

# School Absenteeism

## Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner & Violence and Exploitation Reduction Unit Pilot Project Final Report - July 2023



Office of Bedfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner  
Bedfordshire Police Headquarters  
Bridgebury House, Woburn Road, Kempston, Bedfordshire MK43 9AX  
[PCC@beds.police.uk](mailto:PCC@beds.police.uk)



*"Though we need more research into this subject area, it seems quite clear that, when a young person is absent from school or an education setting for a long enough period of time, bad things happen."*

*As Bedfordshire's Police and Crime Commissioner, tackling the cause of crime and offending is one of my key priorities for our area. This piece of research shows that a lot of work is needed urgently to tackle unauthorised persistent school absenteeism, fund local services, and minimise the role of the police in this space".*

**Festus Akinbusoye**  
**Police and Crime Commissioner Bedfordshire**



*"I very much welcome the findings of the report following our joint project with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner. This pilot scheme has been an excellent opportunity to further our efforts into tackling the root causes of violence and exploitation and I'm pleased to work alongside the office in doing so."*

*"This project was never just about absenteeism, but rather it was our aim to work alongside education provisions to re-engage young people with education, while empowering their parents and carers to provide support that transcends the pilot."*

*"Though the pilot in its official capacity has come to an end, our commitment to these young people and others struggling with school attendance very much continues."*

**Kimberley Lamb**  
**Director Bedfordshire's Violence and Exploitation**  
**Reduction Unit (VERU)**



*"There is a clear correlation between our children persistently missing school and becoming involved in violence. With absence rates 60% up since the pandemic, we must do all we can to follow the evidence on how to get our children back into school."*

*It's great to see Bedfordshire's PCC and the VERU taking a lead."*

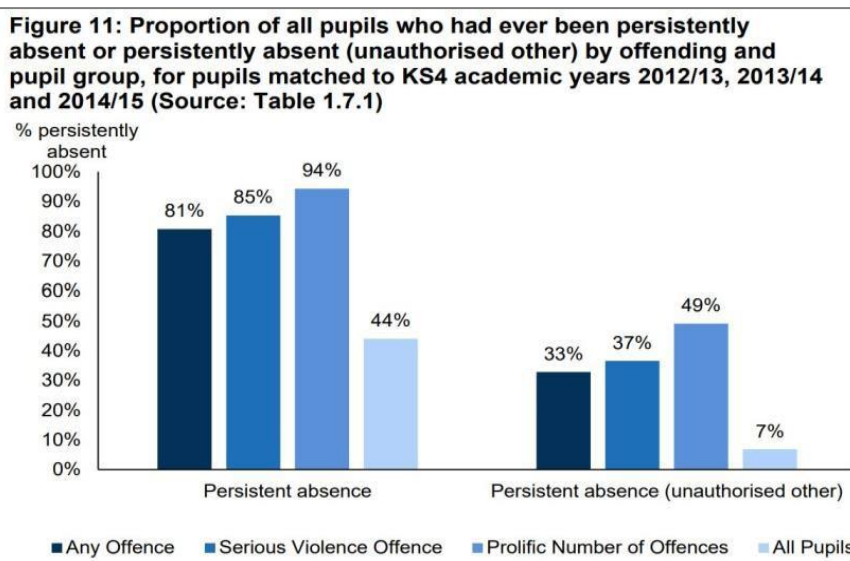
**Jon Yates**  
**Executive Director, Youth Endowment Fund**

<b>PARA</b>	<b>CHAPTER</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
<b>1.0</b>	Executive overview	<b>4</b>
<b>2.0</b>	Headline figures	<b>6</b>
<b>3.0</b>	Notable headline outcomes	<b>6</b>
<b>4.0</b>	Pilot project planning	<b>7</b>
<b>4.5</b>	The schools involved	<b>8</b>
<b>5.0</b>	The interventions	<b>9</b>
<b>5.4</b>	The identified ethnicity of young people referred	<b>10</b>
<b>5.5</b>	Rejected referrals	<b>10</b>
<b>6.0</b>	Socio-economic information	<b>11</b>
<b>7.0</b>	What number of the young people referred were previously known to local services.	<b>11</b>
<b>8.0</b>	School feedback	<b>11</b>
<b>9.0</b>	Key findings / information	<b>12</b>
<b>10.0</b>	Prior to Autumn Term 2022	<b>14</b>
<b>11.0</b>	Outcomes and observations	<b>16</b>
<b>12.0</b>	Recommendations	<b>17</b>
<b>13.0</b>	Challenges	<b>18</b>
<b>14.0</b>	Addressing specific issues of long-term absenteeism	<b>19</b>
<b>15.0</b>	Conclusion	<b>20</b>
<b>16.0</b>	Acknowledgement	<b>21</b>

## 1.0 Executive overview

1.1 In June 2022 Bedfordshire's elected Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), Festus Akinbusoye, launched a 12-month pilot project to support schools and local authorities to address long-term persistent absenteeism.

1.2 PCC Akinbusoye initiated this pilot based on reports from the Department of



Education<sup>1</sup> and Ministry of Justice<sup>2</sup> into school absenteeism and youth offending<sup>3</sup>, as well as his concerns around missing children and those that repeatedly come into police custody.

1.3 Another driver of this initiative was PCC Akinbusoye's concern around the quality and availability of Education Welfare Officers (EWO). Of the three local authorities in Bedfordshire, one was charging its schools over £40,000 for this service, one stopped charging a few years ago, and the third would not disclose how much it charged for 'commercial reasons'. In effect, a lottery system was in place in supporting schools to tackle absenteeism.

1.4 This intervention forms part of PCC Akinbusoye's focus on early intervention, crime prevention through system-wide partnership working in line with his Police and Crime Plan 2021 - 2024. Bedfordshire's Violence and Exploitation Reduction Unit (VERU) jointly embarked on this pilot project with the aim of safeguarding and protecting our young people by reducing the risk of exploitation and/or criminalization, and steering them away from entering the criminal justice system. The VERU is funded by the Home Office through the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner.

<sup>1</sup> [Working together to improve school attendance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [examining-the-educational-background-of-young-knife-possession-offenders.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>3</sup> [understanding-educational-background-of-young-offenders-full-report.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)



1.5 The participating schools were provided with the opportunity to work closely with the VERU's Youth Intervention Specialist (YIS) team who provide tailored support to young people with a pattern of persistent absenteeism, and who could be at risk of exploitation.

1.6 Key aims were to:

- improve school attendance;
- improve engagement between the intervention provision and the identified pupil as well as their family;
- minimise contact with policing and wider criminal justice system.



## 2.0 Headline figures

2.1 Each of the 180 young people (YP) referred to the pilot was either a regular truant or at risk of exclusion from school. The report shows 100% initial engagement of all the pupils referred to the VERU support services or the commissioned service working with the VERU.

2.2 Of the 180 YP engaged in the pilot, 101 were already known to local authority, and 79 were referred to the project due to risk of exclusion from school. 19 YP out of the 79 were deemed to be at risk of child exploitation by VERU YIS team.

2.3 The outcomes showed out of the 180 students reached, 49% attended weekly support sessions, 51% attended less frequent sessions (fortnightly or further agreed time delay). All sessions occurred in school time, showing the students were attending school for those periods / days.

## 3.0 Notable headline outcomes

**Young person A** is studying their GCSEs with hopes to complete A-Levels next year at college. Due to the relationship building with parents, a referral was made to a local service to provide financial support / benefit advice.

**Young person B's** support was closed due to initial non-engagement with the programme. However, this changed, and they were signposted to attend Barnfield College for an open day, the young person attending and enrolled to undertake a mechanics course in September 2023.

**Young person C** continues to have sporadic attendance, a meeting is being arranged with parents, school, and health to create a network of support. Since working with a YIS worker they have been seen by the school nurses' team to explore anxiety, signposted to the Youth Mental Health Drop-in service.

**Young person D** is now attending an alternative provision, which they are doing well, they are happy attending more and making more effort in class. The young person shared they felt the teachers in the alternative provision had more patience.

**Young person E** is engaging well with the programme, has increased their attendance with the alternative provision and have agreed to also work with external services (drug and alcohol, therapeutic support), this young person is making more positive choices with friendship groups.

**Young person F** has been enrolled onto an alternative provision for 2 days a week following a suspension from school, this was pushed by parents as they felt that giving the young person an alternative option would support attendance. The YIS worker has built a good relationship with parents, which enabled consent to be obtained to work with social services following a poor previous experience.

3.1 The feedback from participating schools has been positive. The professionals who work closely with co-opted services feel that the impact has been significant, with up to 3 of their identified young people receiving additional mentoring support per hour of the school day. This has helped to achieve one of the main aims of the pilot, to provide our schools with an additional resource in tackling persistent absenteeism.

3.2 When speaking to the young people themselves, many communicated that having someone to trust and empower them, outside of their teachers and families, has allowed them to feel heard and that no issue is unworthy of their mentor's time. This has allowed the VERU team to build a strong rapport with the young people referred into the pilot, encouraging them to build relationships and talk freely in a trusted environment.

3.3 Working closely with the families as the VERU do, many parents have expressed more general concerns relating to their financial struggles and frustrations at how fines for non-attendance is further impacting their financial insecurity.

3.4 Moving forward, although referrals pertaining to the pilot itself have closed, all Bedfordshire schools are able to make referrals into the VERU where the criteria required to have been accepted into the pilot are met. It is planned that the VERU Education Specialist will meet with all schools who participated and the project to discuss and support continuing impact. The VERU will also ensure that all schools across the county are aware of the project and the support available through the VERU and co-opted services.

## **4.0 Pilot project planning**

4.1 The OPCC/VERU project team worked closely with a range of organisations and advisors, during the developmental phase of the pilot. This was to ensure that the children most at risk of being exploited or harmed when they are not in education, training, employment, or in the safe care of their caregiver, are best supported. This involved advice and guidance being sought from a wide range of professionals within the education sector, including those responsible for special educational needs provision, and specialist youth intervention colleagues from the VERU.

4.2 From here, a Strategic Working Group was established, with the first meeting held in August 2022. Senior staff from the participating education establishments, along

with representatives from their boards of governors, Directors of Education within each local authority and strategic leads across the wider community came together to discuss the Pilot's key objectives and how to ensure a multi-agency approach is taken to addressing this issue.

4.3 Prior to the start of the new academic term in September 2022, the OPCC / VERU project team facilitated a successful Tactical Steering Group. This provided an opportunity for the attendance officers for each participating school to meet members of the YIS team, as well as representatives from the SEND community, and feel confident in their role of the pilot.

4.4 The pilot included two schools from each of the three local authorities in the county, and one alternative provision setting. It did not replace the statutory role of LAs, but rather plugged gaps by providing additional, specialist support to schools given the direct costs and shortage of Education Welfare Officers. The key objective was to have trained members of the YIS team step into this space, take referrals from the participating schools and engage with pupils, while minimising the role of police officers wherever possible.

4.5. The schools included in the pilot were:

- Lea Manor High School – Luton Borough Council area;
- Stockwood Park Academy – Luton Borough Council area;
- Kempston Academy - Bedford Borough Council area;
- Bedford Academy – Bedford Borough Council area;
- Samuel Whitbread Academy – Central Bedfordshire Council area;
- All Saints Academy – Central Bedfordshire Council area;
- The Academy of Central Bedfordshire (PRU), both Stotfold and Houghton Regis sites - Central Bedfordshire Council area.

4.6 Numbers were restricted to seven schools for this pilot due to funding limitations. There were more schools that applied to be included in the pilot than the pilot could accommodate.

4.7 Schools were requested to actively identify young people within their establishments who would benefit from being referred into the Pilot, with first referrals being taken on by the YIS team at the beginning of October 2022.



## 5.0 The Interventions

5.1 In the 12 months since the absenteeism pilot commenced in June 2022, a total of 180 young people received specialist intervention from the VERU's Youth Intervention Service (YIS) together with co-opted support services, as a result of being referred into the PCC's Absenteeism Pilot.

5.2 By working directly with the participating schools, the participating young people have been identified as demonstrating risky or concerning behaviour, linked, or exacerbated by, a pattern of persistent absenteeism. The intervention provided to each young person referred into the pilot has been tailored specifically to address these concerns and provide a wraparound support system, to not only the individual but the wider family also.

5.3 Referrals by school:

School Referral	Number of young people referred	Local Authority Area
Samuel Whitbread Academy	54 18 YP seen weekly 35 YP less frequently	Central Bedfordshire Council
Academy of Central Bedfordshire Houghton Regis	54 36 YP seen weekly 17 YP less frequently	Central Bedfordshire Council
Academy of Central Bedfordshire Stotfold	47 34 YP seen weekly 13 YP less frequent	Central Bedfordshire Council
Stockwood Park Academy	5	Luton Borough Council
All Saints Academy	4	Central Bedfordshire Council
Lea Manor High School	14	Luton Borough Council
Kempston Academy	2	Bedford Borough Council
Total	180	

5.4 The identified ethnicity of young people referred was as follows:

Identified ethnicity	Number
White (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, Irish, Romany or Irish Traveller, any other White background)	<b>87</b>
Mixed / Multiple Ethnic Groups (White and Black Caribbean, Any other mixed/multiple ethnic background)	<b>25</b>
Asian / Asian British (including Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and any other Asian background)	<b>6</b>
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	<b>4</b>
Romanian	<b>1</b>
Not stated	<b>57</b>

## 5.5 Rejected referrals:

Rejected referrals: 3

Stockwood Park Academy – did not meet the YIS criteria

Kempston Academy – referral form not completed fully (missing ethnicity, contact information and history of concerns).

## 6.0 Socio-economic information

6.1 Socio-economic information was not collected by the co-opted service, but this information was collected by the VERU when possible. Out of the 24 young people supported by the VERU's Youth Intervention Service team, 16 are in receipt of free school meals and pupil premium. If this is indicative of the cohort of young people accepted into the project, that would indicate that 66% are living in challenging socio-economic circumstances.

## 7.0 What number of the young people referred were previously known to Bedfordshire Police or Children's Services?

7.1 All the students were known to children's services in one capacity or the other. We did not want YP to suspect we were obtaining data that they thought could linked back to police intelligence or form a picture around the specialist support we were offering, so reporting that fact was not the objective unless of course there was a specific reason the police needed to be involved.

## 8.0 School feedback

### 8.1 Feedback 1

*"We feel the pilot scheme is an important intervention for our students and families.*

*Whilst some students have shown positive engagement, we have noticed a difference of engagement depending on who the worker represents.*

*The VERU team have been very proactive in their outreach to students and families, this has involved face to face meetings, in school and on home visits. I would like to mention the outstanding work Roseann has carried out with one of our students, her continued support, hard work and determination has resulted in a positive outcome for the young person.*

*The feedback from VERU workers after were very informative and demonstrated a collaborative approach.*

*The referral process was effective, and a response was always within a good time span. Communication and responses from the VERU admin team has always been completed in timely fashion and all queries were addressed. We would like to see a continuation of the project but make adjustments to allow all meetings to take place face to face, either at the school or at home."*

## 8.2 Feedback 2

*"The mentor programme has had a really positive impact with our students. I have spoken to students after Dan has been with them and they feel supported and also able to express concerns to him that he can feed back to school and then together students see how we can sort situation out. Also, they see how working together can help them. Students have also been encouraged to reflect on the progress their making using a rating scale. Students' behaviour has improved and also, they are able to express how they are feelings a lot clearer towards staff after working with Dan. Parents have been pleased with this service and also the service we have received from the (co-opted service) ... this has worked really well with some of our more challenging year 11."*

## 8.3 Feedback 3

*"The mentor programme has had a really positive impact with our students. Students' attendance has improved, particularly punctuality in the mornings. The mentor sessions have helped to focus the students, providing them with strategies that they can implement throughout the day. Students have also been encouraged to reflect on the progress their making using a rating scale. Students' behaviour across the school has positively improved with a reduction in suspensions being issued to the students. Parents are extremely positive about the programme also."*

## 9.0 Key Findings / Information

9.1 The Absenteeism Pilot provides the professionals within the VERU a unique opportunity to build trusting relationships with the young people within our community who may be vulnerable to, or at risk of crime or criminality. As a result, we have been able to identify some initial key learning points that appear to influence these young people in disengaging from education.

9.2 There was a common theme that many YP choosing to be absent from education do not see the relevance in going to school as they feel what they are learning is not going to help them in life. Aspects of the curriculum may appear to the young people be outdated, particularly in the way they are taught. There continues to be a focus on classroom based, academic learning with less opportunity for kinesthetic learners to try 'hands on' learning, topics, or vocations. Therefore, students can feel lessons are not engaging, and they find themselves bored and disengaged.

9.3 A key piece of learning was how influential the school environment and feeling of safety is upon students' attendance. YP may choose to not attend school if they feel unsafe. This has also influenced some to strike up friendships with known gang members as a way of feeling protected and safe within the community.

9.4 YP did not see a link between attending school and being successful as they see 'successful people' who did not go to school or gain qualifications. This 'modelling' of success could be a family member or known nominal in the community.

9.5 YP had naked image shared, this has impacted their self-esteem and led to risky behaviour. YP has not had contact with father for over 2 years.

9.6 Parental engagement is key to supporting visits and encouraging school attendance:

*For one YP, the parent would frequently enable non-attendance by not confirming meetings, while child leaves home without the parent being aware.*

*In another case, the parent refused home visits from and engagement with YIS workers.*

*Parental language barriers create barriers for communication between home and school This was significant with a young person whose school informed the YIS team member that the child was translating information incorrectly to parents.*

*We also found cases where parental physical/mental health was impacting ability to take their child to school.*

9.7 YP had not engaged in education since year 9, doesn't like school, and refers to school like a 'prison', they do not know who their personal tutor is. They attend when the YP wants to, they do not enjoy lessons and finds them boring, finds it difficult to retain information from lessons, difficulty sleeping and does not think education can support him in his life. These symptoms could point to undiagnosed or untreaded ADHD/ADD. The education system does not appear to support the needs of the young people involved. This may be due to undiagnosed conditions or external influences.

9.7 YP – difficulties in sleeping, YP was attacked in school which resulted in an exclusion, the YP felt this was unfair and felt unsupported after the incident.

9.8 YP – misunderstood by teachers, undiagnosed/ supported learning needs – intervention provided YP with a yellow overlay.

9.10 YP felt the teaching in alternative provision is better and the teachers have more patience, YP felt they were being 'set up for exclusion', different teachers have different approaches to teaching which can be confusing, not provided with timeout which causes disruption.



9.11 Mental health – feelings of anxiety/ low mood.

9.12 Family breakdown/ fathers absent or non-contact, changes in family dynamics – one YP father was incarcerated during engagement, another YP is moving from their dad's home back to their mum's, one YP father was diagnosed with prostate cancer during engagement, absent father figure.

9.13 Some parents/guardians did not want to engage with LAs due to anxiety and fears of punitive sanctions or fines. The absence of this course of action with the VERU YIS is likely to have encouraged the high level of engagement under the pilot.

## **10.0 Prior to Autumn Term 2022**

10.1 Despite schools closing during the summer holiday period, the pilot continued to provide effective intervention to young people. In July 2022, VERU's Youth Intervention Specialist Team identified eleven young people where persistent absence from school was a known factor. Over the summer period the team worked with ten of those young people delivering a specifically designed programme of intervention. Unfortunately, there was no engagement from one young person identified, however it was confirmed that a professional network was in place to continue to support the young person on their journey.

10.2 Please see below updates for the young people identified during the summer who were relevant for inclusion in the pilot:

- A. Young Person A successfully completed 8 sessions of the programme with the YIS. It was reported that her behaviour improved, and she was successful in securing a full-time landscaping apprenticeship.
- B. Young Person B attended 9 sessions with the YIS worker. The young person struggled to engage with the YIS worker, father's engagement was a factor. Since the work has commenced father has shared that he would like the YIS worker to also work with his daughter. It is reported that the engagement is positive, since working with the YIS worker the young person has changed his peer group, no ASB reported and his views on gangs have changed. The YIS worker support the young person to apply for college and has secured funding for a gym membership. The young person now plans on completing college and would like to apply for the army. Since working with YIS the worker has secured a gym membership for 4 months and arranged a Career Development Professional advice appointment with the school, which supported the YP to enroll at college on a level 1 Sports Development course. The young person was robbed at knife point during his first week attending college, he voiced that he did not wish to return due to this traumatic event, he has been supported to apply for another college and is now attending.

- C. Young Person C was struggling to attend education, the Youth Intervention Specialist increased their visits to support the young person to attend, which was successful. Unfortunately, engagement with the YIS team member reduced, and they, once again, began to refuse to attend education. A referral was made to MASH and discussions were held to consider services that could support them moving them forward.
- D. Young Person D has attended 10 sessions with the YIS worker, she is currently stating she does not wish to attend but the worker is continuing to try and engage. The young person was at risk of CSE, and father was struggling to implement boundaries. Since working with the YIS Team there has been excellent partnership working between YIS, Police and Local Authority which has resulted in CSE disruption. The young person's understanding of healthy relationships has developed, and she is now questioning why adult males would want to be in a relationship with someone of her age. A managed move took place, the young person attended education for around one month, but this has since broken down. Since working with YIS referrals have been made to Aquarius substance misuse service, the VERU Career Development Professional and Samsons Academy.
- E. Young Person E has attended 9 sessions with the YIS worker and is continuing to engage. Young person C and D are siblings. The young person was at risk of CSE, and father was struggling to implement boundaries. Since working with the YIS Team there has been excellent partnership working between YIS, police and Local Authority which has resulted in CSE disruption. The young person's understanding of healthy relationships has developed. The young person was unaware of the role of girls in gangs, since completing the work she has a greater understanding. A managed move was arranged, and the young person attended for a week. She is refusing to attend education at present. Since working with YIS referrals have been made to Aquarius, VERU Career Development Professional, The Mix and Samsons Academy.
- F. Young Person F has been closed due to moving out of the area, he has since returned and requested to work with the YIS worker again. The allocated worker has been advised to submit an updated referral.
- G. Young Person G there was no engagement, it was confirmed that a professional network was in place to continue to support the young person on their journey.
- H. Young Person H has attended 3 sessions with the YIS worker. The YIS worker is working with mother and social worker to improve their school attendance. There has been a school move in the last two months. A referral to Chums is being completed.

## 11.0 Outcomes and Observations

11.1 Where possible, schools should avoid making absenteeism a police matter.

11.2 One of the key issues which initiated the strategy by the Police and Crime Commissioner was the use of police services by schools to locate absent pupils. He is of the view that school absenteeism should not be a police matter at the outset.

11.3 The guidance outlined in 'Working together to improve school attendance' provides clear guidelines for local authorities and schools to work together to address attendance. However, there is one key area of concern in the report: Section 5.87. If all avenues of support have been facilitated by schools, local authorities, and other partners, and the appropriate educational support or placements (e.g., education, health, and care plan) have been provided but severe absence for unauthorised reasons continues, it is likely to constitute neglect."<sup>4</sup>

While this may be true, parents of young people who are victims of CSE or CCE can have little control over the activities of their children. We should not be criminalizing parents. As reported by the Head of SPACE in 2021, 'County Lines: 'this parent blaming response does nothing to protect exploited children.'"<sup>5</sup>

11.4 The guidance for tackling absenteeism needs to focus more strongly on addressing key root causes which are common features of the young people most commonly absent. These include poverty, mental illness, safety in and around school settings, domestic violence (as a witness or victim), alcohol and drug misuse, and familial gang association.

11.5 The initial findings from the absenteeism pilot provide significant scope for the VERU, as well as wider partners across Bedfordshire, to continue to work closely with schools to provide support in addressing these issues, and to minimise the risk of persistent absenteeism within the education system. Much of this activity is funded via the Home Office through its Violence Reduction Unit funding. However, this fund does not cover all policing areas meaning children and young people in other areas not benefitting from this funding may not receive the same interventions.

11.6 More widely, although links between serious violence and exclusions are not clear cut, other PCCs across England and Wales are also delivering activities to reduce serious violence. Examples of these include interventions to prevent school

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance#full-publication-update-history> (Updated April 2023)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2021/12/09/county-lines-this-parent-blaming-response-does-nothing-to-protect-exploited-children/>

exclusion and projects that deliver educational sessions, which aim to educate young people through sports, the arts, talking and cognitive behaviour therapies etc. often delivered through their VRUs.

11.7 Whilst VERU funding is not available to every policing area, the new statutory Serious Violence Duty does commit PCCs, police and education services, as well as other public services, to work closely together to deliver work to reduce serious violence.

11.8 Home Office guidance explicitly requires local partnerships to develop a strategic needs assessment, which should be formulated following an evidence-based analysis of information relating to the violent crime types, including education data, for example attendance, suspension, and exclusion. This further demonstrates how crime prevention can and should link to education.

## **12.0 Recommendations**

12.1 Central funding of Education Welfare Officers (EWO) or Youth Intervention Specialists to work in the axis of care giver, young person and school in order to help improve attendance in education settings. Cross charging for services of EWO by Local Authorities should end.

12.2 Under the new guidance, local authorities and schools would be required to provide persistently and severely absent pupils with additional targeted support where necessary working with partners. The role of Bedfordshire VERU YIS in the pilot project was to provide support and exemplar practice to encourage young people to re-engage with education. The VERU YIS has now provided a model of best practice for schools and local authorities to adapt and use.

12.3 Bedfordshire VERU strongly advise that relevant schools and local authority staff liaise with Public Health to complete Mental Health First Aid – Youth, Contextual Safeguarding especially in understanding the support required by parents, and Transitional Safeguarding. For those students who are transitioning from year 6 to 7, and from year 11 to post 16 routes, this can be one of the highest risk points for educational disengagement and potential recruitment into gangs and CCE.

12.4 The term Transitional Safeguarding describes the need for, “an approach to safeguarding adolescents and young adults fluidly across developmental stages which builds on the best available evidence, learns from both children’s and adult safeguarding Practice and which prepares young people for their adult lives”. It focuses on safeguarding young people, from adolescence into adulthood, recognising this period of transition will be experienced differently by young people at different times.

12.5 The role of Career Development Professionals, CDPs, (formerly known as Careers Advisors) is crucial and needs further investment. Many of the young people are absent due to low ability, low aspiration, and with little understanding of the routes out of their current circumstances. Career Development Professionals (all of whom must be L6 qualified to provide guidance) are an underused professional resource withing schools and local authorities to combat the issue of disengagement with education, including absenteeism.

12.6 Identified young people and their parents should be provided with unlimited access to information, advice, and guidance – our suggestion is that for those young people who are registered as LAC, PLAC or Pupil Premium or receiving FSM receive this service free from the local authority where a CDP is not based within a school and CIAG (Career Advice and Guidance) is a traded service.

CDPs have the knowledge to identify routes to progression for young people who will not meet the traditional level of qualification at age 16. In addition, CDPs can provide tuition and guidance on employability and interview skills. Many parents who did not obtain formal educational qualifications or for whom English is not their first language, the educational system can seem confusing. Young people are under immense pressure to pass core GCSE subjects, and for those who have been absent, with little hope of achieving a grade 4 pass at GCSE, a meeting with Career Development Professional can be life changing. Career Development Professionals may require training to recognise specific behaviours and language use that indicates CCE or CSE.

12.7 Good Careers Information, Advice and Guidance in educational settings or as a support intervention improves attendance, behaviour and promotes social mobility. It is crucial that schools and local authorities work together from the outset of intervention, regardless of the level of absenteeism, so that a network of mutual trust and support is created around the young person. Parents should be treated as safeguarding partners working alongside multiple agencies.

12.8 The guidance outlined in 'Working together to improve school attendance' should be applied in Primary School settings as well. There is contemporary research to support the theory that young people in Primary School settings are being recruited into County Lines and CCE.

## **13.0 Challenges**

13.1 More research is needed into the development of long-term absenteeism, its causational factors, and patterns in the development of the behaviour.



13.2 Often, those young people who are long term absentees, and who do not have Special Educational Needs, are victims of CCE and CSE. Evidence from research and surveys of young people by London Metropolitan University as early as 2013 identified that joining a gang was a conscious positive decision made primarily for financial reasons.<sup>6</sup>

13.3 In the current economic circumstances, young people are under increasing pressure to improve finances when they may already be living in poverty.

13.4 Schools and local authorities need to acknowledge that not all young people participating in gang activity and county lines are victims of grooming, they will then be able to work with appropriate levels of support and guidance around the family; “parents of young people who are victims of CSE or CCE can have little control over the activities of their children. We should not be criminalizing parents. As reported by the head of SPACE in 2021.”<sup>7</sup>

13.4 The initial challenge of getting partners engaged is evidence of the need for closer collaboration across agencies to tackle persistent absenteeism. Furthermore, there was significant push back from parents of children with special education needs (diagnosed or undiagnosed) who feared that they were going to be targeted by the pilot, and subsequently the police. Much effort was put into allaying these fears and addressing concerns successfully.

## **14.0 Addressing the specific issues of long-term absenteeism**

14.1. No country-wide or county data or research for the UK and/or Bedfordshire exists where long-term absenteeism specifically links to criminality. There have been some scholarly articles written on the matter, but the majority precede the issue of County Lines. For the purpose of the Absenteeism Pilot, the VERU had to rely on the recent research carried out by the Children's Commissioner. This study has been extremely useful because it considers the socio-economic factors, which may be part of the drivers for long-term absenteeism.<sup>8</sup>

14.2 The Youth Endowment Foundation provided a good summary on projects, their efficacy and reliability - the majority of which are US based. This fact alone provides weight to support that a UK based research is urgently required to provide a multi-

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/item/v9vxv/the-role-of-the-family-in-facilitating-gang-membership-criminality-and-exit-catch-22-publication>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2021/12/09/county-lines-this-parent-blaming-response-does-nothing-to-protect-exploited-children/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/back-into-school-new-insights-into-school-absence-evidence-from-three-multi-academy-trusts/>

agency response to long-term absenteeism.<sup>9</sup>

14.3 The issue has been (which was to be resolved at the beginning of September 2023), that schools have not had to provide registers to local authorities. Only at transition points have schools been required to provide data on the whereabouts of young people. Once a child is reported at sixteen as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), they may have been a long-term absentee and linked to criminality for several years, and by this time it is too late for appropriate early intervention.

14.4 There are also suggestions of issues around short and long-term exclusions that do not include a referral to alternative provisions. To complicate matters further, currently not all schools have to follow the same register codes. The Department for Education's Bill sought to correct this issue.<sup>10</sup>

14.5 In summary, there are a range of scholarly articles, sadly with most research not completed in this country, that indicates that long-term absenteeism not only leads to criminality but has a lifelong impact on outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

14.6 The above provides some evidence that funding is very much required into this issue. Young people have various reasons for being absent from school, which may include special education needs, mental health, a dangerous commute or walk to school, or CSE, CCE and grooming. We cannot however dismiss lack of motivation, discipline, or indifference towards formal education by responsible adults for a child's attitude to being in school.

14.7 Without building upon the recent research provided by the Children's Commissioner, we risk creating a system that is primarily punitive for the parents or carer, while not addressing the causational factors which impact our young people.

14.8 The Department of Education published guidance called 'Working Together to Improve School Attendance' with the aim of helping Schools, Academy Trusts, Governing Bodies, and Local Authorities to maintain high levels of school attendance.<sup>12</sup>

## 15.0 Conclusion

15.1 This year-long pilot demonstrates the multiple and complex factors that contribute

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/attendance-interventions-rapid-evidence-assessment>

<sup>10</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1077818/Children\\_not\\_in\\_School\\_-\\_Schools\\_Bill\\_Factsheet.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1077818/Children_not_in_School_-_Schools_Bill_Factsheet.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0011128716660520>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance#full-publication-update-history> (Updated April 2023)

to persistent absenteeism. The role of responsible adults or families, how the child feels in and around school and other environmental factors are key considerations.

15.2 We believe appropriate and professional interventions work, while punitive measures work less well. From this small pilot programme in Bedfordshire, we found that supplementing the role of local authorities and the police, with experienced Youth Intervention Officers from Violence and Exploitation Reduction Unit helped to significantly improve engagement levels and positive outcomes. This might be a joined-up model between Department of Education, Home Office and Ministry of Justice that is worth replicating nationwide.

15.3 The next steps now are to see how this provision can be made more readily available to all schools in Bedfordshire possibly as a co-commissioned work between the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and Local Authorities in the county.

## **16.0 Acknowledgment**

16.1 As Bedfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner, I extend my sincere appreciation to the families, young people and schools that participated in this pilot programme. Without them, this small-scale research into persistent school absenteeism could not have happened.

16.2 I also want to thank the staff and leadership of Bedfordshire's Violence and Exploitation Reduction Unit, Office of Police and Crime Commissioner, and University of Bedfordshire for the immense amount of work they have all put into pooling resources and expertise.

16.3 Finally, I want to thank our statutory partners, local SEND parents action groups and all those who formed part of the Working Group. Their guidance, advice, and steer from the beginning of the pilot programme to its end was very helpful.



**Festus Akinbusoye**  
**Police and Crime Commissioner Bedfordshire**