

Executive summary:

Developing an understanding of Children
Missing Education, Elective Home Educated
and Not in Education, Employment and
Training cohorts in the Humber

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April 2026

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Research Aims and Methodology

This study was conducted by Humber Learning Consortium (HLC) on behalf of the Humber Violence Prevention Partnership (VPP) to develop understanding of Children Missing Education (CME), Elective Home Education (EHE) and Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) cohorts in the Humber. It explored barriers that prevent young people remaining in mainstream education and the support and interventions needed to help them remain or reintegrate. The study comprised an evidence review, youth voice captured through semi-structured interviews and questionnaire, stakeholder survey and quantitative analysis of relevant public datasets. Limitations of the study were a short timeframe for completion resulted in a very small sample size.

Evidence review

Rates for all three cohorts are rising, but efforts to gather accurate data regarding numbers of CME and EHE children are hampered by an absence of regulatory systems regarding EHE, and difficulty identifying children not known to services. Studies suggested the official definition of CME excludes a cohort of potentially vulnerable young people who are persistently absent or excluded from school.

Rising rates of non-attendance have been linked to the growth of all three cohorts. Risk factors include SEND, mental health, low educational attainment, poverty, young people at risk of offending and those experiencing criminal and sexual exploitation. Environmental factors include living in a rural or deprived area, attending a school rated as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' and difficult or unstable home lives. Studies found disproportionalities linked to ethnicity and gender. Gypsy/Roma and Traveller children are at higher risk of early exit from education and exclusion. Girls are more likely to be persistently absent, while boys are more likely to be excluded or CME.

It is widely accepted that the growth in EHE is due to children being removed from school. Studies reported **challenges accessing SEND support**, with difficulties navigating unsupportive and hostile systems leading to combative relationships between parents and schools. The evidence suggests parents may be **pressured to remove children from school**, but even so most move slowly towards home education. Flexi-schooling is a practical solution for struggling children which schools may refuse over concerns around attendance figures.

Forms of **exclusion** include isolation, fixed-term and permanent exclusions, part-time timetables, managed moves and 'cooling off' periods. The evidence suggests the application of these measures may feel arbitrary to the children involved and disproportionately affects children from disadvantaged backgrounds. When, in a minority of cases, processes breakdown they may leave children without suitable full-time education.

The **Covid-19 pandemic changed attitudes towards schooling** as it forced many parents to experience home education for the first time. Following the pandemic some parents no longer saw daily school attendance as essential. Added to this, the **cost-of-living crisis** saw many

families facing significant issues over transport, essential care and clothing. School ceased to be a priority in the face of these day-to-day struggles.

Long waiting lists for **mental health** services mean children are making informed decisions to prioritise wellbeing when school feels exhausting and overwhelming. **Always-on digital social lives** may be both a comfort and a burden for young people that leaves them tired and disengaged before school begins. Online influencers making money through gaming and content creation without traditional qualifications may make school seem irrelevant.

School cultures of incentives and sanctions has led to a **loss of trust in the education system**. Pupils may feel coerced into attending to avoid fines and feel the rigid school day erodes their sense of agency. Inflexible and academically focused curriculums disengage vocationally inclined pupils. Added to this, a **lack of careers advice** presents barriers to making informed choices in post-16 vocational provision. Several studies suggested the marketisation of education marginalised less academically inclined pupils and created a **‘churn’ of low-level qualifications, low-paid and unstable work, and periods of economic inactivity** for NEET young people.

The **long-term negative impacts** of NEET on future employment and health are well documented. Little is known about the long-term consequences of CME, but it is known that school absences are associated with poor health outcomes, unemployment, risk taking behaviours, substance misuse and involvement in Youth Justice. School exclusions also have long-term impacts on mental and physical health, employment prospects and housing stability.

Suitable education at home can have positive impacts on academic achievement, wellbeing and personal development. However **substantial barriers** exist in terms of finance, access to exams and specialist teaching resources. Home educating families may face marginalisation and difficulties accessing support services. Reintegration into mainstream education can be challenging for children used to following their own interests. While it is important not to make automatic assumptions of safeguarding, lack of oversight has led to a situation where children may be invisible to state bodies and professionals that can support them. This leaves them more vulnerable to criminal exploitation, grooming and gang recruitment.

Solutions include sharing good practice and earlier identification of children at risk of early leaving. Work placements, employer incentives and keyworker interventions have all been shown as effective in helping NEETs access employment. Reforms to the education system are needed to tackle the attendance crisis, with more vocational options and opportunities to engage with employers and work experience pre-16. Redefining achievement through enrichment activities can help engage less academically inclined students. Tutoring and mentoring can increase attainment, confidence and aspirations. Trauma Informed Practice can build stronger relationship between students and teachers. Rebuilding trust in the education system requires greater choice and flexibility for parents to create genuine parental engagement.

Many of these solutions require financial investment, not just for services and systems, but for children and families as well. It remains to be seen what the impact of recently announced SEND reforms and investment from the UK government will be.

Key findings

Case studies revealed unmet needs related to mental health, SEND and bullying. In some cases, wellbeing and achievement improved once removed from school. Cases revealed difficult relationships between teachers, students and parents, and demonstrated lack of awareness of support services available. The young people expressed earlier support and accommodations would have allowed continued education in school.

Stakeholder survey responses indicated mental health and SEND were the most common reasons for children leaving mainstream education. Although the small sample makes detailed analysis difficult, school responses were less likely to mention the impact of trauma, bullying or difficulties related to the school environment.

Factors impacting on **mental health** included undiagnosed SEND, social anxiety and home circumstances. Responses highlighted **inconsistent SEND support** and issues related to the school environment that lead to maladaptive behaviours. The complexity of the SEND system may create a two-tier system where those with fewer resources are less able to access support needed, while schools lack staff and resources to manage students' needs. Responses around **bullying** suggested schools are unable or unwilling to tackle incidents effectively, leading to children feeling unsafe.

Inflexibility in educational systems were the focus of several responses, which suggested schools fail to understand the reasons for challenging behaviour and rely on management through punitive systems. It was felt more vocational options would engage students that struggle academically. Intergenerational disengagement may mean parents are less inclined to value school. Some of the responses suggested antagonistic relationships between schools and parents and provided examples of parents being pressured to remove a child from the school roll. Concerns were raised about the quality of education received once removed.

School admission processes present barriers for young people attempting to reintegrate due to availability of places and, perhaps, a lack of understanding among parents about the academic cycle. Specific barriers exist for young people involved in Criminal Justice Systems for violent or sexual offenses due to the perceived risk to schools.

Problems in **post-16 transitions** for EHE young people included withdrawal of SEND support and benefits. Difficulties accessing careers guidance may lead to them choosing unsuitable options, which further disengages them. Difficulty accessing GCSE exams may also be a barrier to further education due to unrealistic entry requirements for post-16 options. **Transport** may also be a barrier, particularly in rural areas and for young people that are unable to travel independently in order to access work, further education and exam centres.

The majority of **support services** respondents listed came from schools and Local Authorities. Mental health support consisted mostly of NHS services with some large charitable organisations. Post-16 options were again provided by local authorities and some voluntary and community sector training organisations. There were very few responses regarding pre-16 support for EHE children or help for young people reintegrate. Responses that did address the issue suggested reintegration tends to fail. **Good practice** included multi-agency and relational

approaches to build cultures of belonging. Child-centred and flexible methods were reported to be effective.

Further support needs identified included increased SEND and mental health support, more relational approaches and a broader range of educational options with better information exchange between educational phases regarding support needs. Earlier identification of CME, options to challenge a decision to EHE and more options to reintegrate in-year were called for.

Challenges for local structures largely related to lack of resources, staff and funding.

Analysis of Department for Education (DfE) data confirmed numbers of CME and EHE are increasing in the Humber, with some variation between local authorities. Notably, Hull has the highest number of children awaiting a school place and North East Lincolnshire has the highest proportion of EHE children for reasons 'unknown'. Rates of persistent absence has continued to drop from a post-Covid peak but severe absences are rising. Although permanent exclusions decreased slightly since the last academic year, suspension rates are increasing. The data confirmed disproportionate numbers of young people with SEND, those eligible for free school meals and Gypsy/Roma Traveller children were either persistently absent or excluded.

Across the region authorities report they offer extensive EHE support with advice and signposting, but other forms of support are less consistent. Notably, Hull is the only authority to report no support with exam access.

NEET rates dropped slightly in 2025 (the latest available data) although North Lincolnshire saw a sharp increase with disproportionately more young people of not known status. Data from Hull and the East Riding showed disproportionate rates of NEET among young people with an EHCP. NEET young people not available to the labour market were most likely to be caring for children or pregnant.

Conclusions

CME, EHE and NEET are not three distinct cohorts. There is a great deal of fluidity and clear pathways between them strongly underpinned by unmet needs relating to SEND and mental health. Inconsistencies in support between educational phases destabilises educational experiences, particularly at the post-16 stage for EHE young people. Interventions focussed on prevention, rather than reintegration, are needed. Punitive systems impact disproportionately on the most vulnerable children creating **cycles of disadvantage**. Similarly, inequalities can be seen in both EHE and SEND systems as parents with more cultural and financial resources are better able to access support. However, it is important to remember **systems too are traumatised** from the years of 'chronic underfunding' discussed in the stakeholder narratives.

Recommendations

Identification of CME was a recurring theme throughout the literature and stakeholder responses. The **Humber VPP should explore ways of joining existing data** sets to aid Local Authorities in identifying children not enrolled in schools.

The prevalence of reported bullying suggests either there is a failure to recognise it in some schools, or that teachers do not feel confident to tackle bullying effectively. There is strong evidence as to the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions and **supporting schools to implement one of the evidenced based anti-bullying programmes** available should be considered by the Humber VPP.

The data suggest combative relationship between schools and parents who may not feel confident of their rights or schools' responsibilities and limitations within current educational frameworks and policies. June's suggestion of and **free, independent advocate** that can support families, professionally challenge and act as mediator, where needed, is **a practical solution that should be considered**. The lack of awareness of available support services evidenced in the data suggested **further mapping and a directory of services and groups would be beneficial**.

The disproportionate numbers of young people with SEND needs removed or excluded from school cannot be ignored. **Tackling poor attendance and exclusions through inclusive educational practices** is something for the Humber VPP to explore with education providers. Disability and autism awareness is needed for both staff and pupils. The Humber VPP should **consider funding and evaluating pilot interventions to improve attendance, confidence and aspirations**, such as mentoring schemes, enrichment and peer support programmes, working with schools where there are more known challenges and issues. The VPP should **continue to promote of Trauma Informed Practice** to build better relationships between pupils and teachers and fostering better understanding of the reasons for behavioural difficulties in school.

Similarly, the disproportionate representation of Gypsy/Roma and Traveller children in attendance and exclusion data highlights a need for **culturally sensitive support for this marginalised community**.