

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
05 JANUARY 2026

EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE (EBSA)

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide the committee with an overview on the work the council is undertaking to support schools with attendance for pupils experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

Summary

2. The council, led by the Educational Psychology Service, has established effective working arrangements to support schools, particularly with transition arrangements.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that:
 - (a) That the committee notes the council's current arrangements.
 - (b) That the committee notes the proposed revision to guidance.

Tony Murphy
Assistant Director of Education and Inclusion

Background Papers

There are no background papers for this report.

Tony Murphy: Extension 5637

Council Plan	Education supports the commitments for children and young people-supporting the best start in life, realising potential and raising aspirations.
Addressing inequalities	Effective monitoring of attendance supports children ensuring that they can receive access to high quality educational provision and outcomes.
Tackling Climate Change	The effective delivery of education provision will support the council's Climate Change priorities.
Efficient and effective use of resources	The efficient monitoring of education the commitments in the council's Safety Valve Agreement to ensure efficient use of the Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs Block.
Health and Wellbeing	Health lifestyles of children and young people is a key component of effective education provision
S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no specific elements of the strategy which address crime and disorder.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected.
Groups Affected	Children, young people families and key stakeholders.
Budget and Policy Framework	No change to the Budget and Policy Framework
Key Decision	Not applicable
Urgent Decision	Not applicable
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	The effective delivery of education will positively benefit looked after children and care leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

Background

4. Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad umbrella term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. Many of the strategies that schools will be familiar with around anxiety will be applicable for supporting these pupils, this is true for the full age range from early years to secondary.
5. Official attendance data released by the DfE indicates the extent of severe absence. Whilst overall and persistent absence has reduced between Autumn 2023/24 and 2024/25 the rate of severe absence has increased in the same period.

	Overall absence rate		Percentage of persistent absentees (10% or more missed)		Percentage of severe absentees (50% or more missed)	
	2023/24 Autumn term	2024/25 Autumn term	2023/24 Autumn term	2024/25 Autumn term	2023/24 Autumn term	2024/25 Autumn term
England	6.69%	6.38%	19.44%	17.79%	1.97%	2.04%
North East	7.54%	6.86%	22.85%	19.58%	2.31%	2.32%
Darlington	6.96%	6.55%	22.56%	19.67%	1.88%	2.24%

Darlington Initiatives

6. The Darlington Education Psychology Service (EPS) developed a comprehensive tool to support schools in responding to EBSA in 2022 (Appendix A). This was distributed to all schools. EPs continue to support schools in using this tool, with ongoing reports of its usefulness in practice. An EBSA Transition Group has been established to support transition arrangements.
7. The National Association of Principle Educational Psychologists (NAPEP) has produced draft national EBSA guidance because of a range of events and working groups. Darlington EPS contributed to this work. This has resulted in creation of a document grounded in the most recent emerging evidence and practice, looking much further beyond the pandemic whilst also acknowledging likely ongoing impact.
8. The EPS in Darlington is now using this new piece of work, along with further research and practice-based evidence, to update the Darlington guidance for 2025/26, once again with a very practical emphasis. A task group is now in place within the EPS to make this happen. Members of this group will seek to collaborate with the existing EBSA Transition Group.
9. The updated Darlington guidance intends to reconceptualise 'EBSA', which risks becoming a self-limiting category, and place greater emphasis on the role of all stakeholders in reducing barriers to engagement and attendance. The guidance will support schools to sensitively promote parental agency (and accountability) in creating positive change for children who are not attending school. There will be a specific focus on research that highlights the role of technology (specifically gaming) in perpetuating reduced emotional wellbeing (increased anxiety) and associated non-school attendance.
10. The Education Strategy Group chaired by the Assistant Director Education and Inclusion oversees the work of the EBSA Transition Group. In 2023, the Transition Working Group identified EBSA as a priority area and established an EBSA at Transition Task Group. A pilot programme was developed for Y6 students who are either identified as impacted by Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) or are at risk of being impacted. The programme was led by Rise Carr College.

11. The Steps to Secondary Success pilot programme-built relationships with Y6 pupils in their own primary schools before pupils attended Clifton House for two afternoons a week after Easter. Pupils participated in a resilience programme and bespoke activities based upon the EPS EBSA guidance and ELSA approaches. After May half term, pupils visited secondary schools to meet key secondary school staff, to introduce themselves and participate in Q&A sessions. Post-transition to Y7, pupils returned to Clifton House for one afternoon per week. This supported an extended transition to secondary school. The programme continued to develop social and emotional aspects of the curriculum and address any worries or concerns raised by the children about their transition process.
12. It was considered vital to the success of the programme that parents were involved from the outset. Early Help colleagues delivered three sessions for parents. These sessions explored the parent's own experiences of education, strategies and practical techniques to support improved school attendance and parental involvement in education.
13. As a result of the pilot, the Steps to Secondary Success programme has continued for a second year with a move towards establishing longer-term sustainability by training further staff in the approaches.