

# Overview & Scrutiny

## Children & Young People Scrutiny Commission

<b>Date of meeting:</b> 11 March 2024
<b>Title of report:</b> The Local Authority's approach to managing school attendance and Emotionally Based School Non-attendance (EBSNA)
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<b>Report Summary:</b> <u>Summary of what the Commission is looking for:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explanation of what persistent and severe absence is - and the role and duties and responsibilities of schools, the LA and parents in relation to this.</li><li>• Data on persistent and severe absence for Hackney - trend data, how does the borough compare to national and regional trends and comparator boroughs</li><li>• Local data on what we know about children who are severe absence (SA) or persistent absence (PA) from school? What are the associations between mental health needs, SEND, gender, ethnic groups or other vulnerabilities or disadvantage and SA, PA and EBSA</li><li>• What is the local approach to addressing SA and PA, is there a defined policy to support schools and parents - noting the new national guidance, how are services working collaboratively to address pupil needs, support parents and schools etc. (CAMHS, Early Help, Education, CSC etc) and key elements of the current and future service offer etc.</li><li>• Explanation of EBSA - how this is defined and relates to SA and PA, what data there is around pupils experiencing this - and the authorities collaborative approach to supporting children and families</li><li>• An understanding of the challenges that local teams face in this work - and strategies to overcome this.</li></ul>

# Report to the Children & Young People Scrutiny Commission

## 1. Background and key descriptors

- 1.1. Persistent absentees (PA) are categorised by having missed more than 10% of school sessions (each school day has two sessions) and severe absentees (SA) are categorised by having missed more than 50% of school sessions.
- 1.2. A child might fall into the category of persistent absenteeism following a five school day absence for a one off illness, depending on when that happens in the academic year (percentages are calculated from the first day of the autumn term) and as such, not all children in this category will stay in this category for very long, or have a more complex reason than a cough or a cold underpinning their absence.
- 1.3. Severely absent children will largely all have a complex network of reasons for their absences, or a significant and often chronic medical condition that impacts their capacity to attend.
- 1.4. Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is an umbrella term used to describe children who experience difficulties in attending school as a result of emotional factors. There are a range of factors that lead to their absence from school. Professionals are now using Emotionally Based Non-Attendance (EBSNA) rather than EBSA to describe these children.
- 1.5. The use of severe and persistent absence to categorise absence and together with differing interpretations for children's absence means that we do not have accurate data regarding children who experience Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance, both nationally and locally.
- 1.6. In an attempt to bridge this gap locally, data was collated from CAMHS, the Hackney Integrated SEND service, the Medical Needs Tuition Service and the Family Support Service in March 2023. At that time, 161 Hackney children were identified.
- 1.7. The term "School Refuser" has been used to describe children experiencing these difficulties. It implies that they have control over their non-attendance and locates the "problem" within the child or young person. This detracts from the environmental factors that could be considered instrumental in supporting the child or young person back to school, such as:
  - 1.7.1. Parental health difficulties
  - 1.7.2. bereavement
  - 1.7.3. being bullied at school
  - 1.7.4. unidentified special educational needs
  - 1.7.5. high levels of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms
- 1.8. Attendance has become a national educational focus particularly since Covid 19, since then we have seen attendance rates nationally fail to recover to their pre-pandemic levels
- 1.9. In September 2022, the Department for Education issued new guidance Working Together to Improve School Attendance.
- 1.10. The DfE have published [a set of revised guidance](#) that will become statutory on 19th August 2024
- 1.11. The two sets of attendance guidance both outline new and revised responsibilities for parents, schools and local authorities - these are currently not defined as an additional burden and at the time of writing have not come with additional funding.

- 1.12. [A grid outlining the key responsibilities of parents, school and local authorities in relation to attendance is available here.](#)

## 2. Hackney context

- 2.1. Following the guidance published in 2022, Hackney Education established the School Attendance Support Team (SAST).
- 2.2. The local authority has issued [local guidance outlining a graduated approach to support schools to improve attendance.](#)
- 2.3. The local authority has updated the Penalty Notice [Code of Conduct](#) to reflect the 'support first' strategy that underpins the most recent government attendance guidance.
- 2.4. SAST consists of 6 dedicated officers who offer advice and guidance to all schools (inclusive of independent schools, which in Hackney is a nationally unique picture and has meant a considerable additional resource needed to be made available) regarding attendance issues.
- 2.5. This service expansion came at an estimated cost of 300k to Hackney Education, and in an attempt to offset these costs the service established a trading arm.
- 2.6. The service trades with approximately 20% of schools across the borough and generates a revenue of around 90k. Officers in these commissioning schools hold direct casework and have a good understanding of each school's attendance data and underlying causes of non-attendance.
- 2.7. Whilst the traded service covers some costs incurred by the team, the two tiered system does prevent the team from being able to support schools and young people across all schools on a needs-led basis.
- 2.8. Core offer to all schools from SAST

### 2.8.1. Communication and Guidance

- Every school (maintained, academies, free and independent) has an allocated attendance officer who can be contacted for advice and guidance on individual cases
- Termly newsletters are disseminated across the network
- Advice and guidance sessions have been created. EBSNA training has been delivered through this network, free to schools
- Forums for Traveller pupils and Special Schools

### 2.8.2. Targeted support meetings

The team has now had at least initial meetings with over 75% of schools in the borough. However, despite repeated attempts to contact, some schools (11 primaries, 4 secondaries and 1 AP) continue to decline any involvement with the service. Outcomes from the meetings and non-participation in the offer are fed back to the School Improvement and Performance Team to inform a strategic understanding and more targeted school governance support.

### 2.8.3. Multidisciplinary Support for families

Where a need for some family support is identified in partnership with the school and the family themselves, a referral will be made via our Early Help Hub for some targeted intervention. Where a need is more complex and multi agency input is required, a school will be supported via their Team around the School to access this support and coordinate it.

#### 2.8.4. Legal intervention

In rare cases, when attendance cannot be improved over a sustained period and there is significant concern about the impact of this on a child's outcomes, SAST will advise on, and be part of the process of undertaking, statutory attendance processes as a last resort to improve a child's attendance.

### 3. Multi agency working

- 3.1. SAST have established partnership agreements with key services (Young Hackney, Educational Psychology Service, Re-engagement Unit, Medical Needs Tuition Service, Virtual School, Early Help). Agencies work more widely together on a case based approach e.g. CAMHS and Medical Needs Tuition Service.
- 3.2. Where appropriate, referrals are made for family support via the Early Help Hub, in partnership with the school and the family. In some cases, referrals may need to be made for a safeguarding assessment via the MASH. Families will be assessed using the [Hackney Child Wellbeing Framework](#).
- 3.3. The Medical Needs Tuition Service (MNTS) is a short term, interim offer for children too unwell to attend their school.
- 3.4. The [policy document](#) for the service describes how we are delivering this statutory service within Hackney.
- 3.5. MNTS offers one to one tuition from a qualified teacher for children who are unable to attend school due to ill health. It is not a full education offer and is not an alternative provision, the children being supported are on roll at a school that oversees their learning at the same time as MNTS.
- 3.6. MNTS aims to be part of supporting successful reintegration back into onsite schooling and in many cases this is possible within two terms
- 3.7. For children needing longer intervention, we need to consider a fuller alternative education offer which is currently unavailable in Hackney. The existing approach for these involves requesting Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments resulting in an Education, Health and Care Plan to formalise their additional needs and appropriate provision. This is adding pressure to this part of the system.
- 3.8. A better alternative would be to have an in-borough alternative provision to support children that might need it long term, or who might simply need longer than two terms to support a flexible, dual site offer before returning full time to a mainstream setting. This approach is incorporated in the Alternative Provision strategy ([reported to CYP Scrutiny Commission in November 2023](#))
- 3.9. SAST works closely with the [Virtual School](#) around tracking and improving the attendance of children with a social worker, sharing caseloads, holding reflective sessions and working together to deliver termly meetings in schools.
- 3.10. The team will soon be expanding, through funding secured through North East London Integrated Care Board (NEL ICB) to employ a full time Senior Family Support Practitioner and part time Psychologist, both posts will be fixed term for 1 year. These staff will support a pilot focused on Early Help and prevention, working with pupils whose attendance is between 70-90%. The aims of this pilot are:
  - 3.10.1. To gain a clearer understanding of the support needs of children and families whose absence from school is increasing.

- 3.10.2. To provide effective joint working at this early stage, plan and deliver interventions (to prevent escalating and rising needs) tailored to each child on a case by case basis, through a partnership approach working across agencies including Education, Health and the Early Help system, and working directly with the children and families
- 3.10.3. Identify how to strengthen the support across the system (e.g. training and development of the Early Help system to support these cases) and embed learning from the pilot work.
- 3.10.4. A Theory of Change and Driver Diagram will be developed as part of this pilot with partners working across Education (SAST and Educational Psychology), CAMHS and Early Help to support system-wide learning.
- 3.10.5. The feedback from a survey created by Hackney parents who have had lived experience of Emotionally Based School Avoidance completed by 55 parents was used to inform this pilot.
- 3.11. The [Hackney Emotionally Based School Avoidance Guidance](#) for schools and support services was launched in June 2023 and shared with schools, support services, including CAMHS and Social Care colleagues.
- 3.12. SAST and EPS are working together to try to embed the guidance around EBSNA in schools. A free training session has been offered to all schools based on the guidance and has been well received. To support this training, free group supervision sessions are going to be offered to schools so that expertise can be shared and school based professionals can become 'EBSNA experts.'
- 3.13. There are also links with Young Hackney to deliver the training to ensure a consistent message across the Council. Young Hackney are supporting 43 children experiencing EBSNA out of the 522 children they work with. This is approximately 8% of the cohort that they work with.
- 3.14. HiP conducted a survey in the summer term 2023. This was carried out in collaboration with Hackney officers and the report was shared across the Council with councillors and officers.
- 3.15. Following the publication of the HiP EBSA survey report, the EPS is arranging coffee mornings to support parents who have pupils experiencing EBSNA.
- 3.16. The Targeted Health Outreach Team is piloting a group for 13-18 year olds who are autistic or who are on the neurodevelopmental pathway for assessment.

#### **4. Data collation and available data sets**

- 4.1. The local authority has access to three attendance data sets
- 4.2. The first data set is the School census. This data is complete and final, and is available for all schools in Hackney and nationally. The data is collected retrospectively (one term behind) by the Department for Education and is usually reported in the third term following its collection. Currently, Hackney Education has historic school census data up to the end of 2022/23 academic year.
- 4.3. The school census data can be complemented by 'live' attendance data, available from two data sources:
  - 4.3.1. Data shared directly with schools with the Department of Education, and available to view via 'View your Data'.
  - 4.3.2. Currently there are 38 primary schools (out of 58) reporting data via this methodology, with 10 out of 16 secondary schools and 2 out of 3 special schools. This data has recently become available to download but does not yet feed into internal systems which limits the ability to utilise the data beyond viewing it (ie. it cannot be

matched to internal data, say, to the EHCP caseload which is held in an internal case management system).

4.3.3. Data shared with Hackney Education via an automated data transfer (“Orchestra”)

4.3.4. Currently there are 48 primary schools (out of 58) reporting data via this methodology, with 3 out of 16 secondary schools and 2 out of 3 special schools. This data is integrated into Hackney Education’s internal case management system, so allows caseworkers to view data alongside a child’s record. Furthermore, the data can be extracted and used to populate dashboards and reports in the Council’s corporate reporting tool, Qlik Sense. Development of a series of dashboards is underway currently to enable a better matching between attendance and other vulnerabilities, in particular CSC and EHCP

4.4. Access to reliable, live data is essential to ensuring that Hackney Council is making effective strategic decisions around attendance. Currently, our only reliable and complete data source that captures all the schools is the census. As there is a lag on receiving this data, we are not able to respond to emerging patterns and needs quickly enough.

4.5. Currently the SAST has a trading arm which means that we are able to offer a richer service to schools that choose to pay for it. Those schools are much more inclined to directly share pupil level register data with us via Orchestra, our internal data feed.

4.6. The resource-saving implications of having a reliable, live attendance data stream in-house are steep. It is an option to consider offering a full attendance response as a universal offer, as this would enable us to access a full, live data set which could support targeted work in every aspect of Children, Families and Education.

## **5. What the data we have is telling us**

### Local strengths

5.1. Overall the attendance data for Hackney compares well when compared to Inner London and National data in all areas.

5.2. The overall absence rate for all Hackney schools in 2022/23 is lower than the Inner London level and on par with national level.

5.3. The PA and SA rate are in line or below the National and Inner London average and the SA levels are decreasing within Hackney.

5.4. Overall attendance of special schools is higher than the Inner London and National Level from 2018/19-2022/23

5.5. FSM pupils in Hackney have consistently higher attendance than FSM pupils across Inner London and nationally. The four year average for FSM pupils in Hackney is 94.2% compared to 93.5% in Inner London and 92.7% nationally. This is replicated in both SA and PA figures for FSM pupils.

5.6. Attendance figures for pupils with a social worker are also better than the national average. In 2022/23, 30.5% of pupils with a social worker in Hackney were PA, whilst nationally this figure was 48.5%.

5.7. Pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), as well as those on the SEN Support register in Hackney Schools have consistently higher attendance rates than their equivalent cohorts nationally, as well as lower persistent absence.

Local areas for development

- 5.8. The overall absence rates in Hackney, both authorised and unauthorised have increased since the pandemic. This is in line with national data.
- 5.9. The PA rates have gradually increased each year between 2018-2023.
- 5.10. Whilst the attendance rates for pupils with a social worker is below national average, this is a rate that we would like target to improve the life chances of these young people
- 5.11. Whilst below national averages, the overall absence rate for FSM6 pupils (children entitled to free school meals, either currently or in the last 6 years) is slightly higher than Inner London and this needs to be an area of focus.
- 5.12. Overall attendance rates for pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller of Irish Heritage have the lowest attendance rates by ethnicity (85.8% and 79.3% in primary and 82.8% and 65% in secondary). Persistent absence for these two ethnicities are also particularly high in Hackney, with at least twice as high proportion as any other ethnicity. This again mirrors the national picture, where these two cohorts are also the ethnicities with the highest level of persistent absence.
- 5.13. White & Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils have had noticeably increasing levels of persistent absence.
- 5.14. As absence levels have increased over the last two academic years, so have the gaps between attendance levels of pupils with EHCPs and SEN Support and the non-SEND cohort. This mirrors the regional and national picture but must be an area of focus for the Local Authority.
- 5.15. Our current traded offer can make it difficult to effectively target the support where it is most needed; instead we are led by the school that has bought our services. This means that implementing a strategic approach to improve attendance is undermined as we are not able to invest our resources where the support is most needed.

**Areas requiring a strategic response**

- Formalising a cross-system response across Local Authority, Health and Community & Voluntary sector. A snapshot survey was carried out across a range of services and teams in spring 2023 which showed that 161 children were identified as experiencing EBSA, with a number of children are open to two or more services/teams, which demonstrates the possibility of good multi-agency working, but could suggest a level of duplication. It also raises the possibility of developing and improving our pathway to prevent attendance difficulties becoming EBSA, intervene earlier when issues are identified, enhance service user experience, improve outcomes and make more efficient use of resources. The need for a strategic response is reflected in some of the proposed actions for the refresh of the [City & Hackney Emotional Health and Wellbeing Strategy Action Plan](#).
- Within this cross-system response, considering whether a fully universal SAST offer from the local authority would be more cost-effective in terms of supporting better service delivery and a more targeted response around EBSNA (and attendance more widely) across the system. Currently the SAST service delivers a light touch offer to all schools inline with the guidance, and offer more intensive support and direct casework with traded schools (around 20% of schools in the borough).

**What are the challenges faced by local teams and strategies to overcome this****Challenges**

- Identifying and understanding the needs of this cohort against a backdrop of varying cultures, attitudes and knowledge in schools and the DfE messaging
- Understanding of GPs of the issues and appropriate responses
- Insufficient resources to spread the training required to identify this cohort
- A coordinated, system response to
  - the group of children who have the very lowest levels of school attendance
  - early identification and intervention/diversion away from higher levels of non-school attendance
- Early responses to parental concerns about struggling to get their children to school and links to masking difficulties in school
- Understanding and responding to the needs of autistic children
- A lack of appropriate alternative provision to support children experiencing EBSNA

**Strategies**

- Alternative Provision strategy (linked earlier in report)
- Role of GPs - develop a resource pack linked to training sessions
- Communication plan for schools, GPs, parent/carers and internal Hackney partners
- Pilot project to develop systemic approach to early identification and intervention
- Alternative provision for children to support their transition back into regular school attendance - transition team nature group, art sessions at Linden
- Creative, outdoor learning pilot for children with neurodiversity/EBSNA/out of school
- Coordinate a cross-system agreement to support identification and multi-agency working around children with EBSNA
- Pilot project embedding a Family Support Worker and part time psychologist in School Attendance Support Team (SAST)