

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 Tuesday 25 May 2021**

## **Disadvantaged pupils least likely to return to school after lockdown – new report**

- **25% increase in persistently absent pupils**
- **61% of persistently absent pupils were eligible for free school meals, in contact with children’s services or had special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)**
- **Over half (54%) of fixed term exclusions issued to pupils not previously excluded**
- **Average attendance figures hide a growing attendance gap**
- **Call on Government to provide flexible support and remove catch-up pressure**

The pandemic has increased attendance inequalities in schools, according to a new report published today by Social Finance and Cheshire West and Chester Council. The report reveals a growing gap between pupils with full attendance and increasingly absent pupils - a trend hidden by average attendance figures.

The report, [\*It’s Time To ACT: countering the impact of Covid-19 on pupils and schools\*](#), analyses data from the first term of the current academic year from September – December 2020, following the return to school after the national lockdown, and comparing to the same period in the previous three years. The Council’s proactive analysis of a group of schools in West Cheshire learns from the impact of the pandemic, recognising early that the last year would have potentially far-reaching effects on children in the borough.

The analysis shows that, excluding Covid-19 absences<sup>1</sup>, the number of persistently absent pupils increased by a quarter (from 13% to 16%). It also shows the disproportionate prevalence of these absences amongst pupils already experiencing disadvantage before the pandemic, with secondary school pupils the hardest hit. Nearly two thirds (61%) of persistently absent pupils were found to be eligible for free school meals, have experienced contact with children’s services or have SEND. For young people experiencing all three of these disadvantages, one in three were persistently absent after the summer 2020 lockdown.

Despite school exclusion rates in Cheshire West and Chester being lower than the national average, the analysis shows a 50% increase in first time fixed term exclusions (from 62 to 93 pupils) in the autumn term alone. The number of pupils experiencing repeat exclusions declined, although this group also experienced high rates of persistent absence (with one in four of these pupils missing 20% or more of school – equivalent to a day a week of school or more). This may indicate changes in behaviours and emotional needs arising from pressures experienced during the pandemic. Fixed term exclusions can lead to permanent exclusions, which are known to be an indicator of risk for lower educational attainment, vulnerability to exploitation and likelihood of experiencing prison in future. These findings may be an indicator of a future rise in permanent exclusions across the country, compounding the trend of rising exclusions in the five years prior to the pandemic, as shown in the Government’s Timpson Review<sup>2</sup>. As shown in previous analysis in the area and in line with national trends, pupils most likely to experience

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<sup>1</sup> Covid-19 related absences account for 5.2% decrease in average attendance - pupils living in the most deprived areas had higher Covid-19 related absence (6.1%) than those from the least deprived (4.6%), pupils in Secondary Schools saw a higher average rate of Covid-19 related absence (5.8%) than those in Primary schools (3%) and Special schools (4.5%).

<sup>2</sup> Department for Education, Timpson Review of School Exclusion, 2019. Accessible at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/807862/Timpson\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf)

fixed term exclusions are pupils with experience of contact with children's services and pupils with Social and Emotional Mental Health needs<sup>3</sup>.

**Sara Parsonage, a Director at Social Finance, said:**

"The full impact of the pandemic on children and schools is an emerging and complex picture. This report shows the value of investing in data analysis nationally, to uncover what's really going on in our schools to inform better policy making and practice. We're calling on the Government to use the data that is already available to support local areas to plan for response and recovery, as well as investing in infrastructure to support more timely analysis in future. This will develop local and national structures to support the use of data to make better decisions as communities' needs change."

As children and families have been more isolated during the pandemic, there is concern that lower school attendance and new trends in exclusions after lockdown could link to experiences of 'hidden harms' such as domestic abuse, parental or child mental health or wider impacts of poverty and/or digital exclusion. While there was not an increase in the volume of children seeking support in the autumn term, practitioners noted an increase in both the complexity of cases and in the number of children who had not previously sought support from local agencies.

**Kiran Gill, CEO of education charity The Difference, said:**

"This important report points to the risk of rising persistent absence and exclusion post-pandemic. New analysis points out the children most at risk of slipping out of education - those who not only live in poverty but may also have had a social worker because life outside school is unsafe. The Difference is proud to have worked with schools in Cheshire West and Chester towards changing this story on vulnerable children missing education, through our Inclusive Leadership Course. But more is needed - the report is right - it is time to act."

The report calls on the Government to act by supporting local areas with flexible funding, trusting local experts on the ground to identify emerging needs and priorities with children and young people. There is concern that national pressure on schools to focus on 'catching up' on academic attainment, could prevent pupils from accessing the support they need to stay in school.

**Councillor Bob Cernik, Cabinet Member for Children and Families at Cheshire West and Chester Council, said:**

"As an authority, we realised the pandemic could have an impact on children's education and wellbeing and wanted to act quickly to understand this further as part of our recovery programme, so we could put measures in place to support pupils that needed help. Locally, we are committed to taking an early intervention approach and supporting pupils with specific needs that may have been a result of past or ongoing trauma by using trauma informed practice, something that has been vital over this past year. Strong partnership working allowed us to roll out this support system from the start of the school year. We're keen to use information in the report to give us further insight in this area and to help target our support to ensure children and young people are able to access the education they deserve and achieve their best. I would like to thank the incredible dedication and expertise of local schools and agencies who were involved in this work."

**Hugh Grosvenor, Duke of Westminster, whose charitable foundation supported the work said:**

"This report confirms our concerns that educational inequality has worsened through the pandemic, highlighted by the worrying over-representation of absenteeism from children already known to be at a disadvantage. After such a disrupted year, it's important that all children and young people can return to school and benefit from access to education, support and social relationships."

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<sup>3</sup> Social Finance, Maximising access to education: who's at risk of exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester, 2020. Accessible at: <https://www.socialfinance.org.uk/resources/publications/whos-risk-exclusion-analysis-cheshire-west-and-chester>

**Notes to editors:**

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**About Social Finance**

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**About this report**

The report, [It's Time To ACT: countering the impact of Covid-19 on pupils and schools](#), explores attendance and exclusions data of a group of schools in Cheshire West and Chester in autumn term 2020. It shares insights from a Covid-19 response partnership between Cheshire West and Chester Council's local Averting Exclusions programme and the Our Way of Working programme (West Cheshire Children's Trust). The partnership is embedding these insights into their recovery planning, targeting support to those who need it most. The report shares insights to support others in understanding the impact of the pandemic in their local areas and/or nationally. Although the findings are specific to the sample size within West Cheshire, they may indicate national trends that are relevant elsewhere, many of which call for an urgent response nationally. The report builds on insights from previous analysis commissioned by the council, released in the 2020 report [Maximising Access to Education: Who's at risk of school exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester](#).

**Key qualitative findings from the report:**

1. Trauma informed collaborative working drove effective and innovative approaches to supporting children and young people experiencing disadvantage
2. Some children and young people who did not reach statutory thresholds for support, are likely to be experiencing more disadvantage than before the pandemic
3. Interpreting and implementing evolving national guidance locally was testing, leading to some confusion and inconsistencies across schools and communities
4. Increasing levels of pupil mental ill health presented in schools alongside changes in behaviour, with some pupils at increased risk of exclusion
5. Unknown impact of the pandemic on child and adolescent development, with more investment in research needed to understand this further
6. Despite resilience of staff and trauma informed approaches, working in the context of the pandemic has significantly impacted staff wellbeing
7. Although demanding, online learning was a lifeline for many schools and pupils, however pupils experiencing disadvantage or digital exclusion faced significant barriers to learning
8. As children and families have been more isolated than usual during the pandemic, the emphasis needs to be on spotting signs for 'hidden harms' and responding early

**Policy recommendations:**

1. Make use of datasets that already exist and join them up to understand early trends to support earlier intervention
2. Invest in the infrastructure for creating and sharing analysis
3. Invest in infrastructure that supports early intervention
4. Make funding available for local recovery by allowing schools and local authorities to work together to prioritise the way funding is spent to match local need amongst children and young people
5. Take a strengths based approach to the future of children and young people, removing pressure to "catch up" quickly on attainment