EBSA Advisory Team report for Local Offer

Academic year 2023-2024

Objective:
The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the role of the EBSA Advisory Team including trends, performance, challenges and proposed solutions.

Background:
EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance) can be defined as ‘‘reduced or non-attendance at school by a child or young person due to emotional, mental health or wellbeing issues’ (Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, 2022). EBSA replaces the term ‘school refusal’ and affects around 1/3 of school age pupils at some point in their school life (Kearney, 2021). This differs from truancy as young people experiencing EBSA generally want to be in school and parents are aware of this, and are generally fully involved in supporting them back to school but it can be difficult. The pupil experiences extreme distress (emotional and physical) at the thought of going to school and is often ‘stuck’ between wanting to go in but not being able to. Some pupils may be able to attend school but hide their anxiety or avoid distressing times, i.e. particular lessons and/or show their distress after school at home.

The Educational Psychology Service wrote the EBSA guidance for schools in 2020 and expressed this as a continuum of need (Levels 1-4) as below. This has become a common way of communicating the level of difficulty within West Berkshire Council.

Pupils experiencing EBSA can be both attending and not attending school

EBSA level			
Level one	**Level two**	**Level three**	**Level four**
The pupil is attending school but shows **occasional reluctance** to attend and/or is anxious about attending school	The pupil is attending school but they are experiencing high levels of anxiety. **Parents** express that they can appear reluctant to attend school. **Occasional absences** may occur	The pupils may be in school but not able to attend some lessons The pupil may have periods of non-attendance. **Patterns** may be forming. Reluctance to attend school is a **concern to parents.**	The pupil **is no longer attending** school. Their negative feelings about school are overwhelming.

An EBSA Team was set up in September 2021 reporting into the Service Manager for SEMH with the aim of reducing rates of persistent absence due to anxiety, increasing pupil attendance and reducing the need for alternative provision for these pupils. An EBSA Forum was set up to oversee this work and an EBSA Triage was subsequently set up to manage referrals from schools. Primary Heads bought into this approach; however, secondary heads did not, so were given funds (approx. £11,000 pa) to support their own EBSA pupils.

Since 2021, 106 young people have been referred to the EBSA Team; however, many more young people experiencing emotional distress about school have been referred to other teams e.g. EPs, EHA, MHST, MTS, Autism Team etc…There is no coding for EBSA absences and no way to capture those who experience symptoms whilst still attending school, so it is difficult to capture the magnitude of EBSA difficulties across West Berkshire.

One of the main challenges facing the team over time has been that schools have referred into the EBSA Team at Level 4, i.e. where pupils have been out of school for a significant period of time. In these cases, EBSA difficulties were entrenched, and the impact of the EBSA Team input was hard to see. An additional challenge has been that following referral, schools appeared to pass accountability to the team and expected them to 'get the child back into school' for them. As increasing school attendance firmly depends on collaboration and relationship building between school, pupil and family, the team have endeavoured to advise schools of this and how they can encourage engagement (as a pre-cursor to attendance). For this reason, in September 2023, the name of the team was changed to the EBSA Advisory Team.

Current team

The **EBSA Advisory Team** currently provides short term advice, guidance and interventions to support pupils experiencing anxiety. The team supports all West Berkshire primary schools.

The team comprises of:

- *Coordinator (Jackie Smith) - 5 days per week (term time only)*
- *Educational Psychologist (Dr Samantha Broomfield) - 1 day per week*
- *Primary Mental Health worker (Alan Dickens) and Play Therapist (Kayleigh Rainbird) – a total of 3 days per week bought in from EHA*

Role Title	Role description
EBSA Coordinator (5 days/wk.)	• Single point of contact for schools and families and WBC teams • Coordination of EBSA cases and reviews • Organisation of person-centred meetings • Coordination of AV1 usage
EBSA Mental Health Worker and Play Therapist (3 days/wk.)	• Therapeutic support for families and pupils to reduce anxiety and increase attendance • Graphic facilitation of person-centred meetings
EBSA Educational Psychologist (1 day/wk.)	• Supervision for EBSA Coordinator • Facilitation of EBSA meetings/workshops • EBSA strategy, research and reports

NB: Prior to 2023-2024, the **Educational Psychologist** was able to work directly with children and their families (when working for EBSA 2 days per week); however, a reduction in time allocation to 1 day per week, has meant that the focus has shifted to facilitation of meetings, overseeing all EBSA cases/ providing supervision to the Coordinator, and strategic EBSA issues and reports.

Process
A **monthly triage panel meeting** is held to triage and advise on referrals.
The triage panel comprises of:

- *SEMH Service Manager (Chair)*
- *EBSA Coordinator*
- *EBSA Educational Psychologist*
- *EHA Manager*
- *Autism Advisory Team Coordinator*
- *Medical Tuition Service Coordinator*

The EBSA Triage is able to offer information, advice, guidance and interventions to schools/pupils as follows:

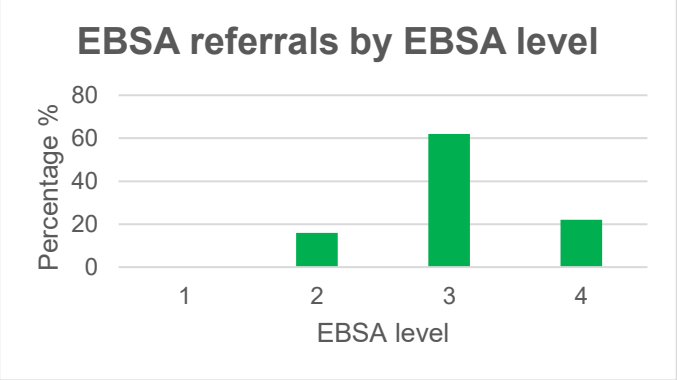
EBSA Advisory Team support			
Information	**Advice**	**Guidance**	**Interventions**
Presentations Leaflets Worksheets	Coordinator emails and phone calls Attendance at My Family Plan/ CiN meetings	Coordinator meetings EP-led meetings/ workshops Training courses	Mental Health Worker Play Therapist AV1 Funding

A wider **EBSA Forum** oversees the more strategic EBSA issues – chaired by the SEMH Service Manager. *The SEN Service Manager, MHST Manager, Principal EWO* also join the triage panel members for these meetings.

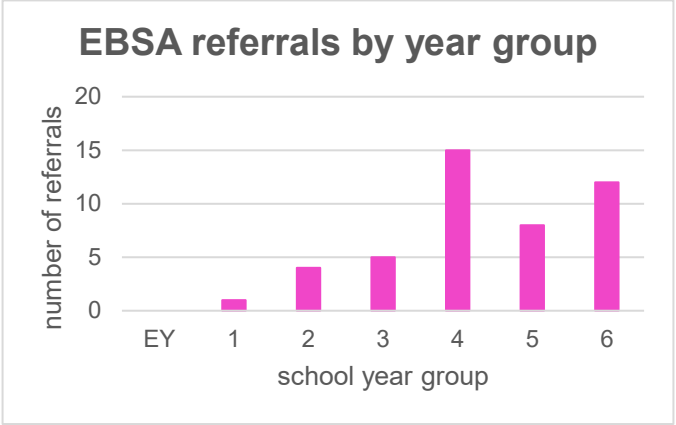
All West Berkshire primary schools are supported by the EBSA Advisory Team.

2023-2024 referrals

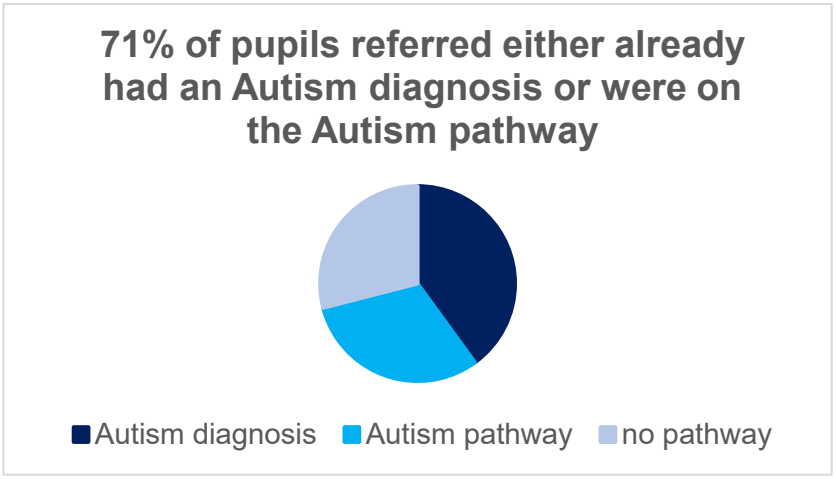
A total of **45 referrals** came through to the EBSA triage this academic year, these were mainly at Level 3, where children were still attending school but experiencing high levels of anxiety. Of note, just over 1/5 pupils were referred at Level 4, where they were no longer attending school, needing much higher levels of intervention for success.
NB: The EBSA level was determined by the referring school.



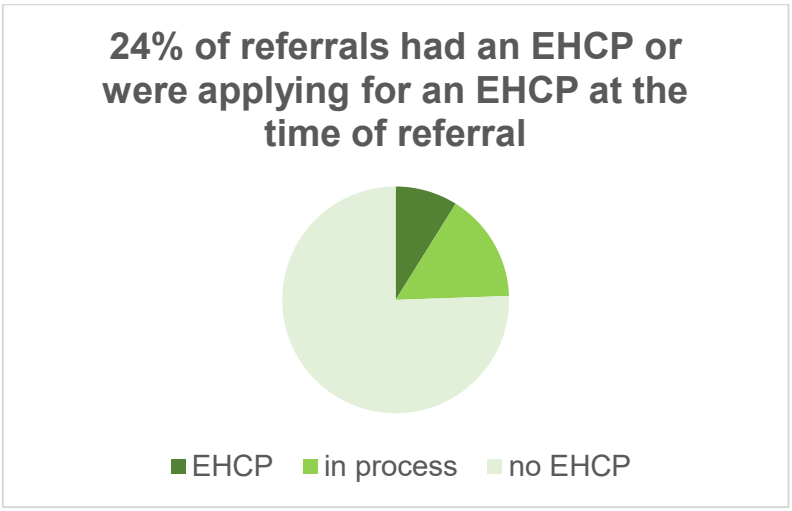
Of those referrals, the majority were referred at Year 4 (33%) followed by Year 6 (27%). Of note, the EBSA Advisory Team do not support secondary schools, so referral at Year 6, especially in the summer term (please see later note) are typically more difficult to support as the anxiety is often related to Year 7.



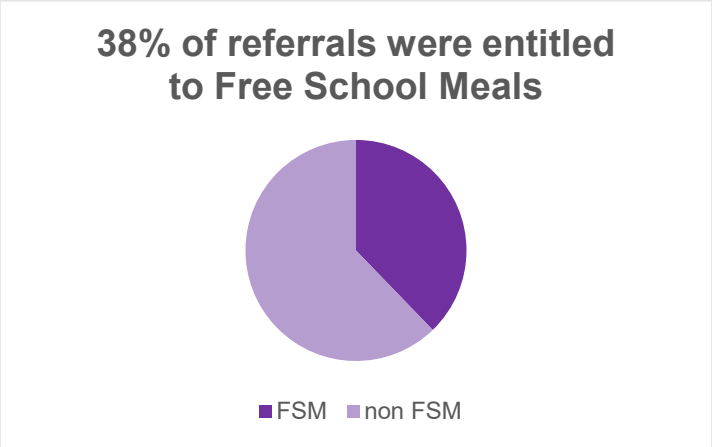
Of those referrals, 71% of pupils already had a diagnosis of Autism or were on the CAMHS pathway for an assessment. This high level of neurodiversity is a pattern that has been seen over the last 3 years and is common with the national/global picture.



In addition, 9% of referrals were from pupils who already had an EHCP and an additional 16% in the process of making a referral, indicating the already identified high level of need of these pupils and potential unmet needs.



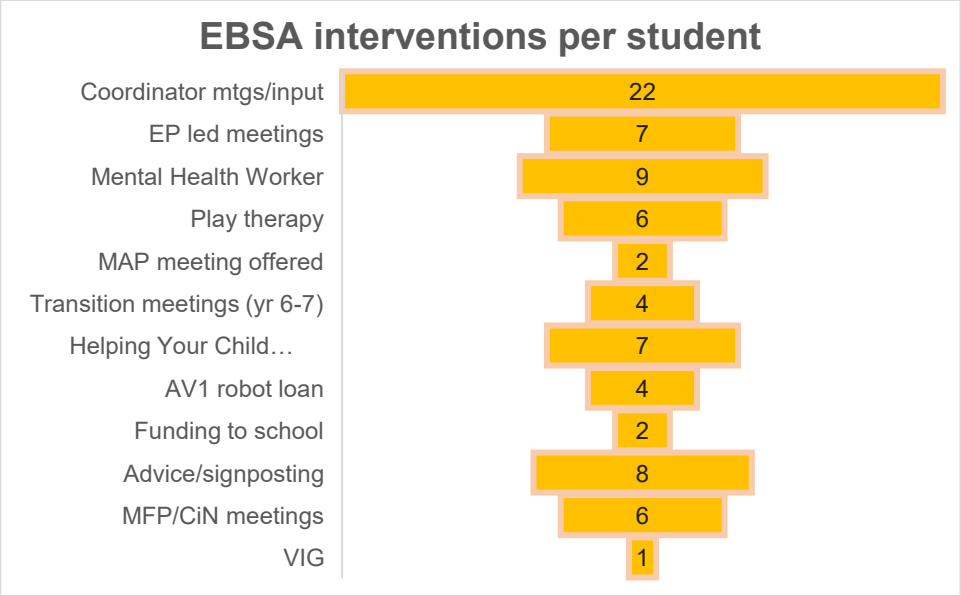
38% of referrals were also from low income families entitled to free school meals.



EBSA support
For the 45 pupils referred, the following support was agreed by the EBSA triage:

Information and advice
All cases were overseen and monitored by the **Coordinator** who liaises with schools, families and professionals working with the pupil/family. The Coordinator has also attended My Family Plan/ CiN meetings and kept updated spreadsheets on pupils, issues and trends. Time has also been spent providing ad-hoc EBSA advice to schools who haven't made an EBSA referral and sharing resources.

Guidance and interventions
The EBSA triage agreed a range of ways to support schools, pupils and families:



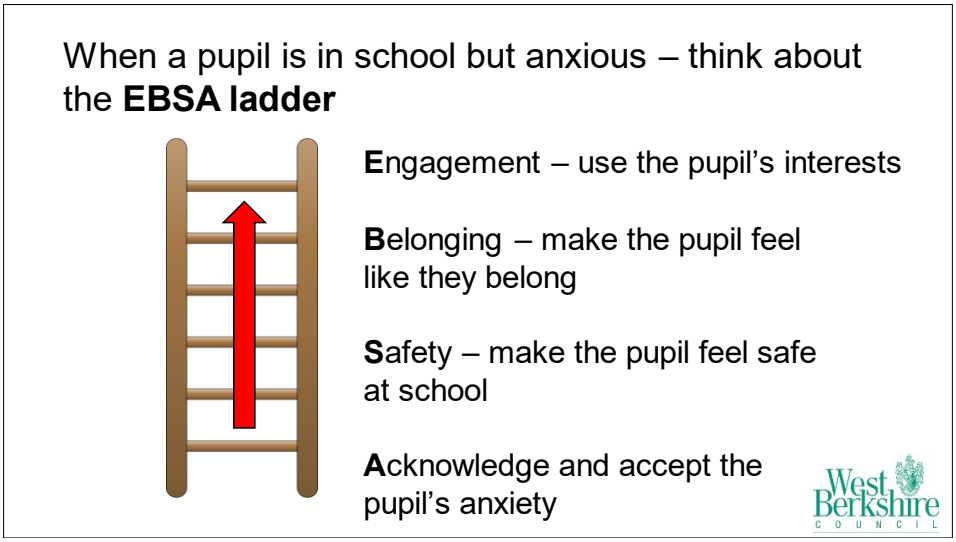
Above: please note that more than one intervention may have been offered to the same pupil.

N.B. A number of these offers weren't taken up (e.g. VIG, MAP meetings)
In the cases where interventions were offered but not taken up, this was due to:

- School not being supportive of the intervention
- Family not being supportive of the intervention
- Pupil not being supportive of the intervention
- Change of circumstances e.g. pupil being in hospital

EBSA guidance
The message to schools has been developed from the latest research, focusing on the need to provide the child with a sense of **safety, connection and belonging** to increase engagement and attendance. Schools have also been reminded that early intervention is best and will lead to a more positive outcome.

When a child is attending school but anxious, schools should implement the 'EBSA ladder' by acknowledging and understanding the distress (anxiety), helping the pupil to feel safe, help them to feel that they are needed/important in school (sense of belonging) and that school is a place for them (increasing engagement).



When a pupil is no longer attending school, then school should use the CAUSE framework, named as schools should always understand the reason for the non-attendance. Schools should maintain regular contact with the family, even when they are not attending and should acknowledge the difficulties being faced. Schools should try to understand the barriers to attendance, and this should include school, pupil and family factors as there is unlikely to be one singular cause. The EBSA Advisory Team provide schools with a series of tools/worksheets e.g. Push/Pull factors, *Memories*, and the *Perfectly Safe School*, to try to identify and understand these barriers. School should ensure safeguarding checks are in place (weekly advised) and that if the pupil has not been attending for more than 15 days (and the non-attendance is authorised), that suitable school work is sent home. It is understood that schools have a duty to provide education and the longer the young person is out of school without access to education, this increases their anxiety and can become another barrier to non-attendance.

When a pupil is <u>not</u> attending school*, think CAUSE

- **C**ommunicate – have regular contact with the pupil and their family to maintain connection
- **A**cknowledge - the pupil's attendance difficulties including any anxiety
- **U**nderstand - the pupil's unique barriers to attendance and put a plan in place to address them
- **S**afeguard – there is a duty to undertake a weekly 'eyes on' safeguarding check
- **E**ducate – ensure the pupil has access to appropriate education /work should be sent home

*if authorised, where a child is not attending school due to health issues – mental/physical/EBSA difficulties, schools have a duty to provide education

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Schools have been advised in accordance with the principles of the **DfE 'Working together to improve school attendance'** document, which becomes statutory on 19 August 2024. Attendance is everyone's responsibility, and the emphasis for schools is to support, support, support families. Only when all support has been exhausted, should any prosecution be considered. The EBSA Coordinator has worked closely with the EWSS team to understand and reinforce the same messages on attendance.

In terms of coding, **mental health should be treated the same as physical health**, therefore it is advised that non-attendance due to EBSA is coded as illness (I) when pupils are not able to attend. This remains true for as long as the family are engaging with the school, and a support plan is in place. Medical evidence does not need to be provided; however, for prolonged periods of non-attendance, some medical evidence would be expected. Of note, coding in schools does appear inconsistent, with some schools coding EBSA non-attendance as unauthorised (O).

From September, there will be a new code for those absent, when on a part time timetable (C2), so that might give us a better clue as to more accurate EBSA numbers across West Berkshire, as EBSA pupils are often on part time timetables.

In addition, schools have a responsibility to highlight those children having missed 20 consecutive days as Child missing Education (CME) to West Berkshire Council.

Referrals – issues and trends

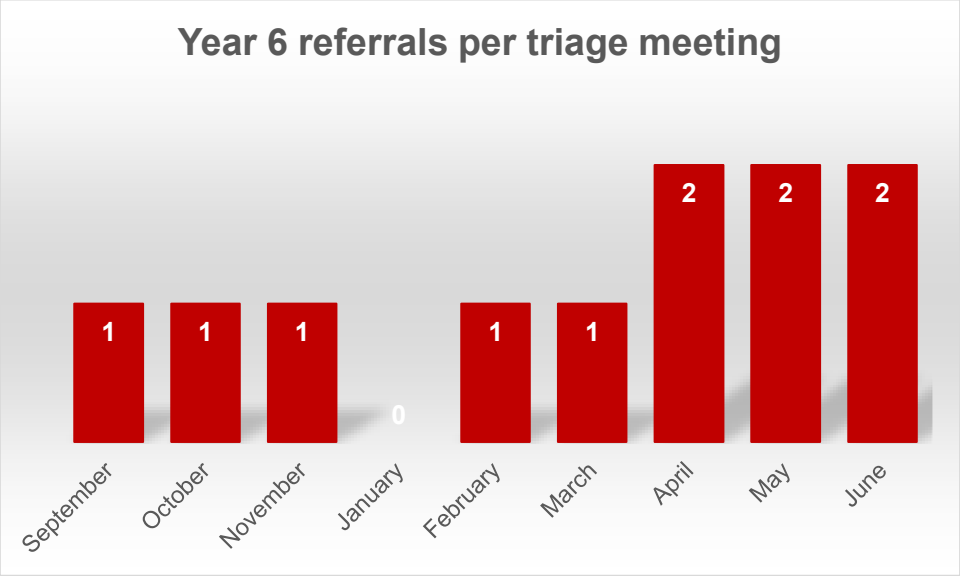
All EBSA referrals are complex in their nature and in nearly all cases, EBSA (in its simplest form – anxiety triggered by the school) is not the primary reason for the referral. Usually, difficulties arise from a number of sources including unmet SEN and/or issues at home. This year, cases appear to have become even more complex with more young people needing **CAMHS and/or Social Care support but not meeting thresholds.**

Underlying issues seen on the referral forms this year include:

- Neurodiversity – 71% Autism diagnosis or on the pathway (at the time of referral – some children have gone onto the pathway since the referral was made, so in fact is in excess of 71%) – masking in school, sensory issues, 'meltdowns' at home
- Anxiety, in particular separation anxiety
- ACEs/Trauma e.g. domestic abuse, sexual abuse, bereavement
- Family issues - parenting, difficult family breakdown, parent in prison
- Friendships/bullying or perceived bullying
- School environment e.g. going through the school gates, going into the classroom
- Children saying that they don't feel safe in school

There was an increase in **Year 6 referrals** towards the end of the academic year, as transition to secondary school approached.

- 6 of the 11 year 6's (55%) were referred to the triage meetings after the Easter holidays e.g. April, May, June meetings, leaving only a term left at primary school. As the team do not support secondary schools, it has been difficult to support these young people.
- In some cases, EBSA referrals were due to have an Autism transition meeting, therefore the EBSA Coordinator was able to join these meetings. In other cases, the team could only advise schools to have a transition plan in place for these pupils.
- The **Year 6 to Year 7 transition** does seem to be a gap that needs addressing.



There has been a rise in the number of EBSA referrals who require a **multi-disciplinary approach**, where it is not only education, but health and social factors that are affecting attendance.

EBSA pupil outcomes

Due to the individual nature of EBSA difficulties, it can be difficult to measure 'success' which can look **different for each young person**. Whilst the aim is to increase attendance and reduce anxiety, often other factors have to be addressed before school attendance can be tackled. When attendance is reduced, typically anxiety also reduces, so re-engaging can have the opposite effect and increase anxiety. Attendance can also sometimes decline as interventions are put in place too late to have any impact. For some, returning to school is not the right option and their education would be better served in an alternative provision (SEN) or provided differently e.g. online/tutor. The short-term nature of EBSA team interventions also means that this is not typically enough time to show changes in metrics where difficulties are entrenched and complex.
For these reasons, it is **difficult to measure team impact**.

The true impact of EBSA team support is difficult to measure. By working with the family to support their child, this can lead to a shift in attitudes and engagement, and result in changes that will benefit the child and the whole family dynamics; however, this is difficult to capture.
We have, for example had pupils who have not/will not leave their bedroom/their house, let alone attend school. Small step changes in them leaving the house for a walk, and increasing their wellbeing should be recognised as steps towards eventual school attendance.

In terms of **destinations**, EBSA pupils can experience school moves as a result of their anxiety/needs, so the following are reported:

- Number of pupils remaining in same school (as at the time of their referral)
- Number of pupils moved to another mainstream school
- Number of pupils moved to EHE
- Number of pupils moved to MTS
- Number of pupils moved to alternative/specialist provision
- Number of pupils not worked with

N=45	Remain in same school	Moved to another mainstream	Moved to EHE	Moved to MTS	Moved to alternative/ specialist provision	Not worked with
No. pupils	29	3 (1 then subsequently moved to EHE)	3 (+ 1 subsequent) = 4	4	1 (then moved out of county)	5

EBSA challenges

The EBSA Advisory Team face a number of significant challenges in supporting young people experiencing EBSA. These include:

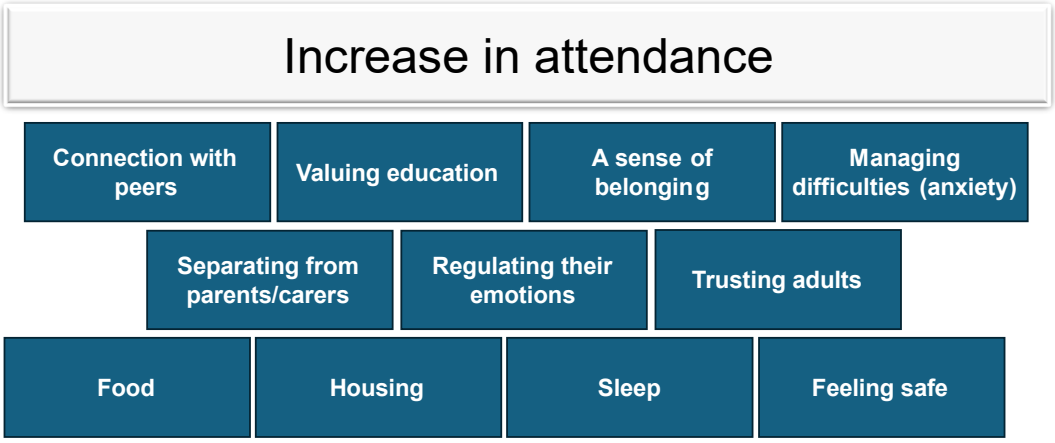
- Complexity of the challenge – The reasons for pupil non-attendance are generally **complex and multi-faceted**, incorporating education, health and social care needs. A 'one size fits all' solution does not work.

- Referrals are being received regarding children with **significant mental health issues** – these being over and above the issues expected for EBSA referrals, due to the pressure on CAMHS etc.
- The EBSA Advisory Team is set up as a **short-term intervention** team, however, from recent EBSA research and webinars, 12 months is considered the average time to get a pupil who is not attending school, due to EBSA difficulties, to attend and/or re-engage with education.
- Supporting pupils means **listening to them and understanding their needs**. It takes time for these anxious and vulnerable children to trust other adults. Success has been seen when these relationships have developed and the child feels safe enough to work with the adult. This takes time and the team do not have the resources to do this with every pupil.
- Supporting pupils can also mean **supporting their families** and helping them to understand the importance of school and helping to ensure hygiene needs (housing, transport etc) are being met before attendance can be prioritised.
- Supporting pupils can also mean **supporting schools** to understand the needs of the young person and helping them to put accommodations in place. Implementation is outside the control of the team, so this is reliant on the school's buy in to the situation, their willingness/capacity to support, and having available staff (generally) to re-build and repair relationships.
- Success can mean **collaboration amongst school, pupil and family** and invariably this relationship has already broken down, so time has to be invested to repair this.
- **Measurement** - Attendance data from Capita doesn't show the true attendance data as registers are taken twice a day, and a mark will only be given when the child is present during registration times. However, some pupils start by coming into reception for just 5 minutes and slowly build up to working with a trusted adult for 20 minutes. Over time, the pupil may be able to spend 1 hour in school but this 1 hour (a huge achievement!) is not acknowledged by any register.

Potential solutions

To support children back into school, there increasingly needs to be firm foundations at home, where education is valued and hygiene needs are met. In many cases, parents also need support to know how to best help their child with their anxiety and they may also be struggling with their own needs.

When pupils do come into school, they need to feel heard and believed and their needs should be understood and accommodated. They may need help to separate from parents, so having trusted adults to support them will be key. They will need time to recover from their absence (and any associated trauma that may have occurred as a result of that) and relationships re-built. They will need help to re-connect with peers and feel like they belong in school and learn to manage their difficulties (anxiety), so that small steps progress can be made in a supported and positive way. This can be shown as a number of building blocks:



To be more effective at supporting pupils experiencing EBSA, the following are recommended:

- Whole school approaches to supporting (and championing) mental health and wellbeing (including Therapeutic Thinking) – for all, including those with neurodiverse needs
- EBSA training for schools and parents to improve understanding of EBSA
- EBSA coaching/Overcoming EBSA sessions to help 'in the moment' for schools and parents
- EBSA family support worker to support in the home and coach parents on EBSA related topics
- Better West Berkshire Council/school working to understand attendance issues in general and where EBSA fits and how it can be supported
- Joint West Berkshire Council work on attendance – education, health and social care
- Earlier notification of attendance/anxiety difficulties in school
- Single triage to capture and support attendance and mental health issues
- Better reporting so that daily progress can be captured in school i.e. small increments of time (that is not captured by the register)
- Home-to-School Hubs – in a non-school venue where pupils can attend some lessons/meet teachers/learn skills to aid their return to school
- Flexibility in schools (particularly secondary) to create a primary school model i.e. one classroom for all subjects, so the environment/experience is more controlled

Conclusion

Every pupil is different, so when they are not able to attend school due to emotional distress, the barriers to attendance (school, pupil and family factors) need to be understood and appropriate interventions put in place. These pupils are not refusing to attend school, they are not able to attend school, but would if they could.

Successful EBSA support relies on early identification of need, positive relationships with parents and the time, flexibility and capacity to understand and implement bespoke accommodations. Schools need professional advice and guidance to support with this and sometimes funding to allow them to accommodate and meet their pupil's individual needs. This is not a short-term intervention as difficulties can build over time, so sufficient support and recovery time should be allowed to repair, re-connect and develop new skills for young people to cope with these difficulties. This support needs to be holistic - taking a multi-disciplinary view across education, health and social care, as the reasons for emotional distress can be complex and varied.

Schools should use frameworks such as the EBSA ladder and CAUSE to support their pupils but most importantly they need to ensure that all pupils feel welcome and valued, whatever their need. Measures will need to reflect this as focusing on attendance alone (whatever the cost) will not support long term pupil outcomes. Staff and pupil mental health and wellbeing are vital measures to consider alongside any attendance and learning data.

It is also important to acknowledge that attendance is everyone's responsibility and the needs of some pupils are not being met in mainstream schools, leading to absence. EBSA support alone is not sufficient to prevent this. An alternative approach that builds trust and teaches skills whilst reducing environmental, sensory and social pressures will be key. These young people want to learn (and in the main can learn) so our environments and approaches need to be supportive.

References

Working together to improve school attendance (applies from 19 August 2024) (publishing.service.gov.uk)

Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Mental health issues affecting a pupil's attendance: guidance for schools - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

July 2024

Appendix

Voice of the Child - comments from child referral forms

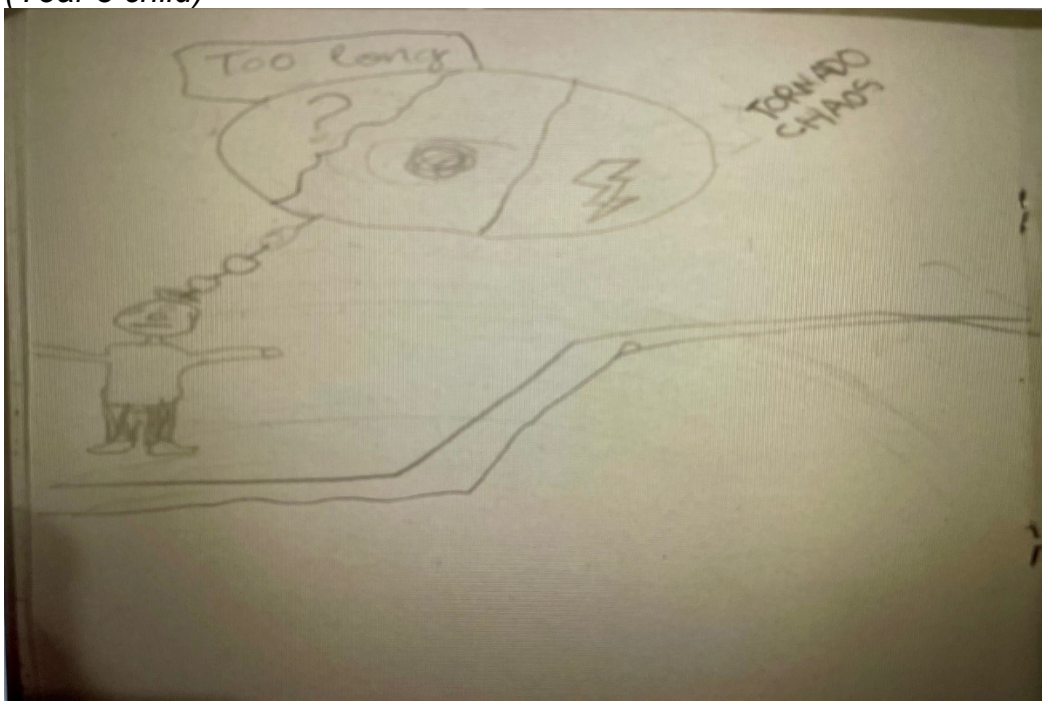
We have included some information taken from the child referral forms. This is just a selection to illustrate the child's voice at the time of referral.

Question: What does school feel like to you?

(Year 5 child) Feels like going on a roller coaster that goes through an aquarium with sharks doing ten loop-de-loops in space with a vertical drop straight through the centre of earth.
It feels scary and stressful.

(Year 6 child) It feels like a prison. I feel like I could do the exact same thing in a place I feel safe in.
School sucks for me. It feels like I'm not myself there. I am saying I feel fine, but I am not fine.

(Year 3 child)



Too loud. Tornado. Chaos…… I would like less noise but this is very difficult... because when the other children begin to be noisy the teachers get noisy.

(Year 5 child) Teachers not doing what they say they will. Makes me want to scream, sad. I feel confused and angry. Sometimes I can't talk and say what I feel. Some adults at school use a cross voice – I hate it.

(Year 3 child) Being away from mum makes me scared.

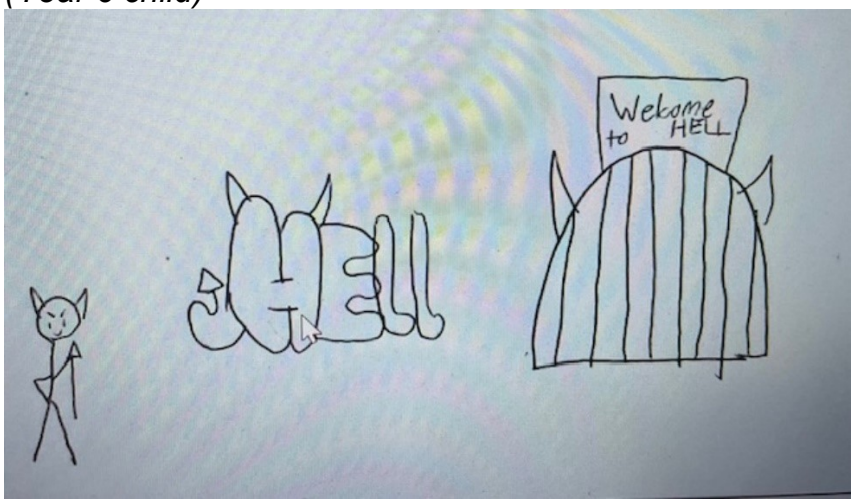
(Year 1 child) Worried, noisy, hungry, sicky, anxious, not confident, nervous.
Main worries: *PE and assembly.*

(Year 2 child)
Main worries: *Changes with grown-ups that teach me. I don't like the uniform as it feels uncomfortable. I feel unsafe at school.*

(Year 4 child) Prison, horrible, boring, strict, scary, worried, annoying.
Main worries: *getting stuff wrong and told off. I don't like leaving my parents.*

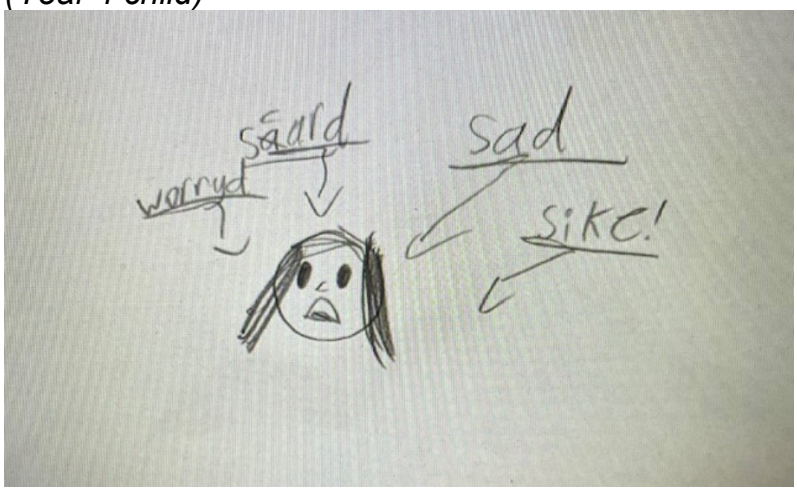
(Year 5 child) School doesn't feel safe. I feel like I'm going to get hurt, and I don't like it.

(Year 6 child)



(Year 6 child) I hate it. It feels like torture. I'm scared of school.
Main worries: *Getting told off, getting told to do something I don't like, getting forced to do something, people telling me off, other children telling me I've done the wrong thing, being made to learn things I don't want to, being made to learn things I don't like. I hate having to stay at school when I don't want to. I worry that no adults will listen to me. I worry that mummy and daddy won't pick me up. I worry about lunchtimes. When I get to go home at lunchtime, I worry that the adult won't take me to the office to be collected. I worry if I need to go home or I'm stressed that I can't.*

(Year 4 child)

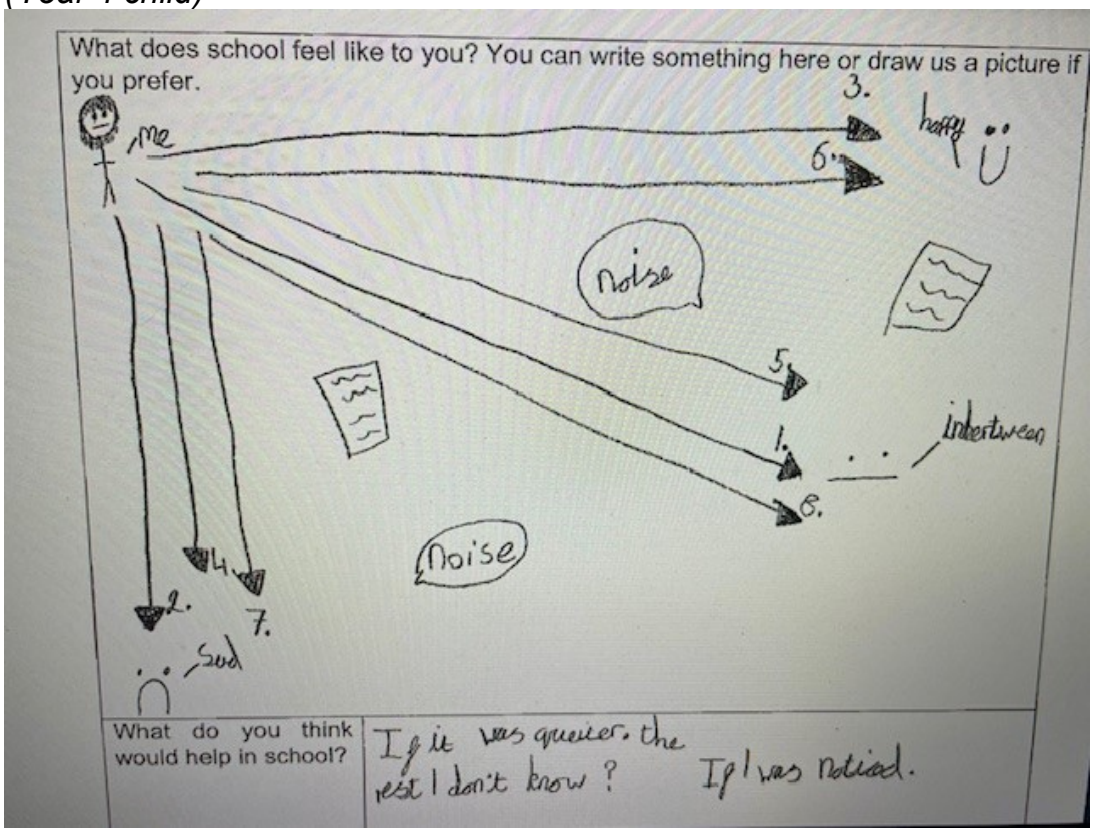


Worried, scared, sad, sick.

(Year 6 child) Feels like a prison. Rules hard to follow.
Main worries: *Lots of people is stressful. Time stress (pressure to get work done in time). Being seen as different. Wanting to fit in.*

(Year 6 child) Main worries: *not being with my mum.*

(Year 4 child)



Main worries: *it's too loud, feeling sad.*