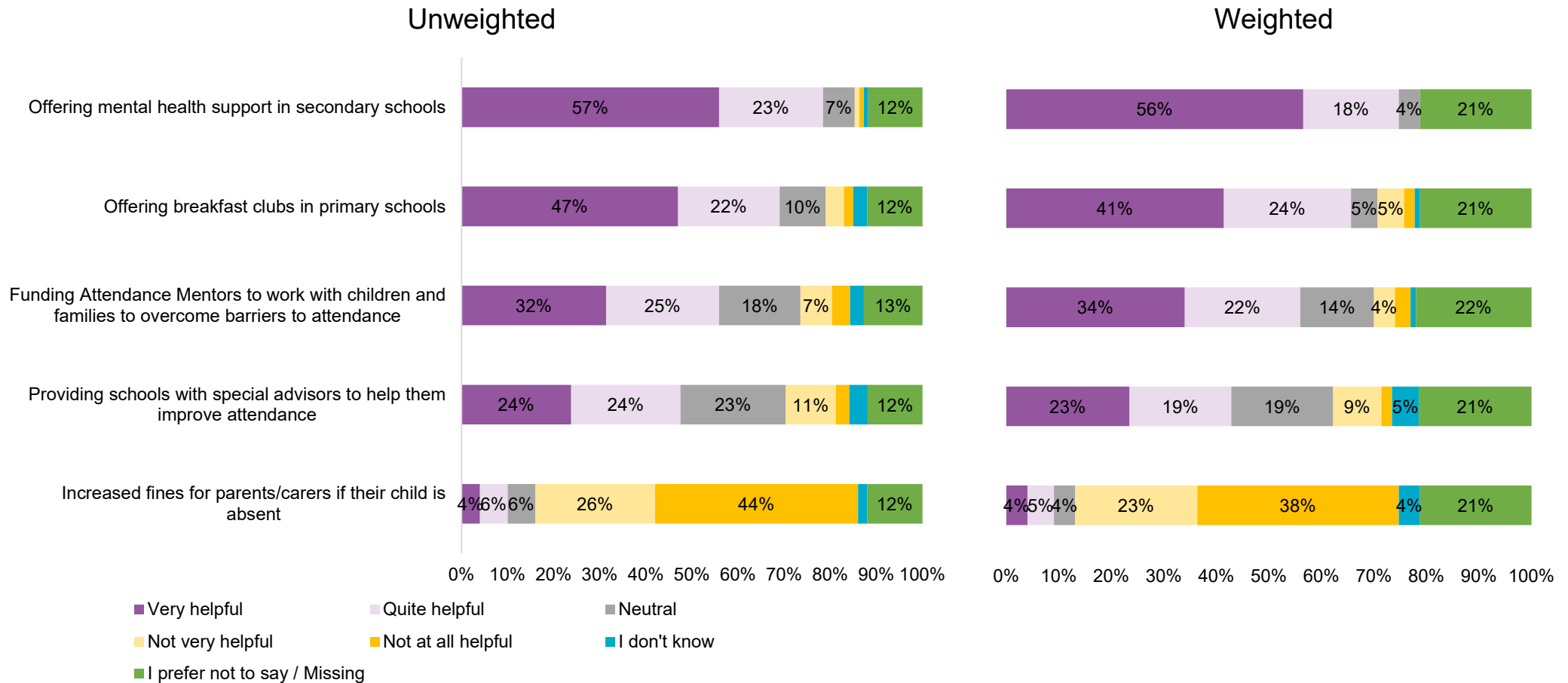
As noted in Section 1, recent policy responses to improving attendance have included statutory attendance guidance for schools and parents and carers, changes to absence recording and higher penalty notices (fines) for absence.

In addition, schools can use the DfE data dashboard¹³ to monitor their school attendance, identify absence trends and pupils who need support, build attendance reports and compare attendance reports within the local authority and nationally (DfE, 2026b).

In our interviews with school staff, we asked how effective they felt these new policies were at tackling persistent absence. We also asked parents and carers responding to our survey about school approaches to improve attendance (see Figure 11) and what they thought would help pupils attend school more frequently (see Figure 12). The key findings are presented in the following sections.

¹³ Monitor your school attendance is an online platform provided by the DfE which aggregates daily attendance data submitted by schools allowing users to create interactive dashboards see: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/access-your-school-attendance-data#monitor-your-school-attendance>

Figure 11 Parent and carers views about the helpfulness of current Government approaches to improving attendance



Data source: NFER parent/carers survey (N = 399)

Figure 12 Parents and carers views about things that would help pupils attend school more frequently



Data source: NFER parent/carer survey (N = 399)

5.1. Schools were positive about the new DfE attendance guidance and data dashboard

Among school staff, there were some positive reflections on the recent policy changes. Schools particularly welcomed the focus of early intervention and wellbeing in the attendance guidance provided to schools.

The guidance is, I think, well-intentioned and is correct. When we read the guidance last summer, it was very focused on early intervention..., wellbeing and all that stuff. And I thought, yeah, spot on.

(School staff member)

However, interviewees also commented on the need for further funding, concrete examples of early intervention, and training around absence codes. They also felt that support implementing the attendance guidance would enable them to fully action it. For instance, the recording of bereavement absence was given as an example of where clearer guidance and parameters would be beneficial for schools.

There were also some positive examples where schools noted that the DfE data dashboard was particularly helpful. These schools reported that it helped them to track their attendance, compare with other schools, identify patterns and trends and make data-driven decisions.

And can I also say at this stage, that the DfE dashboard for attendance now is amazing, so it used to be rubbish...You'd never get any data. The new DfE 'monitor your school attendance'¹⁴ data tool is amazing. It's transformational for schools...

(School staff member)

It's been really helpful, in terms of the view of educational data, to be able to log on and see our school's comparison report and pick out what's going well here...One issue for us has been Year 10 and we're thinking, okay, transitional dips... Why is it trend?... is there something about GCSE pathways? Is it just hormonal for the kids?... I would say there's been lots in the Department for Education [guidance] that has definitely helped us think more strategically about attendance and about how we can make, I guess, data-driven decisions.

(School staff member)

¹⁴ Monitor your school attendance is an online platform provided by the DfE which aggregates daily attendance data submitted by schools allowing users to create interactive dashboards see: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/access-your-school-attendance-data#monitor-your-school-attendance>

5.2. Penalty notices were consistently felt to be unhelpful for tackling persistent absence

Much of the discussion around existing government policies centred on penalty notices, often referred to as fines. These are financial penalties for parents and carers if their child is absent for, typically, ten sessions (about five days) of school and that absence is unauthorised - that is, the reason for absence is not approved by the school. Whilst the local authority issues these fines, the responsibility sits with the school to deem an absence authorised or unauthorised.

Penalty notices were consistently felt to be ineffective for tackling persistent absence across the different interviewee groups. Parents and carers of persistently absent pupils often spoke of the threat of a potential fine being unhelpful, and in some cases creating additional anxiety for their child. These parents and carers either wanted their child to go to school and felt they were doing their best to make that happen or were reluctant to send them to school at that specific time because they considered it to be detrimental to their mental health.

If your kid is struggling as a parent and you can see their mental health declining, you're going to do what's better for your child [even] if it means keeping them out of school.

(Parent or carer)

That's the one thing that will always make me just cry or just make me really angry because I am not going on a cheap holiday. Honestly, I wish that was all my problems, that I just need a cheap holiday.

(Parent or carer)

Furthermore, some interviewees felt that where pupil absence was wellbeing or health related, fines did not tackle the reason for the absence and so were considered to be ineffective at bringing pupils in these situations back into school. School staff and parents and carers gave examples of where schools chose not to trigger the penalty notice for the parents and carers in these circumstances because it was not deemed to be the most appropriate course of action.

Before we get to an official warning letter or a fine letter from the local authority, we almost have our own list of students that are on the periphery of being a concern. And we do our own school version of that letter that says that we're really concerned. This is what we're going to put in place, and these are the risks of what will happen if it doesn't change. So, we do try and support the communication side.

(School staff member)

Additionally, school staff noted that pupils with high absence rates were often more likely to be from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This made them reluctant to trigger penalty notices as they believed a fine would make things even more challenging for these families.

The families are often very poor. [A fine] isn't going to change anything. We're reluctant to pursue that against a particular family because you're compounding their issues.

(School staff member)

Finally, the recent School's White Paper sets out an expectation that all schools will measure pupils' sense of school belonging by 2029 (DfE, 2026a). However, some school staff reflected on the conflict between creating a positive sense of belonging for pupils and building positive relationships with the wider school community and having to issue penalty notices to parents and carers for their child's non-attendance. This was felt to be counterproductive for improving relationships as issuing penalty notices was felt to have a negative impact on parent and carer, as well as pupil, relationships with the school.

One hand they [DfE] say to us 'develop belonging, make sure all of your communities feel part of the school'. And then at the same time, they're expecting us to send out threatening letters regarding fines [for absence].

(School staff member)

Many of the school leaders we spoke to also believed that fines were ineffective for tackling holiday-related absences as they were not felt to be a sufficient deterrent. This was because paying the fine was still considered to be significantly cheaper than the difference in holiday prices in and out of school term-time. Some school staff reflected on the wider changes needed to counteract this, for example, greater regulation of holiday companies to mitigate the financial benefit of taking holidays during term-time.

You can't outweigh the difference in price of the holiday. An £80 fine is irrelevant when you're saving £3000 on a holiday, so fines are pointless for most.

(School staff member)

Similarly, parents and carers in our survey did not deem fines to be helpful in addressing absence, with 70 per cent of parents saying fines were 'not very helpful' or 'not at all helpful' (see Figure 11).

Collectively, this evidence suggests that issuing more penalty notices is unlikely to be an effective solution to the attendance crisis.

5.3. Offering mental health support and breakfast clubs would be welcomed by parents and carers

Parents and carers saw offering mental health support (in secondary schools) and breakfast clubs (in primary schools) as potentially helpful for improving attendance, more so than increased fines (see Figure 11). Four-fifths (80 per cent) of parents and carers who completed our survey felt that the government policy of offering mental health support to pupils in secondary schools would be 'very helpful' or 'quite helpful' for improving attendance (see Figure 12). In addition, 69% of parents and carers said the same about breakfast clubs. Funding attendance mentors was rated less highly, with just over half of parents and carers viewing this as helpful (57%).

5.4. Taking a child-centred approach was felt to be important for tackling attendance issues

As noted in section 4.5, responsive support was deemed most effective in supporting attendance. Pupils and parents and carers in our interviews felt it was especially important to understand a child's views and experiences by taking the time to listen to them and their parents and carers. This included understanding additional, unmet needs, including mental health. This approach then allowed schools to tailor support to the pupils needs. For instance, pupils and parents and carers gave examples of where the school SENCO had been made aware of their absence related issues and this had made a difference to the school experience. A few parents and carers also spoke about the importance of schools being 'trauma-informed', so that they can identify and respond appropriately to children that have experienced adversity.

I feel like sometimes teachers will always just expect that they [persistently absent pupils] just don't like school. Sometimes, it's the people and it's the environment... It would just be easier if you ask the students [what the issues are].

(Persistently absent pupil)

It's in that bigger picture... It's looking at my daughter and saying, actually, she's gone through all of primary school [with no issues]. There's something going amiss here. Let's see what we can do. And being more child-centred and unpicking it that way, instead of this is a child, put her in this square.

(Parent or carer)

They need to offer a nationwide training programme for teachers and school staff. So we need everybody on the same understanding of working with neurodivergence. If it's the same training programme, then that's what they can have as a competency framework. Be trauma informed.

(Parent or carer)

5.5. Pupils need to feel safe at schools

Persistently absent pupils talked about the need to feel safe at school for them to attend. Many of our sample of persistently absent pupils had experienced bullying, which led to them feeling unsafe in school. Meanwhile, pupils experiencing mental health difficulties reported that aspects of the school environment could increase their anxiety and make them not want to attend school.

So overall, if the government is going to change anything about the education system, it's to make sure everyone feels safe, secure, and welcome.

(Persistently absent pupil)

This was also a key finding from our parent and carer survey, with the vast majority (83 per cent) responding that ‘helping pupils feel safe in school’ would help pupils attend more regularly (see Figure 12).

In particular, interviewees discussed the vital role schools play in identifying and dealing with bullying. Pupils in both our interviews and focus groups spoke about the need for tougher consequences for bullying, including bullying taking place off-school premises (such as on the way to and from school) and online. Existing punishments were deemed to be too lenient, meaning that the bullying frequently continued, and the pupils being bullied continued to feel unsafe in school.

When they [the school] say, ‘zero tolerance to bullying’, they need to mean it. There are people getting bullied all the time. If they’ve done it over and over, suspension or seclusion isn’t enough. Seclusion is just seen has fun, early lunch and just muck around.

(Persistently absent pupil)

The punishments [for bullying] are very minimal. It’s just like I’ll sit in a classroom and then they’ll never truly stop and then it gets worse if you tell someone.

(Pupil, focus group)

Relatedly, 79 per cent of parents and carers said that *improving relationships between pupils* would help pupils attend school more frequently (see Figure 12).

Together these results indicate that tackling bullying that takes place both in school and online and taking steps to improve relationships between pupils are vital for helping pupils feel safe in school and for improving attendance.

5.6. The curriculum needs to be practical, relevant and engaging for pupils

Many of the suggestions from interviewees to improve persistence absence centred around the curriculum and school environment. It was felt that the curriculum needs to be enjoyable, practical and feel relevant for pupils. For example, pupils wanted to know why it was important to learn particular information and how it would help them in the future. Offering a mix of different types of subjects was felt to be important so all pupils could learn about something they enjoyed.

Furthermore, in both the pupil interviews and the focus groups, pupils were asked what a good day at school looked like. Common features included practical subjects or practical elements of schoolwork and pupils reported that this type of learning would make them want to attend school. Similarly, in our parent and carer survey, 69 per cent of parents and carers responded that offering a wide variety of subjects for pupils to study would be ‘very helpful’ or ‘quite helpful’ for supporting pupils to attend school more frequently (see Figure 12). These findings suggest that, even where schools feel they are offering a broad and balanced curriculum, some pupils (and parents and carers) may perceive the curriculum as insufficiently aligned with their individual interests and preferences. School staff also noted that it was important to offer a range of subjects. However, the

importance of good teachers in creating an inspiring and engaging school environment was also stressed, yet this was felt to be hindered by wider teacher recruitment and retention issues.

The biggest factor of getting kids into school is to make lessons entertaining, relevant and powerful, most kids come to school for that. When you go to schools where their attendance is poor, there is a direct correlation between the lessons being bad and the teachers being poor. So, my biggest message to government would be that the teacher retention and recruitment crisis is the biggest anathema to school attendance, because the ability to build relationships and inspire young people is at the core of school attendance.... The biggest impacting thing is the adults in the place that make the kids want to belong and want to come to school and that for me is all about teacher recruitment and retention and the relevance of curricula as well.

(School staff member)

In addition to the curriculum, suggestions were also made about how to improve the wider school environment. This generally referred to school buildings and infrastructure, so schools felt safer and less chaotic to pupils. Some school staff and pupils reported that physical aspects of their school buildings made it more difficult for anxious pupils to attend (for example, narrow, crowded corridors). However, this was not considered to be something that schools were able to change. One suggestion from the pupil focus groups, however, was to allow more changeover time between lessons so the corridors do not feel as chaotic. Other suggestions, as noted above, were around increased provision of 'safe' or quiet spaces for pupils to visit if they're feeling overwhelmed.

5.7. More funding is needed to enable schools and external services to tackle attendance issues

Monitoring and improving attendance are time and resource intensive tasks. Schools frequently reported that they had hired specific staff members to tackle attendance, but lack of funding limited how much more they were able to do. For example, the recent policy approaches were noted to have added to workload for schools but came with no additional funding to support implementation. If penalty notices are to continue being used, despite schools and parents and carers generally finding them unhelpful, one proposed solution was to redirect the money to the schools themselves, to support their work on improving attendance.

Furthermore, school attendance does not exist in a vacuum and schools reported that often the issues driving poor attendance lay outside of their control. Consequently, they reported needing more support from external services such as local authorities and other services (such as CAMHS) to improve attendance. More early intervention support was felt to be particularly important.

Multi-agency working would be so useful in so many of these cases, but because there's such long waiting lists, they can go and do a referral, but we're waiting. And in the meanwhile, that kids education is just slipping away from them.

(School staff member)

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Declining pupil wellbeing was generally perceived to be a major factor in the increased absence rates observed since the Covid-19 pandemic, but it is not the only contributing factor

School staff generally reported an increase in pupil wellbeing concerns since the Covid-19 pandemic, which they believed was linked to declining attendance. However, some school staff suggested that this apparent rise in wellbeing concerns reflected greater knowledge and awareness rather than a true increase in prevalence.

Similarly, 51 per cent of parents and carers who completed our survey identified poor pupil wellbeing as a key factor underlying the rising school absence rates since the Covid-19 pandemic. That said, it was not the only influence: parents and carers also pointed to a greater tendency to keep their children home for minor illnesses, as well as the increasing cost of holidays outside of school term times, as important contributors.

Poor pupil wellbeing appeared to be important in many cases of persistent absence in our study, with the exception of pupils whose absences primarily related to repeated minor illnesses. In several instances, pupil wellbeing concerns among our sample of persistently absent pupils had arisen from experiencing bullying.

Together these results suggest that while improving pupil wellbeing is likely to help improve attendance, especially among persistently absent pupils, there are also other factors that need to be considered.

The relationship between pupil wellbeing and school attendance is likely to be bidirectional

Participants widely acknowledged that poor wellbeing or mental health could make it more challenging for pupils to attend school. Although, being absent from school could offer temporary respite for pupils, extended periods away from school could adversely impact pupil wellbeing and make it more difficult for pupils to return to school, contributing to a reinforcing cycle between pupil wellbeing and attendance. Furthermore, participants described how school attendance can have both positive and negative effects on pupil wellbeing depending on individual circumstances, further highlighting the nuanced and bidirectional nature of the relationship between pupil wellbeing and attendance.

Pupils with regular school attendance and those experiencing persistent absence frequently perceived the pressures of school as having a negative impact on their wellbeing

Consistent with previous research (Carr, Whitehead and Burtsonshaw, 2025), pupils frequently reported that the academic and social pressures associated with school attendance could negatively impact their wellbeing. Consequently, pupils viewed taking time off school due to poor mental health or wellbeing as legitimate, because it gave time to reset and recover. Over two-thirds (67 per cent) of parents and carers who completed our survey also felt that poor mental health or wellbeing was a legitimate reason for absence at least some of the time. In contrast, school staff frequently emphasised the benefits of school attendance for pupil wellbeing. Meanwhile, the views of parents and carers of persistently absent pupils were more mixed – while they recognised the benefits that school attendance could offer their child, they also felt their child's wellbeing was

better at home. These findings suggest that to help overcome barriers to attendance policymakers and schools to consider what can be done to ensure that more pupils have a more positive experience of school.

There is a difficult balance for schools to navigate in terms of being responsive and adapting to pupils' wellbeing needs, and pupils' adapting to the realities and pressures of school and life more generally

Our data indicates that the continuum of wellbeing and mental health may be understood differently between participants. Views particularly diverged among pupils, parents and carers and school staff in relation to what schools described as everyday school challenges, which pupils saw as having a negative effect on their wellbeing or mental health. This created circumstances where pupils and in some cases their parents and carers felt this justified absence or missing certain subjects, but school staff did not feel this was appropriate and frequently talked about pupils needing to be more resilient in this context. At the same time, schools were also putting considerable effort into supporting pupils with significant mental health needs and being flexible and responsive to the needs of these pupils. This suggests there is a need to build a shared understanding across school staff, pupils, and parents and carers about the continuum between wellbeing and mental health, while ensuring that when pupils raise concerns, they feel listened to and supported.

Bullying and difficulties with social relationships may be underestimated in terms of their potential role in driving absence and in school responses to absence

Bullying emerged as a common driver of persistent absence in our sample, and this had a substantial impact on pupils' wellbeing and school attendance. Pupils who participated in our focus groups also felt bullying was a legitimate reason for absence and suggested it may have contributed to the rise in absences observed since the Covid-19 pandemic. Some perceived that an increase in bullying on social media was a key driver of school absence. Pupils highlighted the protective role of friendships in supporting school attendance. Similarly, parents and carers felt that the best way to support pupils' attendance was to ensure pupils feel safe in school. While we cannot determine why this is the case from our survey data, it is likely that experiencing bullying would contribute to a child feeling unsafe in school.

In contrast, although friendship issues were referenced in school staff interviews, bullying itself was not a prominent theme. Our sample of persistently absent pupils was small and may not be representative. However, this discrepancy may indicate that the prevalence of bullying, and its relationship with school attendance, are underestimated. It also points to the need to better understand the nature and prevalence of bullying among secondary school pupils and suggests schools and parents and carers should consider bullying (including online) as a potential contributing factor when pupils become persistently absent.

Attendance support was perceived to be most effective when it was underpinned by positive, supportive relationships, flexible and tailored to the child's needs

Positive communication and relationships were felt to be key for supporting persistently absent pupils to re-engage with school, more so than any individual intervention approach. Patience, empathy and understanding were strongly valued among persistently absent pupils and parents

and carers, and this helped schools and families to work together and come up with solution-focused approaches. Taking the time to listen and build relationships also enabled school staff to get a clear understanding of the barriers to attendance for individual pupils so they could put the right support in place. Being flexible and tailoring support to individual needs was as key to ensuring the pupil felt listened to, safe and supported.

Where persistently absent pupils have physically returned to school they may not all be receiving a full educational experience

All case study schools provided examples of pupils successfully returning to regular school attendance following periods of persistent absence. However, this did not necessarily mean that all pupils were attending school full-time or receiving a full curriculum, or a full classroom-based education alongside their peers. There were isolated cases of pupils spending most, or all, of their school day in a separate location in the school away from their class peers. For these individual pupils, this was felt to have a negative impact on their wellbeing and educational experience. It also indicates more broadly that a physical return to school premises does not always necessarily equate to full reintegration into the school community and that further work may be needed to achieve this.

Schools are putting significant time and resources into tackling attendance issues, but they are constrained by funding and the system they operate within

Schools invested considerable time and resources into improving attendance. This included appointing dedicated attendance staff, undertaking detailed attendance monitoring, and implementing a wide range of support measures to enable pupils to attend. However, many of the barriers to attendance extend beyond what schools can reasonably influence. Consequently, schools sometimes felt they needed to be able to draw on support from wider services, which was not always available.

It is also important to recognise that schools must operate within limited budgets and balance improving attendance with other key priorities. They are also constrained by staff capacity, timetables (including restrictions on the use of part-time timetables such as the need for parental agreement and the temporary timeframe they can be used for), exam requirements, and, in some cases, an inability to adapt the school environment to better meet pupils' needs.

Furthermore, schools are working within the context of reduced external support, for example, cutbacks to local authority support services and other support systems. As a result, many schools are left tackling these issues alone, with minimal external assistance.

6.1. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in recognition of the extensive effort and wide range of initiatives already being implemented by schools and the Government to improve attendance. Building on this ongoing work, they are intended to complement and strengthen existing approaches by highlighting ongoing key attendance issues and challenges, particularly those relating to pupil wellbeing, that should remain at the forefront of local practise and national policy.

For schools

Recommendation 1: Adopt a curious and supportive mindset when addressing persistent absence. Focus on understanding the issues driving non-attendance, and building positive, trusted relationships with persistently absent pupils and their parents and carers.

Recommendation 2: Alongside delivering curriculum content, continue efforts to support pupils to build resilience through whole class and individual interventions.

Recommendation 3: Maintain a focus on the prevalence and nature of bullying – both in school and online – and the extent to which it may be affecting school attendance. Support pupils to build positive peer relationships, drawing on established best practice to prevent bullying, and ensuring that the school environment feels safe and inclusive for all pupils, particularly those who have experienced bullying.

Recommendation 4: Facilitate positive transitions between primary and secondary school. This should include helping pupils to build strong friendship groups, develop trusted relationships with school staff and become familiar with the new school environment.

For government

Recommendation 1: Many of the barriers to attend lie outside of schools' influence. Schools are making significant efforts to improve attendance, but to build on this the Government should ensure that wider public services—such as local authorities, family support and mental health provision—are adequately resourced and staffed to work in partnership with schools. This joined-up approach will enable schools and agencies to collaborate effectively in addressing the barriers that prevent children and families from securing regular attendance.

Recommendation 2: Providing specialist attendance staff and interventions is time and resource intensive for school. Ensure that schools are provided with adequate funding to meet these additional demands.

Recommendation 3: Ensure that there is sufficient investment in mainstream school infrastructure and resources to ensure that the physical school environment is fit for purpose and schools can meet the needs of an increasingly diverse pupil population with a growing range of needs.

Recommendation 4: Considering the role that online bullying may play in school absence, monitor and evaluate the impact of new social media restrictions for under-16's (expected to be in place by Spring 2027) on the rates of online bullying, pupil wellbeing and bullying-related school absence.

Recommendation 5: In the context that schools are being asked to strengthen pupils' sense of school belonging and build positive relationships with the wider community, carefully consider the use of fines including their benefits and limitations, and the extent to which their use may undermine these objectives.

Recommendation 6: Consider the potential interaction effects of different policy reforms, including the Schools' White Paper, curriculum review, and social media restrictions for under-16's, and how they may collectively alleviate or increase the barriers to school attendance.

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Public

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The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ

T: +44 (0)1753 574123 • F: +44 (0)1753 691632 • enquiries@nfer.ac.uk

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NFER ref. NABS

ISBN: 978-1-916567-65-8

