

Breaking the Barriers to School Attendance

Let adopted and kinship children
take their seat in the classroom

January 2024



Executive Summary

The UK is facing a national attendance crisis in schools. Almost one quarter of pupils were persistently absent during the 2022 autumn term¹. The UK is not alone. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, rising school absence is a “worldwide problem”².

While the pandemic has affected attendance overall, there are groups of children who have historically faced significant barriers to attendance which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and its continuing legacy. This group includes those living in poverty, with special educational needs and children in the care of the state.

However, this report is about a group of children who are equally vulnerable but have received little attention in the debate on school attendance. These are children who were previously cared for by the state – adopted children and those in kinship care. There are almost as many in this group as there are children currently in the care of the state³, and up to half struggle to attend school or access lessons.

For many previously looked after children, school is a very hard place to be. Most adopted and kinship children have experienced significant trauma and adverse early experiences and all have experienced the disruption and loss of leaving their birth parents and moving to a new family. There is a growing body of neuroscientific research showing the damage these experiences can do to children’s development, including their executive functioning skills, their ability to navigate relationships and the development of a sense of safety – all of which are essential for learning. Compounding this, chaotic early lives and moves around the care system result in their learning and developmental needs being overlooked leading to delayed diagnosis and support. Seven out of ten adoptive parents say it feels like a battle to access the support their children need in school⁴.

Many of these children experience considerable social, emotional and mental health challenges. Two in five adopted children missed school due to concerns about their mental health or wellbeing in 2022. One in six missed five or more days for this reason⁵.

They are also:

- more than twice as likely as their peers to have additional learning needs⁶;
- much more likely to have social, emotional and mental health needs as their primary area of need⁷;
- more likely to be excluded from school than their non-care experienced peers⁸;
- more than twice as likely to be suspended⁹;
- commonly spending days in internal exclusion¹⁰.

1 Department for Education (2023). *Pupil Absence in Schools in England. Autumn and spring term 2022/23*

2 <https://www.tes.com/magazine/teaching-learning/general/how-to-fix-pupil-attendance-research-view>

3 Education and Skills Funding Agency (2023). *Pupil Premium Allocations 2022 to 2023*

4 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

5 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

6 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

7 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

8 Department for Education (2023). *Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England. Summer term 2021/22*

9 Department for Education (2023). *Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England. Summer term 2021/22*

10 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

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My daughter spent most of her time isolated in a room with her teaching assistant [TA], unable to access the classroom. She would be left alone while her TA ran an errand or supported another child. She had no support in the playground and her delayed communication skills meant she could not make friends . . . Her many appointments, therapies and surgeries impacted her attendance, but much of her absence was due to her being completely unable to attend school, crying and begging me not to make her go.

”

Adoption UK works with young people, parents and carers who are facing real barriers to accessing the education they are entitled to. We have analysed national attendance data available in England for this group, and existing research on the experiences of adoptive and kinship families across the UK.

This analysis has resulted in four key findings which suggest that the barriers to attendance faced by these children are not a result of poor engagement with education or lack of motivation to attend school. They are too often rooted in a system that is not skilled or resourced to effectively meet their learning, social and emotional, and mental health needs.

- Current methods of reporting absence are hiding a mental health crisis amongst school children.
- Poorly defined absence codes are masking the fact that schools are struggling to meet the needs of children who need the most support.
- Care experienced, disabled and chronically ill children and their families are being sanctioned for unavoidable absence – much of which is authorised by schools themselves.
- Even when children are in school, some are not able to take their seat in the classroom because schools cannot meet their needs. Instead, they are sitting outside class, in internal exclusion or sent home during the day.

The findings indicate that absence and persistent absence are symptoms of education systems and wider services – such as social care, health and mental health services – that simply cannot meet the needs of many children and their families.

Schools are struggling to recruit experienced staff. Education welfare services are overwhelmed. Children face long waiting lists for assessments, diagnoses and support, especially in mental health services. Families are struggling with a cost of living crisis, the lasting impacts of the pandemic, and essential services across health, care and education that are under increasing strain. The resources being used to monitor schools and harass families could be better directed to resourcing schools and other services to support families and break the barriers to attendance.

All previously looked after children are care experienced. Most have additional needs. The strategies and solutions that will support improved attendance for this group are likely to have benefits for many others with similar needs. When we get it right for the children facing the biggest challenges, we get it right for all.

Recommendations

We call upon governments to commit to a 4-point action plan to break the barriers to attendance for adopted and kinship care children.

Understand the children

Collect and use national data to improve understanding of previously looked after children's needs and to assess the effectiveness of measures already in place to support them.

Equip the teachers

Improve training for education professionals on the impact of care experience, adverse early experiences, neglect, abuse and trauma, and conditions which disproportionately impact care experienced children such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).

Know the needs

Improve procedures for early identification of learning needs and ensure prompt access to assessment, diagnosis and support for all previously looked after children.

Review the codes

Review the codes used to record pupil absence including the addition of a mental health code.

Throughout this report we use the following terminology:

Previously looked after child: a child who has previously been in the care of the state but has moved to a permanent home through an adoption order (AO), special guardianship order (SGO), child arrangements order (CAO) or (in Scotland) a Kinship Care Order (KCO). All data from the Department of Education in England that is used in this report is based on this definition.

Looked after child: a child who is in the care of the state, usually in foster care (including kinship foster care) or a residential setting or looked after at home.

Adopted child: a child who has previously been in the care of the state but has moved to a permanent home through an adoption order.

Kinship care: a formal or informal arrangement where a child is cared for full time by a member of their extended family or a friend of the family. Some will be cared for under legal permanence orders including special guardianship, kinship care and child arrangements orders. Some may be cared for as part of kinship foster care arrangements and are legally still looked after children. In this report 'kinship' is used to refer to previously looked after children in the care of their extended family or friends via a legal permanence order because the Department for Education in England provides attendance data for this group. Many of the children in other kinship arrangements have the same needs in school, and this report's recommendations will also apply to them.

Care experienced: any person who has been in state care at any point during their childhood, including looked after and previously looked after children.



Measuring attendance

All nations of the UK produce guidance for schools on measuring and managing attendance. Pupils can be marked 'present' or 'absent' at each half day session, with a range of codes for recording the nature of the absence and whether it is authorised or unauthorised. There are at least 30 different codes in use in schools across the UK.

Absence can be authorised due to illness, medical/dental appointments, authorised family holidays and religious observance. Other circumstances, such as bereavement, participation in a licensed performance, or exceptional leave can also be recorded as authorised absences, but each nation has its own set of codes for these circumstances, with a mixture of specific codes and categories for 'other' reasons.

Absence will be recorded as unauthorised if it does not meet the criteria for an authorised absence, or if the reason for absence is not known. Lateness can also be recorded as an unauthorised absence.

In some nations, absence reporting differentiates pupils who have higher levels of absence. In England, pupils are classed as persistently absent if they miss 10% or more of possible sessions or severely absent if they miss 50%. In Wales, guidance was recently amended to say that missing 10% of possible sessions is considered persistent absence.

In England, the Department for Education (DfE) publishes attendance data for children with previously looked after arrangements (adoption order, special guardianship order or child arrangements order) based on recorded eligibility for post-LAC pupil premium funding. In 2021/22, the DfE recorded 30,278 adopted children, 20,037 children with special guardianship orders, and 5,569 children with child arrangements orders. When discussing attendance data, we use this group as a proxy for all previously looked after children in schools in England, with the caveat that those who have not been declared eligible for post-LAC pupil premium funding are not included in these figures.

Guidance documents on attendance, including complete lists of absence reporting codes, can be found on the relevant government websites for each nation.



Attendance: a national debate

School attendance has become a topic of national debate in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, with government data showing that levels of absence and persistent absence have been rising since schools fully re-opened after successive lockdowns.

In February 2022, the Welsh government published a report recognising that school closures during the pandemic had resulted in worsening attendance¹¹. By May 2023, the Department for Education in England was promising new support to tackle post pandemic absence¹² and the Children's Commissioner for England had committed to "a bold programme of work" around improving attendance, focusing particularly on children in care, with the aim of 100% of children being able to attend school¹³. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education held a special summit to address serious school attendance issues in October 2023, and the newly-appointed Children's Commissioner identified education as a priority in his new role.

The drive to improve attendance often focuses on good attendance as a factor in good exam results, and it is true that those who have fewer absences, on average, achieve better results¹⁴. Yet many children face significant barriers to attendance including chronic ill health, disability, responsibilities as young carers and mental health needs. Government attendance data shows rates of absence among children with special and additional educational needs are disproportionately high. For many, it is likely that the barriers to attendance that they face are also barriers to high attainment – a double blow.

A 2023 Public First report¹⁵ found that there has been a fundamental breakdown in the relationship between the school system and parents across the socioeconomic spectrum since Covid-19. In England, approaches to managing attendance were seen as "increasingly draconian" by families. Sanctions were seen as "irrelevant and antagonistic".

For parents whose children have reasonably good attendance, repeated communications about short absences due to illness are counter-productive. For those facing significant barriers to attendance, letters, fines and other punitive interventions do nothing to remove the barriers.

For families facing the most extreme challenges – mental health crises, children being drawn into criminal exploitation, chronic and severe ill health – the prospect of poor exam results in the future is just one more thing to add to their anxieties.

Yet, behind the preoccupation with topline attendance statistics, guidance documents for schools are actually clear that the first approach should be one of identifying barriers to attendance and providing support to children and families.

In England, for example, guidance¹⁶ states that schools should "support pupils and parents by working together to address any in-school barriers to attendance" and "support pupils and parents to access any support they may need". Scottish guidance¹⁷ notes that "school attendance issues cannot easily be separated from the relationships, behaviours and wellbeing of the pupils and wider school community and it is important that schools view the promotion of attendance in this context."

11 Rowlands, M (2022). *Attendance review – implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for school attendance*.

12 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-tackle-post-pandemic-absence-rates-with-new-support>

13 <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/statement/new-support-for-absence-rates-announced-statement-in-response-from-the-childrens-commissioner/>

14 Department for Education (2015). *The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4: 2012 to 2013 academic year*.

15 Burtonshaw, S. & Dorrell, E (2023). *Listening to and learning from parents in the attendance crisis*.

16 Department for Education (2022). *Working together to improve school attendance*.

17 Scottish Government (2019). *Included, engaged and involved part 1: promoting and managing school attendance*.

However, schools are not obliged to follow non statutory guidance and, while there is much more that schools could be doing, they cannot solve the attendance crisis alone. Not only do some families face complex challenges that go well beyond the scope of a school to support, but the education system itself entrenches inequalities for some groups of children, including those who are previously looked after by the state.

Unequal barriers

It is clear that barriers to attendance affect some children more than others.

Children from a background of economic disadvantage are more likely to be absent from school than their peers¹⁸. National attendance data suggests that children with special or additional educational needs or disabilities are also more likely to be absent from school. Children with a social worker, including looked after children, have higher levels of absence¹⁹. These three groups of children, already facing significant vulnerabilities, are more likely to experience the additional negative impact of barriers to school attendance and national guidance documents on attendance recognise this.

However, there is another group of vulnerable children who we know are likely to have faced considerable disadvantage, are more likely to be suspended from school, and experience lower levels of attainment than their peers. This group is previously looked after children, including those who are adopted or living in permanent families with a special guardianship order (SGO), child arrangements order (CAO) or kinship care order (KCO) after a period in care. These children are largely invisible in guidance relating to attendance.

Adoption UK research among adoptive families, adoptees and education professionals over several years demonstrates the particular vulnerabilities of adopted children in school. Among kinship families, access to education is also a significant concern. The Kinship charity's annual survey in 2022 found that half of kinship carers said their child had additional educational needs and 42% said that it had been 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to access support for them.²⁰

Previously looked after children are more than twice likely to be suspended from school than their non-care experienced peers and are more likely to face permanent exclusion²¹.

“

The teachers didn't understand the huge sense of shame and rejection that adopted children can feel. They always seemed to take a negative view of my son. They put him in isolation when he did something wrong, suspended him several times and then permanently excluded him. It was the ultimate rejection for him. He was starting to come to terms with his issues around rejection but now he's in a pupil referral unit. His behaviour has gone drastically downhill with knock-on effects for the whole family. As a teacher myself, I do feel that all teaching staff need better training to understand care experienced children's needs and how to help them in school.

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18 Education Endowment Foundation (2023). *Evidence brief on improving attendance and support for disadvantaged pupils*

19 Foundations (2023). *School non-attendance by children with a social worker in the UK: A rapid overview of extent, risk factors and interventions*

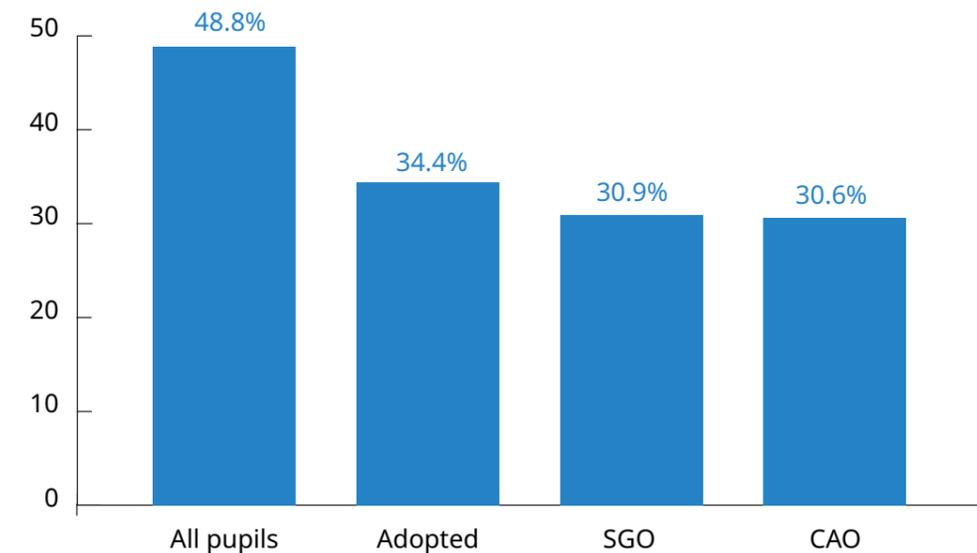
20 Turner, S (2022). *The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022*

21 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>

In England, Department for Education data on special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) shows that looked after children are twice as likely to have SEND as their peers²². Although the DfE does not publish data on SEND among previously looked after children, Adoption UK research suggests that rates of SEND are at least as high, if not higher, among adopted children²³, and, just like looked after children, previously looked after children are far more likely to have social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH) as their primary area of need when compared to other children with SEND.

This group of children fall behind their classmates at the end of primary school and in their final examinations. Attainment data available in England for KS2 (aged 11) and KS4 (aged 16) shows consistently poorer attainment and progress for previously looked after children²⁴.

Figure 1: Average KS4 Attainment 8 Score (2021/22) for all pupils and previously looked after pupils (Source:DfE)



This is stopping people from reaching their full potential and having a significant impact on their lives. Adopted young people are twice as likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET) as their peers²⁵. Reflecting on their experiences of education, 30% of adult adoptees said that school was difficult for them most of the time and only 19% felt that their exam results at 16 were a fair reflection of their abilities²⁶.

“

No-one listened. I got bullied. They didn't do anything. I didn't do my work 'cos I didn't understand half of what was going on.

Amy, adopted young person.

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22 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england>

23 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

24 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2020>

25 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

26 Adoption UK (2020). *Better Futures*

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There was no awareness of or desire to address my immaturity or family complications. These were just never on any school's radar. Consequently, I was treated as variously 'thick', 'lazy' or 'rebellious' . . . I was just written off.

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Karl, adopted young person²⁷

By all measures, previously looked after children are identifiable as a particularly vulnerable cohort of children in our schools, who are likely to need considerable support in order to achieve and to thrive. There are nearly as many previously looked after children in our schools as there are looked after children and yet we know very little about the barriers to attendance for this group and, in most UK nations, data on their school attendance is not collected or published. In the push to improve attendance for groups of children identified as 'disadvantaged', the invisibility of previously looked after children in the data and guidance means that this extremely vulnerable group risks missing out on access to initiatives that might make a real difference to their chances in education.

In order to uncover previously looked after children's experiences of absence and attendance, Adoption UK has analysed Department for Education data in England (the only UK nation where it is available) and gathered evidence from reports on the lived experiences of previously looked after children and their parents and carers from across the UK.

National Attendance Data (England)

According to the most recent full-year Department for Education attendance data (2021/22), overall absence rates for previously looked after children were slightly lower, at 7.35% of sessions missed due to absence, than their peers (7.55%). The absence rate represents the percentage of half-day sessions missed out of a total of all possible sessions for all children.

Previously looked after children's absences are more likely to be classed as authorised (5.59%) than their peers (5.49%) and less likely to be classed as unauthorised (1.74% compared to 2.06%). 19.68% of previously looked after children were classed as persistently absent, compared to 22.5% of other children, although there were differences within the group. Adopted children had lower absence and lower persistent absence rates than children with special guardianship or child arrangements orders.

At first glance this data seems encouraging. However, when the reasons for absence are examined, it becomes clear that the pattern of absence among all previously looked after children is noticeably different from that of their peers. The data reveals that previously looked after children are more likely than others to be absent due to causes outside of their control. While the total rate of absence may not give cause for concern, the underlying reason for absence does.

- Previously looked after children are **less likely** than their peers to be absent due to illness.
- They are **more likely** to be absent due to attending appointments.
- They are **more likely** to be absent due to suspension and exclusion.
- They are **much more likely** to be absent due to 'other' reasons.

27 Adoption UK (2020). *Better Futures*

Figure 2: Rates of absence among previously looked after pupils compared to others (2021/22) (Source: DfE)

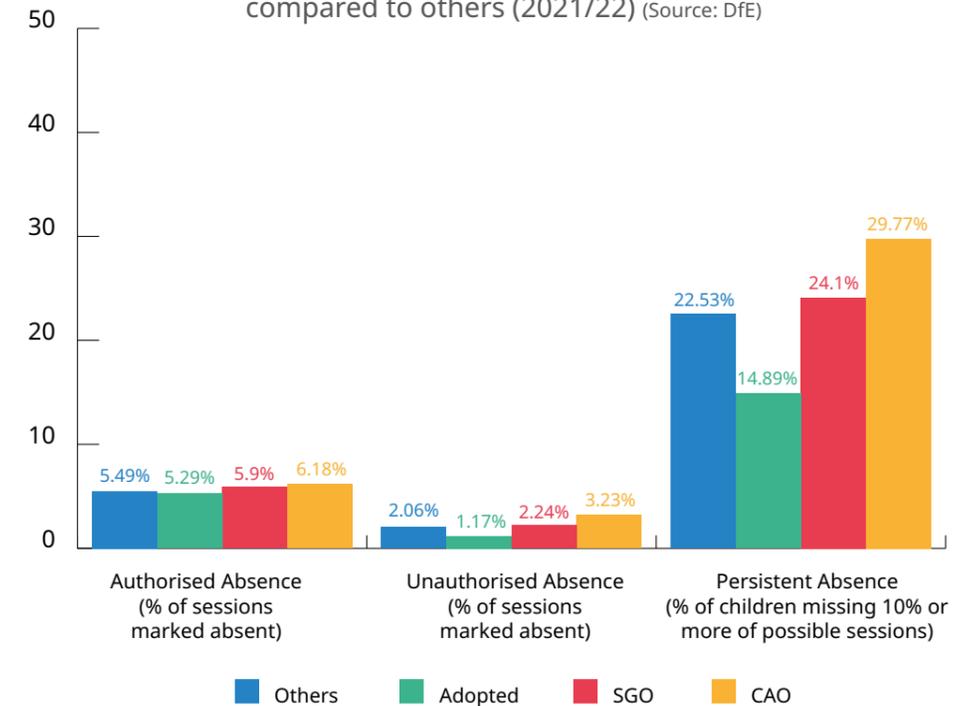
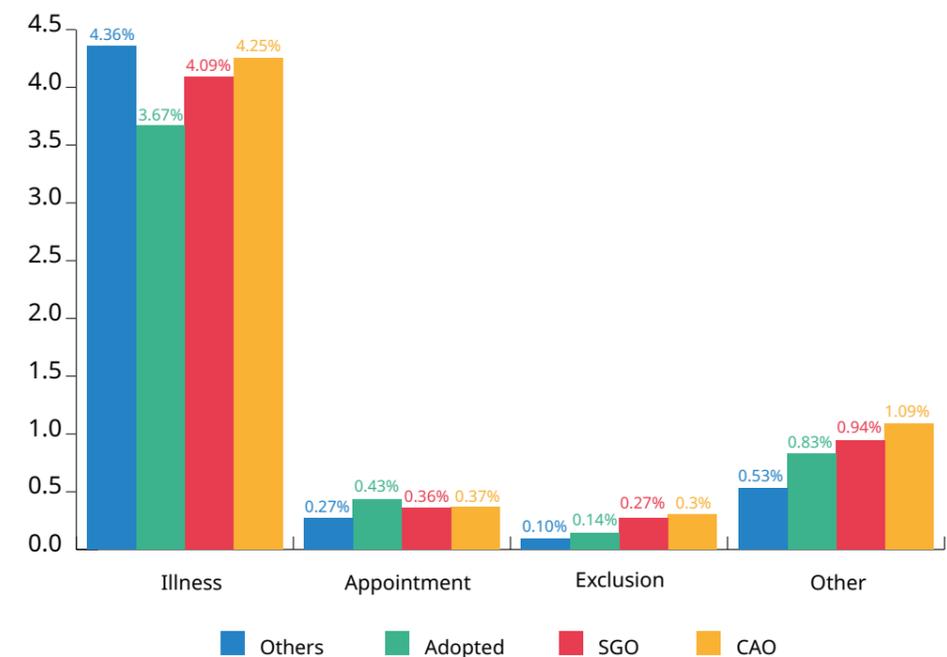


Figure 3: Reasons for authorised absence among previously looked after pupils compared to others (2021/22) (Source: DfE)



The data about school attendance in England, and analysis of research in the other nations of the UK where data is not available, reveals a highly complex picture of absence amongst previously looked after children. The picture is likely to be equally complex amongst other cohorts of children who need extra support with learning. It is clear that, in order to decrease absence, policy makers must look beyond the headline statistics and understand what is really preventing children from attending school.

Key Findings

1. Current methods of reporting absence are hiding a mental health epidemic amongst school children.

In 2021, the NHS estimated that one in six children had a probable mental health condition – five in every classroom – and that children with mental health conditions were twice as likely to be persistently absent as those without²⁸.

Previously looked after children are actually less likely to be absent due to sickness than their peers. It is clear that parents and guardians value their children's attendance at school and ensure they attend when they are well enough to do so.

However, *The Adoption Barometer 2023* – based on a survey nearly of 3,000 adopters and adoptees – found that 39% of adopted children had missed one or more days of school due to concerns about their wellbeing or mental health during 2022, and 16% had missed five or more days for this reason, suggesting that a significant proportion of absence reported as 'illness' among this group of children may actually be related to poor mental health.

“

I suffered with anxiety and imposter syndrome during the later years of high school which affected my confidence greatly.

Claire, adult adoptee

It was all too much for me and my anxiety.

Luke, adopted young person²⁹

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Current methods of reporting absence obscure the extent of absence due to mental ill health. It may be recorded as 'illness' if parents and carers are able to provide the medical evidence required by the school, but Westminster's Education Select Committee enquiry found that where absence from school due to mental health challenges could not be corroborated by medical evidence it was often recorded as unauthorised absence. The report recommended the introduction of a 'mental health' absence code to record the extent of the problem and ensure that parents and carers were not sanctioned inappropriately³⁰, but in December 2023, the Department for Education rejected that proposal³¹. At present, no UK nation allows for the recording of absence due to mental ill health separately from 'illness'.

Absence due to poor mental health cannot be fixed by bombarding parents with reminders about the importance of good attendance nor setting stringent attendance targets for schools. It will require a comprehensive plan for meeting the growing mental health needs of a generation of young people, joining up all the overlapping systems that need to work together in order to support young people, such as social care, health and mental health services. **For previously looked after children, it will also mean providing consistent, expert and trauma-sensitive mental health support to address their specific needs.**

²⁸ NHS Digital (2021). *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021 – wave 2 follow up to the 2017 survey*.

²⁹ Adoption UK (2020). *Better Futures*

³⁰ House of Commons Education Committee (Sept 2023). *Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils*. HC 970

³¹ Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils: Government response to the Committee's Seventh Report - Education Committee (parliament.uk)

2. Poorly defined absence codes are masking the fact that schools are struggling to meet the needs of children who need the most support.

Although previously looked after children are less likely than their peers to be absent from school due to illness, the DfE data in England shows that they are much more likely to be absent due to 'other' reasons.

Each nation of the UK uses a system of codes for recording absence, as described on page 6. Schools in all nations have the option of recording an authorised absence as 'other' but what is included as 'other' varies from nation to nation:

- In Wales and England, the 'other' category, which is recorded as code 'C' in school registers, covers exceptional leaves of absence, participation in a licensed performance (such as acting or musical performance), temporary part-time timetables, and absence due to pregnancy.
- In Scotland, there are specific reporting categories for 'extended leave' (which is reported separately from other attendance data) and 'absence due to exceptional circumstances', as well as a list of what can be counted as 'other authorised absence' including bereavement, religious observance, attendance at social care or legal proceedings, and sporting and cultural events.
- In Northern Ireland 'extended leave' is reported separately from 'other' absences. There are separate codes for participation in performances, bereavement and religious observance, as well as a code for 'other exceptional circumstances' although these circumstances are not defined.
- All nations also have codes for recording children who are not in school but are accessing an approved educational activity (e.g. school trip, work experience) and therefore not counted as absent. However, what is included in these codes varies from nation to nation. For example, Northern Ireland records attendance at CAMHS mental health support as an approved activity (and therefore not an absence) but other nations would record this as a medical/dental appointment absence.

The complexity of the systems for recording absence, the differences in national guidance, and the different interpretations used by schools makes it very difficult to get a clear picture of what is really happening.

Moreover, since attendance data for previously looked after children is not collected or published in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland, our analysis can only consider data available in England.

In England, the breadth of the code C 'other' category means that it is impossible to know the true reason why so many previously looked after children are marked absent with this code. However, it is probable that absences due to licensed performances and pregnancy are least likely. Therefore, we must assume that previously looked after children are far more likely than their peers to be taking leaves of absence or have agreed part-time attendance at school.

According to *Working together to improve school attendance* (non-statutory guidance in England), leaves of absence should only be granted in "exceptional circumstances"³² at the discretion of the head teacher, although the guidance gives no examples of what might constitute exceptional circumstances.

³² Department for Education (2022). *Working together to improve school attendance. Guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities*.

Part-time timetables should be used “In very exceptional circumstances, where it is in a pupil’s best interests ... to meet their individual needs” although this “should not be used to manage a pupil’s behaviour.”³³

Adopted and kinship children are therefore disproportionately absent due to schools agreeing to part time attendance, leaves of absence and potentially for a range of other reasons, and every one of these absences has been authorised by the school.

The way these code ‘C’ absences are recorded and reported obscures the full story behind them, but Adoption UK research suggests three uncomfortable realities: some children are told by their schools not to come in; children with additional learning needs are more likely to miss out on education; and some children are missing out on their education altogether.

Some children are told not to come in by their schools

As many as 8% of children in kinship care are on reduced timetables at school.³⁴ Adoption UK has heard from many families whose children are attending school part time, have been sent home from school for reasons other than illness, or asked to stay home when the class is going on trips due to lack of staffing. It seems likely that code C absences include children who have been told not to attend school.

“

Our son is now 15 and diagnosed with ADHD, autism, anxiety and FASD. He has had an EHCP since he was seven. He hasn't been full time in school since a short spell in year 3. School have asked me to keep him at home when staffing is low and I have frequently been asked to come into school to take him home when he becomes dysregulated. Despite excellent physical health, his attendance is often around 70%. The impact on our family is huge. Working is impossible for me, and my other children miss out on so much because our whole week revolves around whether my son can be in school successfully. We are now at the point where some days it's easier for all of us if we don't try to send him as he is much calmer and happier without the pressure of school. This makes us angry and sad as with the right support and if the provision on his EHCP [education, health and care plan] was consistently delivered, he could really flourish.

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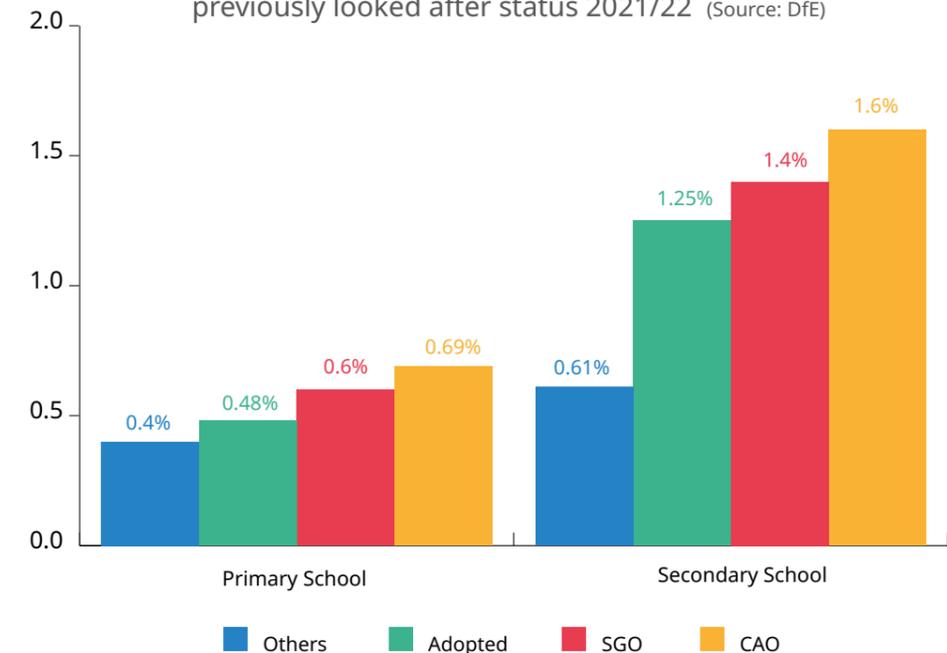
As children move through education and the pressure to achieve becomes stronger, many are struggling. Challenges which were managed well in the more personal and less pressured environment of primary school can come to the fore in larger, more impersonal secondary schools, where rates of suspensions and exclusions are significantly higher.

Code C absences are also higher at secondary school where they are at least twice as common among previously looked after children as their peers.

³³ Department for Education (2022). *Working together to improve school attendance*

³⁴ Turner, S (2022). *The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022*

Figure 4: Rates of Code C absence by school type and previously looked after status 2021/22 (Source: DfE)



Much more needs to be done to understand the nature and use of these Code C absences. Every child is entitled to a suitable full-time education. If children’s schools cannot support them to attend full time, this is a problem that must be resolved.

Children with additional learning needs are more likely to be denied their right to full time education because their needs cannot be met

Rates of absence are disproportionately high among children with special educational needs and disabilities and previously looked after children are disproportionately likely to have these needs. While 70% of adoptive parents in England agree that the provision outlined in their child’s education, health and care plan (EHCP) is sufficient for meeting their needs, only just over half say that this provision is being fully delivered. In Scotland the situation is similar, with fewer than two thirds of parents agreeing that their child’s co-ordinated support plan (CSP) is sufficient, and only 49% saying it is fully implemented.³⁵

From failures in transport to school, to missing trips and activities because there is no appropriate support, to being asked to stay home because the teaching assistant is away from work, there are myriad ways in which children with the most complex needs can miss out on their educational entitlements.

Part-time timetables, flexi schooling arrangements and staggered returns after school holidays can all be effective short-term strategies to support attendance for children who are struggling. However, if these strategies are relied upon by schools to cope with insufficient resourcing to meet children’s needs, the reality is that children are being denied an education by the very system that is supposed to be providing it.

³⁵ Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

Some children are missing out on their education altogether

In cases where the system breaks down completely, families can be left searching for other schools that can meet their children's needs and, too often, finding that they do not exist. Meanwhile, children remain on roll in schools they can no longer realistically attend and risk becoming part of ever increasing 'persistently absent' statistics.

In 2022, 16% of adoptive parents changed their child's school to find a setting that could meet their needs, and 7% home educated their child. The overwhelming majority of these parents say that home education was not their first choice and more than 80% would prefer their child to be in school.³⁶

“

Our daughter has significant and complex needs and disabilities, including FASD. She began her schooling at a mainstream school with a specialist unit for physical disabilities and full time 1-1 support but, after we moved to a new area, the only option was a mainstream school on a part-time timetable. Things quickly deteriorated. Her many appointments, therapies and surgeries impacted her attendance, but much of her absence was due to her being completely unable to attend school, crying and begging me not to make her go. She became very unhappy and angry, waking more than 20 times in the night, distressed and inconsolable.

It became clear that the support at school was not being fully put in place. My daughter spent most of her time isolated in a room with her teaching assistant (TA), unable to access the classroom. She would be left alone while her TA ran an errand or supported another child. She had no support in the playground and her delayed communication skills meant she could not make friends. Her therapy consisted entirely of her using animals to re-enact how unhappy she was at school. When I challenged them, the school admitted that they could not meet her needs and it was agreed that a special school was needed.

We then had 18 months of consultations, communications failures and apparent inaction. The council did not offer any alternative provision, meaning my child was stuck in a school that could not meet her needs. The specialist trauma-informed school I hoped would be suitable did initially offer her a place, but the local authority turned this down. Later, even that school withdrew the offer as my daughter's needs were too complex. It became obvious that there were no schools that could meet my child's needs. Eventually I requested EOTAS [education other than at school] provision and, after a lot of persuasion, the local authority agreed.

Now, nearly a year later, she is attending alternative provision two days each week and is finally making progress, but she has lost four years of education and on top of everything else she is now also having to process school trauma. The system has completely failed my daughter.

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All children, including those with complex needs and disabilities, are entitled to a suitable, full-time education. However, for a small number of children there are simply no suitable mainstream or special schools. Urgent consideration must be given to a review of the way that specialist provision is delivered and, where parents step up where the education system has fallen short, local authorities must have a statutory duty to provide support, including funding for tuition and educational provision as well as funded access to exams that will lead to qualifications.

3. Care experienced, disabled and chronically ill children and their families are being penalised for unavoidable absence – much of which is authorised by schools themselves.

Adopted and previously looked after children are more likely than their peers to miss school due to medical and other related appointments (see Figure 3). This is to be expected since the legacy of adverse early experiences, including abuse, neglect and trauma, experienced by the majority of previously looked after children is likely to result in long term health and developmental impacts necessitating more frequent visits to healthcare professionals.

Previously looked after children are considerably more likely than their peers to be diagnosed with a range of developmental and neurological conditions including fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, autism and ADHD. Nearly one quarter of adopted children will have speech, language and communications difficulties³⁷.

Some children may also be receiving ongoing specialist therapeutic support. While schools rightly encourage parents and guardians to schedule routine appointments outside of the school day, this becomes impossible where children are receiving regular health or therapeutic services which often involve travelling some distance and can leave a child too emotionally or physically exhausted to quickly return to the classroom afterwards.

Under pressure to meet stringent attendance targets, many schools have automated systems for flagging up poor attendance to parents, as well as systems for rewarding children for good attendance, and these systems are still triggered when an absence, for example due to a medical appointment, is authorised by the school. Poor attendance rates on a child's school record will follow them into employment. Yet, every one of these appointments will have been authorised by the school. In these circumstances, sanctions for poor attendance are seen as irrelevant and antagonistic by parents³⁸, including sanctions on children, such as not allowing them end of term treats because of unavoidable absence from school. Such measures erode the relationship between schools and parents.

Even more seriously, children with chronic ill health and disabilities are protected from indirect discrimination by the Equality Act 2010. Policies that disproportionately negatively impact disabled children by punishing them or withdrawing benefits to them because of unavoidable absence caused by their illness or disability may amount to a breach of children's protections in law.

When children are attending medical appointments which are authorised by school and which may result in improvements in their attendance and ability to learn, it makes no sense to send these families letters about absence and penalise their children. In Northern Ireland, guidance allows for attendance at mental health support services to be recorded not as an absence, but as an approved activity. Other nations should follow suit in recognising the importance of taking care of children's mental health and wellbeing as a factor in long-term improvements in both attainment and attendance and introduce codes that ensure that approved appointments for therapy, management of chronic illness or mental health support do not count towards children's overall absence rates.

³⁶ Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

³⁷ Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

³⁸ Burtonshaw, S. & Dorrell, E (2023). *Listening to and learning from parents in the attendance crisis.*

4. Even when children are in school, some are not able to take their seat in the classroom because schools cannot meet their needs.

While national data is enough to show that achieving full attendance will be much more complex than it may appear, it tells us nothing about children's access to learning once they have entered the building and been marked present.

Many children are being marked present but later taken home after a phone call to their parents or guardians. Others are marked present but then spend the day in internal exclusion. Many are unable to access learning because the support they need is not available.

11% of adopted children were sent home from school for reasons other than illness in 2022, without a formal suspension being recorded.³⁹

19% of adopted children experienced one or more days in internal exclusion in 2022.⁴⁰

18% of adoptive parents have been told their child's school cannot meet their needs because of budget constraints; 71% agree that it feels like a battle to get the support their child needs in school.⁴¹

The data is hiding the fact that many children are marked present but are in fact missing out on the education to which they are entitled.

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My daughter is in a mainstream school. Her EHCP [education, health and care plan] entitled her to full time 1:1 support with a highly differentiated curriculum but increasingly, her TA was being called away to do other things. One afternoon the TA took another group of children on a school trip and my daughter was left to work alone on an iPad with no support. Predictably, my daughter did not stay on task and ended up accessing inappropriate content on YouTube. She was very frightened by what she saw, and I had to file a formal complaint.

At the start of year 5, her key worker reduced her hours, leaving my daughter with no support one afternoon each week in breach of the provision in her EHCP. On days when a large proportion of TAs have been on religious leave, my daughter has been given colouring in. The school said they could no longer support her needs unless they got further funding from the council. A request for more funding was made, but this was turned down.

Following that, my daughter's EHCP was amended, removing a large part of her support, despite professional reports stating that she still needed it. Now I cannot do anything about her lack of support as it is no longer stated in her plan. I have taken it to tribunal but have been given a date of September 2024 for a final hearing, too late to plan for transition to secondary school. I fear that my daughter will be left without an appropriate school place at all.

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Official attendance data provides only a partial picture of the barriers to attendance faced by previously looked after children. When we factor in all those who are marked present but are back home before the end of the day, who spend time in internal exclusion, who are absent due to mental health concerns or who are home educated despite their parents wanting them to be in school, we see that up to half could be struggling to attend in school or be in lessons regularly.

Efforts to ensure all children receive the high-quality education they deserve must go well beyond simply ensuring that children are marked present in the register. Where schools lack the support, funding, training and time to meet the needs of all children, those who need the most support are likely to lose vital weeks, months and even years of education.

39 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*
40 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*
41 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023*

Conclusion

The 'attendance crisis' is a symptom of education systems and wider services – such as social care, health and mental health services – that simply cannot meet the needs of far too many children. This has become even more evident since the recent dramatic increase in absence from school in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Adopted and kinship children are not well understood within the education system. They are more likely than their peers to be absent because of mental ill health, unmet learning needs and essential medical appointments. Only when we improve understanding, training and support will we improve attendance.

What is more, the strategies and solutions that will support improved attendance for adopted and kinship children are likely to have benefits for many others with similar needs. Once we are able to give these children the education to which they are entitled, we will be breaking the barriers for all children.

Recommendations

1. Collect and use national data to improve understanding of this cohort and to assess the effectiveness of measures already in place to support them.

Where data is not collected on children's outcomes, it is impossible to be certain that their needs are being met, or that measures designed to support them are having a beneficial effect. In England, Scotland and Wales, additional funding is available to local authorities or to schools to promote the education of care experienced children, yet there is little analysis available as to how this funding is being used to support previously looked after children, or whether it is having a positive impact. Where systems are already in place to support the education, mental health and wellbeing of previously looked after children, it is essential that these are coordinated, effective and subject to appropriate scrutiny to measure their effectiveness and highlight best practice.

Governments should:

- In all nations, collect and publish data on the educational outcomes of previously looked after children including attainment, attendance, special/additional educational/support needs, suspensions and exclusions.
- In Wales, empower the virtual schools that are being established across the nation to include all care experienced learners in their oversight of provision and monitoring of standards alongside looked after learners.
- In England, commission research into the effectiveness of the designated teacher role, the virtual school and the use of pupil premium plus for previously looked after children and use the findings as the basis for updated, evidence-based guidance.

2. Improve training for education professionals on the impact of care experience, early adverse experiences, neglect, abuse and trauma, and conditions which disproportionately impact care experienced children such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).

There is a growing body of neuroscientific research demonstrating the long-term physical, psychological and developmental impacts of exposure to traumatic and adverse early childhood experiences. Changes to children's threat processing, reward processing, autobiographical memory, and executive control systems create latent vulnerabilities to a range of future mental health conditions⁴², and can have significant impacts on children's ability to cope in the school environment and to attend to learning effectively. Yet just 45% of adoptive parents feel that their child's teachers have a good understanding of the specific needs of adopted and care experienced learners⁴³.

Governments should:

- In all nations, ensure the inclusion of specific training about the impact on child development of adverse early experiences, trauma, abuse, neglect, and pre-natal alcohol exposure as part of initial training, early career development and continuing professional development for all education professionals including teachers and education welfare officers.
- In England, amend Teacher Standard 5 to include care experienced children in the list of those cohorts with particular needs of which teachers must have a clear understanding.

3. Improve procedures for early identification of additional learning needs and ensure prompt access to assessment, diagnosis and support for all care experienced children.

The Education Policy Institute has demonstrated that primary school children need to stay in one place and stay visible to the same professionals over long periods of time in order to access diagnosis of and support for their special educational needs⁴⁴. Children who have experienced chaotic early lives, have moved around the care system and may have moved to a different part of the country as a result of being placed with a permanent family and are therefore more likely to be disadvantaged by missed opportunities to identify and support any additional needs. These children should not face any further barriers once they are settled in school.

Governments should:

- In England, amend the SEND Code of Practice to include an automatic entitlement to an assessment of education, health and care needs for all care experienced children on the request of parents/guardians, schools or eligible children.
- In Scotland, amend guidance on co-ordinated support plans to include a requirement for education authorities to consider whether both looked after and previously looked after children may require a plan.

42 Armbruster-Genc, D. J. N. et al (2022). *Altered reward and effort processing in children with maltreatment experience: a potential indicator of mental health vulnerability.*

43 Adoption UK (2023). *Adoption Barometer 2023.*

44 Hutchinson, J (2021). *Identifying pupils with special education needs and disabilities.* Education Policy Institute.

- In Wales, consider whether the needs of care experienced children should be included in IDP plans as part of recently introduced ALN procedures.
- In Northern Ireland, embed partnerships with the Education Authority and other multi-disciplinary specialists when undertaking assessments as part of the implementation of the Adoption & Children Act (NI 2022)
- In England and Wales, introduce a statutory requirement for all schools to offer the equivalent of the personal education plan (PEP) for all previously looked after children in order to ensure continuity of support.

4. Review the codes used to record pupil absence including consideration of the addition of a mental health code.

It is time to review the way we categorise and record absence from school. In all nations of the UK the codes used to record reasons for pupil absence are open to interpretation and include 'other' codes which are too broad to give a clear picture of the drivers of poor attendance for the children with the highest needs. Children are being marked absent when attending essential medical and therapeutic appointments despite the school authorising these. The charities Square Peg and Not Fine in School have long called for a mental health absence code and this call has been backed by Westminster's recent Education Select Committee report. Adoption UK supports this call for a change in all nations which would ensure that the impact of on school attendance of poor mental health and lack of access to support is properly recorded so that solutions can be driven by accurate data.





Our vision is a society in which every child or young person who is unable to live with their birth parents can thrive in childhood and has an equal chance of a bright future as an adult.

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