

**Call for Evidence: Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils by Fiona Fearon, Policy and Projects Manager, National Governance Association**

1. The National Governance Association (NGA) exist to improve the well-being of children and young people by promoting high standards in all our schools, and improving the effectiveness of their governing bodies. The NGA is the only independent body representing school governors at national level across England. We support governing boards in both local authority maintained schools and academies.
2. This submission includes evidence from a range of NGA sources including interactive online events and our most recent annual governance survey (2022). NGA has been running a survey of school governors and trustees since 2011. The aim of the survey is to gather the views of those who govern in order to inform and shape education policy and, in the absence of official data, to provide an overview of the state of school governance in England. The survey was open to all school governors, trustees and academy committee members between 25 April and 30 May 2022 via the online surveying website SmartSurvey. In total, 4,185 respondents engaged with the survey.
3. **The factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils**
  - 3.1. Governing boards were asked to what extent their school/trust had seen a change in the number of safeguarding concerns, following the COVID-19 pandemic. 71% of boards reported an increase in safeguarding concerns, among wider possible factors, this reflects the impact of the partial school closures on pupils' safety and wellbeing across the country. This has been widely reported within and beyond the sector.
  - 4.1 When asked to expand further on the most common safeguarding concerns, attendance was a reoccurring theme with respondents frequently linking pupil absence to "disadvantaged" and vulnerable pupils as well as mental health and wellbeing. Respondents also raised poor mental health of parents as a barrier to pupil attendance.

*"Some of our students with severe health concerns have missed 2 years of school. Our concerns for these children and the need to do regular face to face checks have been a worry. We are now working on absence rates in our PMLD school as they are above average and could be a safeguarding issue".*

*"Lower attendance of disadvantaged children"*

*"Disadvantaged pupils not attending school as regularly as before Covid"*

*"Reduced attendance for vulnerable pupils"*

*"Attendance of vulnerable groups has decreased significantly particularly Pupil premium students which has led to safeguarding concerns"*

**4. COVID-19 and the impact of the partial school closures were identified as a factor impacting on pupil attendance:**

- 4.1 Within open text responses to the same question, respondents shared their experiences of how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted on attendance:

*"Increase in persistent absenteeism. Parental anxiety affecting children and their attendance".*

*"Fear of COVID-19"*

*"We have seen a deterioration in pupil behaviour compared to pre-covid times. Some students found it hard to re-adjust to the routine of attending school on a daily basis and interacting with a wider range of staff and students."*

*“Pupils or parents scared to return to school re covid concerns. Loss of routine after 2 disrupted school years, some pupils less engaged & low level behaviour issues around school.”*

**5. How schools and families can be better supported to improve attendance, and how this affects pupils and families who are clinically vulnerable to covid-19.**

5.1. While we didn’t explicitly ask about how schools and their boards could be better supported in relation to attendance, boards shared their views on what their board and their school currently do to support families experiencing poverty and what would help their boards and schools to further support those families. Again, in the open text responses respondents frequently linked strategies and services offered to improving attendance.

5.2. Governing boards are engaging in a variety of strategies to support pupils in poverty, most commonly regularly monitoring pupil premium spending and impact (87%) and ensuring disadvantage and pupil premium features as a regular agenda item for their governing board meetings (74%).

5.3. When asked to share other strategies (figure 1) being adopted to support pupils living in poverty, respondents expressed a driving ambition to support their school community and build an inclusive vision. While there was some frustration shared over schools shouldering the consequences of funding cuts of some other key services, it is clear that schools and trusts are not short of passionate governors and trustees who are willing to step up and lead in supporting those most in need.

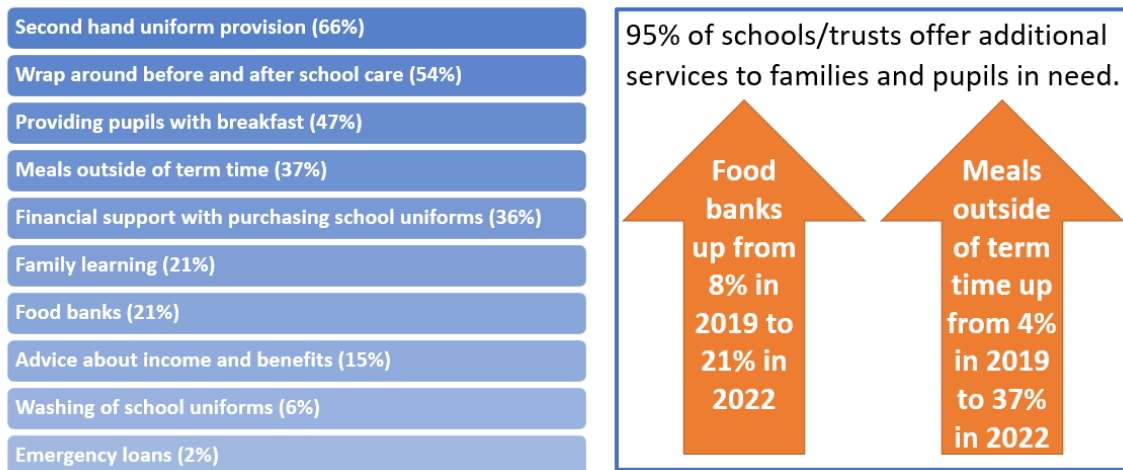


Figure 1

*“We have a family support worker and provide breakfasts, family meal vouchers for good attendance, pizza parties for tutor group attendance”*

*“School bus and walking bus to help improve attendance”*

*“Support with barriers to school attendance, signposting to other support networks e.g. SEND support, parent carer forum etc.”*

*“Rural poverty, particularly help with transport for excluded pupils placed in specialist provision; taxis for this cohort are essential to support good attendance.”*

*“While support is welcome it is vital that schools do not accept a role that is best intended for, and better performed by, other agencies. Schools risk being unilateral agents where there should be shared social responsibility.”*

6. We recently hosted a series of Leadership Forums for Chairs and Vice Chairs of governing boards on the subject of 'disadvantage'. We presented the attendees with two interactive polls:
  - 6.1. To what extent do you think breakfast clubs and free school meals have a positive impact on attendance?
  - 6.2. To what extent do you think holiday activities and food programmes and other after school and holiday clubs, such as sports have in improving attendance and school engagement?