NIHR | National Institute for Health and Care Research

Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) Newcastle

Improving school attendance in Newcastle: a mixed-methods exploration

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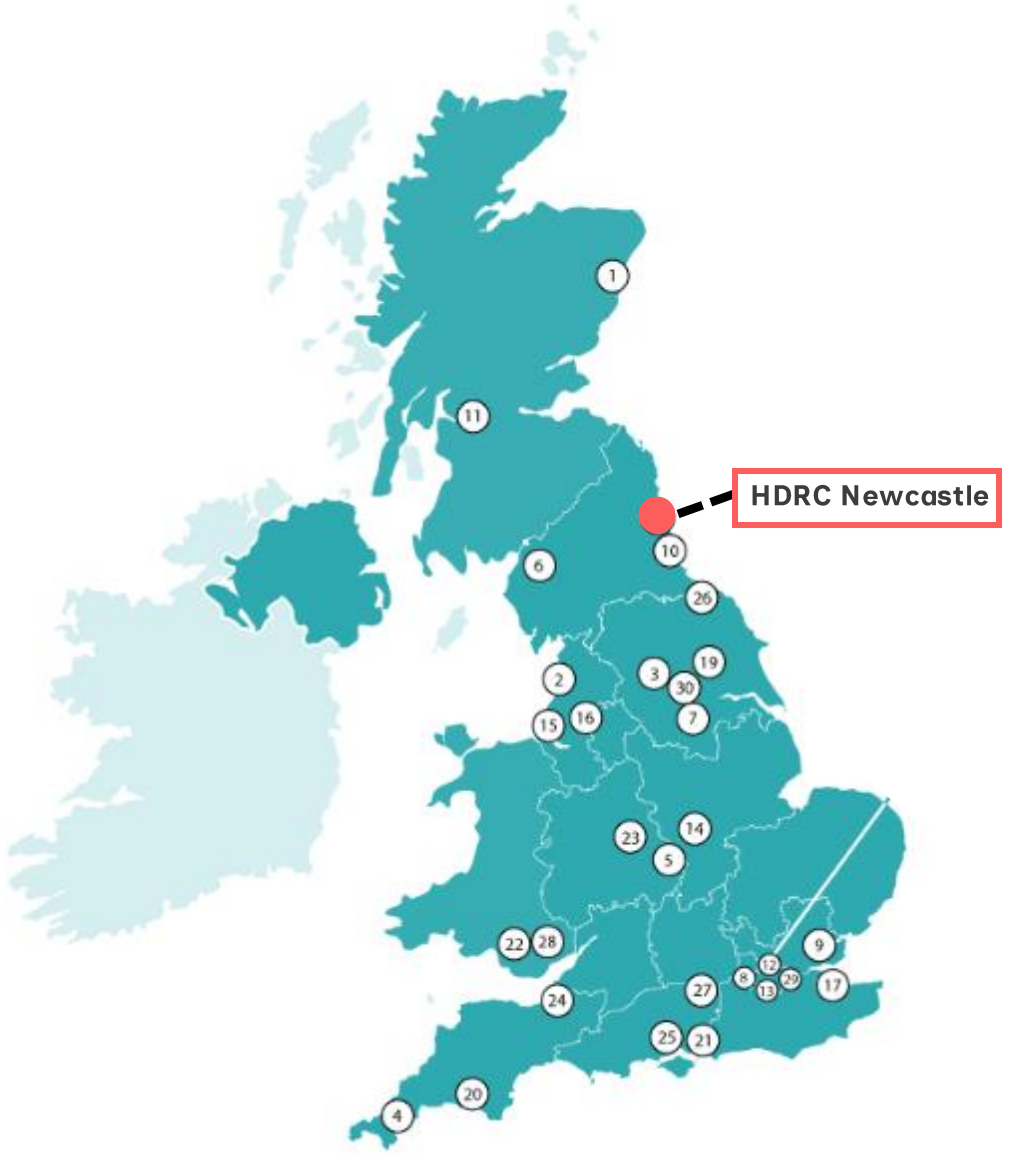
20 Years

Overview of HDRCs

Health Determinants Research Collaborations (HDRC) are part of a national programme funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR).

There are 30 HDRCs across the UK.

Each HDRC is usually hosted by a single local authority which works with universities. This brings together local government knowledge and research skills from the academic community.



Introducing Newcastle HDRC

Newcastle HDRC is a partnership between Newcastle City Council and Newcastle University. And hosted by Newcastle City Council.

We work with council teams, community organisations, local residents and universities to:

- Help people find, understand and use information and evidence
- Make research easier to understand and use
- Do research on local issues

We look at the everyday things that shape health, rather than healthcare. This includes things like housing, schools, jobs and communities. By understanding what works and why, we help tackle health inequalities across the city. Health inequalities are the unfair and avoidable differences in people's health.

We make it **easer to lead, take part in and use research.**

We use our **unique position** within NCC to **connect research directly** to real-world **challenges and decisions.**

This **helps people live happier, healthier lives** in our city and beyond

Areas of Research Interest (ARIs)

Areas of Research Interest

- ARIs are a tool, adapted from UK government departments, to identify and communicate organisational research needs with the research community
- ARIs can help research engagement focus on relevant council priorities, leading to more impactful, co-created research
- Having established ARIs means it is quicker for the Council to harness opportunities for research
- School attendance research arose from need identified during ARI process

Newcastle City Council ARIs

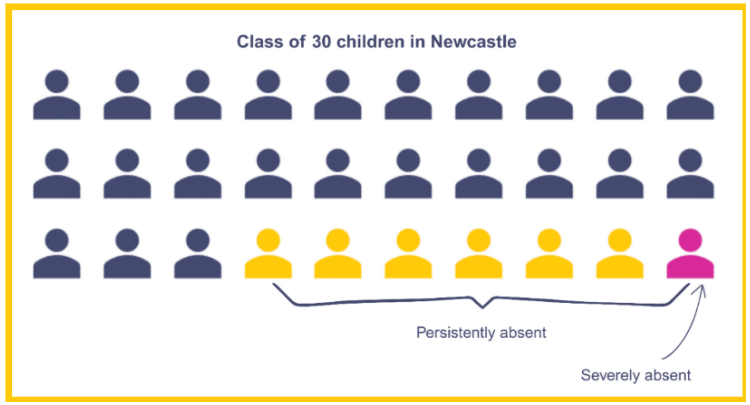
- Completed ARIs:
    - Children and Families
    - Public Health
    - Adult Social Care
    - ‘Connecting People, Connecting Ideas‘
    - Sustainability
- Upcoming ARIs:
    - Planning
    - VCSE
    - Children and Young People
    - Community
- Establish collaborative Research Interest Groups to mobilise research funding proposals in response to priority ARIs

Take a look at NCC ARIs here: Areas of research interest | Newcastle City Council

Rationale for the school attendance research

The local challenge

- School attendance is a growing concern nationally, but the challenge is particularly acute in Newcastle, where absence rates consistently exceed the England average.
- In our city, absence is not just an educational issue, it's a signal of deeper, interconnected challenges.



Typical attendance in Newcastle schools, as represented by a class of 30 students (source: school census data 2022/2023)

Why attendance matters

- When children miss school, they risk falling behind academically and socially, which can impact their mental wellbeing, limit future job prospects, and negatively impact long-term health outcomes.
- In a city working hard to improve life chances and reduce inequalities, tackling school absence is critical.
- It's not only about supporting individual pupils, but also shaping a healthier, more resilient future for Newcastle as a whole.

School absence is a national issue, but the challenge is particularly acute in Newcastle

Higher prevalence of risk factors

- Newcastle has a higher prevalence of known absence risk factors compared to national averages
- These include:
    - Deprivation
    - Free School Meal eligibility
    - Child In Need status
    - Suspensions
- A greater proportion of pupils are also exposed to multiple challenges, increasing the risk of absence and making the problem more systemic

Local system challenges

- High levels of poverty in Newcastle may affect attendance through multiple pathways, including financial hardship, housing instability and parental employment
- Lower adult qualification levels and intergenerational disengagement from education may influence pupil attendance
- Community safety concerns, including youth violence and crime, correlate with higher absence rates in Newcastle, reflecting wider social disadvantage
- Schools face significant pressures and often act as overstretched community hubs with limited resources, fragmented service coordination, and transport barriers

Research Aims

1. Identify which groups of children and young people are most at risk of school absence
2. Understand the underlying reasons for not attending school
3. Explore how attendance might be improved

Research approach

Evidence review & quantitative analysis

Conducted an evidence review of factors associated with school absence and related interventions

Performed descriptive analysis of historical school data.

Applied a multi-level regression model to examine how pupil characteristics relate to absence, controlling for other factors.

To inform the qualitative research we identified primary and secondary schools with the highest and lowest absence rates, adjusted for differences in pupil population.

Qualitative insights

Carried out interviews, focus groups and surveys with

- 30 children and young people
- 6 school staff
- 20 parents
- 5 attendance officers
- 7 partners, including VCSE organisations

Findings from the statistical modelling

Characteristics that have the strongest association with increased absence and therefore could benefit the most from targeted interventions are:

- One or more suspensions in the previous term
- SEND needs (EHCP or no EHCP)
- Eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM)
- Child in Need (CIN) status
- Gypsy or Roma ethnicity
- Living in areas of higher deprivation
- Moving home in the previous school term

For example, secondary school children eligible for free school meals (FSM) miss 66% more school days than their otherwise identical peers who are not eligible for FSM.

Relationship between pupil characteristics and absence after adjusting for other factors

Characteristic	Primary School	Secondary School
Suspensions and Exclusions (comparison group: no suspension or exclusion in the previous term)		
1 suspension in previous term	↑+84%	↑+95%
2+ suspensions (primary) / 2 suspensions (secondary) in previous term	↑+140%	↑+142%
3 suspensions in previous term	N/A	↑+175%
4 suspensions in previous term	N/A	↑+232%
5+ suspensions in previous term	N/A	↑+255%
SEND provision (comparison group: No recorded SEND)		
EHCP in previous term	↑+62%	↑+68%
SEND Support in previous term	↑+27%	↑+41%
CIN (comparison group: not CIN in last academic year)		
CIN within last academic year	↑+32%	↑+80%

Characteristic	Primary School	Secondary School
Ethnicity (comparison group: White – British/Irish)		
Any other ethnic group	↑ +6%	↓-25%
Any other white background	↑+22%	-
Asian or Asian British	↑+20%	↓-21%
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	↓-46%	↓-61%
Ethnicity not known	↑+39%	-
Gypsy or Roma	↑+107%	↑+34%
Mixed or multiple ethnic group	-	↓-19%

Key:

'↓'	'↑'	'-'	'N/A'
Fewer absences	More absences	No significant difference	Not included in analysis

How to interpret the results: An example
Children in Need (CIN) in primary school miss 32% more school days than their otherwise identical peers who are not CIN. CIN secondary school miss 80% more school days than their otherwise identical peers who are not CIN.

Relationship between pupil characteristics and absence after adjusting for other factors

Characteristic	Primary School	Secondary School
Year group (comparison group: Year 1 for primary / Year 7 for secondary)		
Year 2	↓-8%	N/A
Year 3	↓-11%	N/A
Year 4	↓-9%	N/A
Year 5	↓-8%	N/A
Year 6	↓-4%	N/A
Year 8	N/A	↑+21%
Year 9	N/A	↑+33%
Year 10	N/A	↑+48%
Year 11	N/A	↑+64%
Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) (comparison group: IMD quintile 5)		
Home address in IMD quintile 1	↑+31%	↑+48%
Home address in IMD quintile 2	↑+30%	↑+43%
Home address in IMD quintile 3	↑+21%	↑+32%
Home address in IMD quintile 4	↑+9%	↑+20%

Characteristic	Primary School	Secondary School
Language (comparison group: First language is English)		
English as additional language	N/A	↓-14%
Eligible for FSM (comparison group: non-FSM eligible)		
FSM eligible in previous term	↑+46%	↑+66%
Gender (comparison group: Male)		
Female	↓-3%	↑+13%
Moved home (comparison group: No home move in last term)		
Moved home in last term	↑+16%	↑+19%
School move (comparison group: no school move last term)		
Moved school in last term	N/A	↑+13%

Key:

'↓'	'↑'	'-'	'N/A'
Fewer absences	More absences	No significant difference	Not included in analysis

The qualitative research identified 7 overarching themes on why some children do not attend school regularly

1. Physical and mental health of children and young people (CYP)
2. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic
3. School factors
4. School rules and policies
5. Relationships with schools
6. Additional needs of CYP
7. Wider outside influences

If I was a headteacher for the day...

Children and young people were asked to imagine they were the headteacher of their school and what they would do to encourage children and young people to come in to school more often.



How might we improve school attendance?

A whole system approach is required to address school attendance in Newcastle.

We therefore utilised this research to create recommendations for schools, parents and families, Newcastle City Council, and wider partners.

Recommendations for Newcastle City Council

1. Link health, education, and social care data to create a holistic view of a child.
2. Promote multi-agency working and wider community support.
3. Strengthen links between Early Help, Children's Social Care, and school attendance support.
4. Explore opportunities to improve school transport options.
5. Promote the positive impact of attendance officers.

How might we improve school attendance?

Recommendations for schools

1. Use this research to deepen understanding about your school's attendance.
2. Consider giving more responsibility for older pupils in school.
3. Involve pupils in improving school attendance.
4. Engage with a wide group of parents about attendance.
5. Involve families in primary to secondary school transition.
6. Include more vocational and creative options into the curriculum.
7. Offer realistic and relatable career planning.
8. Use attendance rewards carefully.
9. Identify possible SEND issues early, especially in primary schools.
10. Ensure dedicated and consistent mental health support.
11. Consider schools' role as hubs in communities for signposting pupils and families to support from VCSE and wider partners.
12. Consider how to use fines.
13. Use existing guidance to code absence consistently.

How might we improve school attendance?

Recommendations for parents and families

1. Access local support and guidance about the SEND process as and when needed.
2. Keep working with your child's school to strengthen attendance through open communication and sharing ideas.
3. Support in-person learning, even when this is challenging.

Recommendations for wider partners

1. Work closely together to reduce risks to children outside the home.
2. GPs should ask about children's school attendance during routine appointments.
3. Promote the work you do at relevant strategic partnership forums.
4. Share and use your data to understand and tackle attendance.

Knowledge Mobilisation and next steps

- Internal workshops, boards and webinars
- External webinars and events
- Long report
- Short report
- Schools report
- Newsletters
- Participant feedback
- Advanced analytics and predictive modelling



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Thank you

If you would like to get in touch please contact: hdrc@newcastle.gov.uk

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20 Years