



EVALUATION PROTOCOL

Impact of Attendance Mentors in secondary schools: a two-armed school-level cluster randomised controlled trial and IPE

Centre for Evidence and Implementation

Principal investigators: Katherine Young; Jane Lewis

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Evaluation protocol

Evaluating institution: Centre for Evidence and Implementation

Principal investigator(s): Katherine Young, Jane Lewis

Project title ¹	Impact of Attendance Mentors in secondary schools: a two-armed school-level cluster randomised controlled trial and IPE
Developer (Institution)	Etio (with delivery support from Thrive and ImpactEd)
Evaluator (Institution)	Centre for Evidence and Implementation
Principal investigator(s)	Katherine Young; Jane Lewis
Protocol author(s)	Amy Hall, Katherine Young, Jamie Rowland, Jane Lewis, Shania Rankin, Ariel Lindorff, Sharon Lee
Trial design	A two-armed cluster randomised controlled trial with random allocation at the school level and parallel implementation and process evaluation
Trial type	Efficacy
Evaluation setting	School

¹ Please make sure the title matches that in the header and that it is identified as a randomised trial as per the CONSORT requirements (CONSORT 1a).

Target group	Secondary-age pupils in Years 7-11 who are persistently (50-90% attendance) or severely absent (<50% attendance) from school, in mainstream secondary schools in England
Number of participants	63 schools; 17,325 pupils across control and intervention arms
Primary outcome and data source	Attendance: school Management Information System (MIS), data gathered via the ImpactEd platform; average attendance rate of pupils (2 terms before and after mentoring) who were persistently (50-90% attendance) and severely (<50% attendance) absent at baseline per school
Secondary outcome and data source	Social and behavioural difficulties: Strengths and difficulties questionnaire Total Difficulties Score and subscales (Emotional Symptoms, Conduct Problems, Hyperactivity/Inattention, Peer Relationship Problems, and Prosocial Behaviour). Young Person self-report, measured annually in Year 8 pupils only Attainment (Pupil-level Attainment 8 score): ImpactEd platform and National Pupil Database (NPD) Exclusions and suspensions: ImpactEd platform and NPD

Protocol version history

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1. Study rationale and background

Absence from school has become a significant issue facing secondary schools, with numbers of pupils who were persistently or severely absent surging during the Covid-19 pandemic and remaining high. Pupils are termed persistently absent if they have 90-50% attendance and severely absent if they have less than 50% attendance. Data for Autumn 2023/24 show that 1.4 million pupils in England were persistently absent and 142,000 had severe levels of absence. In secondary schools, 23.4% of children were persistently absent in Autumn 2023/24, a drop from 27.4% in the previous year but substantially higher than pre-Covid rates of 12.7% in 2018/19. The rate of severe absence among secondary school pupils has risen from 1.1% in Autumn 2018/19 to 3.1% in Autumn 2023/24 (DfE, 2024a).

Disadvantaged children and those from some minoritised ethnic groups experience more absences (DfE, 2024a). When discussing attendance and the barriers to attendance, it is important to take a race equity perspective – 49% of young black people surveyed in 2020 by the YMCA felt that racism was their biggest barrier to achieving in school. In England for the 2022/23 school year, absence rates varied significantly by ethnic background – ranging from 3.4% for Chinese pupils to 22.9% for pupils with Irish Traveller heritage (gov.uk, 2024). The drivers of absence operate at personal, family, peer-relational, school and wider social levels (Centre for Mental Health, 2024) making persistent absence 'individuated, complex and intractable' (BPS, 2017).

The consequences of missing school are significant for children's attainment and life chances, including employment, social networks, mental and physical health, and engagement in risky behaviours (Dräger et al., 2024; EEF, 2022; Liu et al., 2021; London et al., 2016; Santibañez L and Guarino M, 2021), and youth violence is both a cause and a consequence of school absence (YEF, 2024). Despite schools using a wide range of approaches in efforts to reduce it, school absence is an entrenched challenge (YEF, 2024).

The evidence for mentoring to address school attendance and behaviour is mixed but promising (EEF, 2022). Lakshminarayanan et al.'s (2022) review found positive impacts on academic achievement as well as on drug use, family relationships and physical health, although not on socio-emotional outcomes and school behaviour. Raposa et al.'s (2019) review found positive impacts for school, psychological, social, cognitive and health outcomes. There is little rigorous research on the impacts for pupils from minoritised ethnic groups, but a recent systematic review drawing primarily on US studies (Sánchez et al., 2018) highlights that mentoring can support young Black males with academic outcomes, reduce risky behaviour, and encourage positive internalised racial identity, although effectiveness is mediated by factors including cultural appropriateness, parent/carers involvement, and ethnic match with the mentor.

There is also a growing evidence base about key quality dimensions of mentoring, pointing to the importance of attention to mentor recruitment, screening and training; matching and initiation; and closure processes (Garriger et al., 2015; Gaffney et al., 2022).

An evaluation of an earlier model of Attendance Mentoring initiative (York Consulting, 2024) using a pre-post design without comparison group was promising. 50% of pupils achieved improved attendance, with an average increase of 11 percentage points in attendance rate during the intervention. There were implementation challenges including slow referrals; capacity constraints; role creep and inflexibility on the part of schools in providing support and adaptations. A new delivery partner is now delivering Attendance Mentoring, with delivery funded by the Department for Education and with potential for delivery to be scaled up if the model is effective. An evaluation of Attendance Mentoring is therefore important to inform decisions about its wider delivery and it is anticipated that the findings will be of relevance to other initiatives aiming to address attendance rates.

Evaluation approach

This evaluation will use a school-level randomised controlled trial and in-depth implementation and process evaluation to explore the impact of attendance mentors in schools on the attendance of pupils who are persistently or severely absent at baseline, and at a whole school level.

School-level randomisation has been chosen as the approach because Attendance Mentoring involves selection of eligible pupils at a whole school level, the implementation includes setting up of a whole-school data platform (the ImpactEd platform) and the Theory of Change specifies likely down-stream impacts of Attendance Mentors on whole school policies, practices and cultures.

We focus on the impact of persistently or severely absent pupils because, as we describe below, participants are selected from this group by the delivery partner in discussion with schools, drawing on patterns of absence and the schools' knowledge of pupils' circumstances, in ways that could not be replicated in the control group.

The objectives of the impact evaluation are to understand the impact of Attendance Mentoring on pupils' attendance, attainment, exclusions and suspensions, and social and behavioural difficulties.

The main data source is schools' administrative data (from schools via the ImpactEd platform and via the National Pupil Database; NPD). The primary outcome will be attendance (including authorised and unauthorised absences) at a school level, namely attendance for the two terms prior to the data collection point. We will also explore attendance for all children with

attendance below 90% and children who are offered the intervention, with a matched sample of pupils in the control schools (described later in the protocol).

Secondary outcomes are:

- pupils' emotional and behavioural difficulties: pupils who are in Year 8 at baseline will be asked to complete the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire annually in 2025, 2026 and 2027
- educational attainment: GCSE Attainment 8 score for pupils who complete their GCSEs during the evaluation, via ImpactEd
- exclusion rates and reasons: the number of exclusions and suspensions and an assessment of the reasons, via NPD data

The implementation and process evaluation (IPE) aims to further understand how the programme is implemented, and the barriers and facilitators to delivery across schools. Namely, we will explore:

- the impact of Attendance Mentors on schools' attendance policies, practices and support provided
- the impact of Attendance Mentors on participation by referred pupils
- the activities involved in Attendance Mentoring and differentiation from BAU
- feasibility and fidelity
- acceptability and appropriateness
- mechanisms of change and any unintended consequences

The IPE will involve the analysis of administrative data, a survey of mentors, and qualitative interviews with Attendance Mentor management staff, mentors, school staff, pupils participating in Attendance Mentoring, and their families. We will also explore changes in school policies, practices and cultures: for each trial school (intervention and control) one attendance lead or member of senior leadership who is closely involved with attendance will complete a survey at baseline and again towards the end of the trial.

Prior evaluation

The pilot evaluation of the Watchtower Project, an attendance mentor intervention, was conducted by York Consulting LLP (York Consulting, 2024). Commissioned by the Department for Education, Barnado's delivered the intervention between October 2022 to October 2023, in Middlesborough, a Priority Education Investment Area (PEIA). The pilot delivery and

evaluation aimed to understand the implementation of the attendance mentor intervention model and to assess its feasibility and effectiveness in increasing school attendance among pupils who were identified as persistently or severely absent.

The evaluation used a pre-post design without comparison group, within a mixed-methods approach, consisting of:

- Development of a theory of change through workshops with the DfE, senior leaders from the Watchtower Project, and mentors.
- Review of Action Plans: 113 plans outlining pupils' barriers and goals, created at the start, mid-point, and end of the intervention.
- Quantitative Data Analysis:
 - Analysis of referral patterns and pupil characteristics.
 - Tracking attendance changes and year-to-date rates.
 - Reviewing outcome star ratings² across 6 domains, including mental health, structure and routines of family, attendance, attitude to learning, engagement in activities, and feeling understood.
- Qualitative Data Collection:
 - Stakeholder Interviews, including project managers, mentors, school staff, pupils, parents and carers.
- Analysis of case studies of 40 pupils, by triangulating using evidence from action plans, attendance and outcome star data, and qualitative perceptions from the pupil, mentor, school staff and their parent/carer.

Findings and Outcomes:

- The most common attendance barriers faced by pupils included mental health challenges, lack of structure or routines at home, poor attitudes to school or learning, family circumstances, and having diagnosed or undiagnosed special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- Indicative findings were that 50% of pupils who completed the mentoring achieved improved attendance, with an average increase of 11 percentage points during the intervention, from 53% at the start of the interventions to 64% during the intervention.

² A tool for measuring change across 6 measures, each with 5 ratings statements to assess how a young person felt: mental health and wellbeing; structure and routines of family life; attendance at school; attitude to learning; engagement in activities in and outside school; feeling listened to and understood. The tool was developed by the Barnardo's team, based on similar tools they had used previously.

- Indicative findings (as this was a pilot study, there was no comparison group) suggest that the average increase in year-to-date attendance rates between the start and end of the intervention was 3 percentage points, from 53% to 56%.
- Pupils and families reported a range of other positive outcomes achieved including mental health, better routines, better attitudes to learning, engagement in positive activities, higher attainment and financial barriers addressed.
- Indicative findings also showed that 36% of pupils who completed the mentoring experienced a decline in attendance during the intervention.
- Challenges:
 - Feedback from school staff, pupils and parents/carers identified cases where either the pupil was attending school more often but not regularly attending lessons or the improved attendance was not sustained post-mentoring due to over-dependency on mentors, lack of pupil resilience or insufficient exit planning.
 - Limited family engagement, uneven flow of referrals, delays in pilot launch and a slow initial flow of referrals impacted mentor capacity.
 - The evaluation report highlights that there were some challenges with collecting data from schools involved in the intervention, which led to multiple quality and consistency issues with the outcome data.

The Pilot Evaluation has informed the current project. The intervention design for the current evaluation builds upon the insights gained from the prior evaluation studies. The current evaluation has also been informed by the pilot with regards to the MDES calculations and expected attrition rates.

2. Intervention

The DfE Attendance Mentoring programme is part of the UK Government's broader initiatives to address absenteeism³ and to improve school attendance and ultimately, life chances of pupils. It has been specifically designed to support schools in engaging with and mentoring pupils who are persistently or severely absent, helping them to improve attendance. The programme has been designed, and will be implemented, by Etio, supported by ImpactEd and Thrive, and delivery is funded by the DfE.

³ For more info see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-national-drive-to-improve-school-attendance> and https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66bf300da44f1c4c23e5bd1b/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance_-_August_2024.pdf

During the co-design phase of the evaluation, CEI worked with Etio, ImpactEd, DfE and YEF colleagues to understand and refine the intervention and the evaluation design that will sit alongside it.

DfE Attendance Mentors intervention

For a full description of the attendance mentors programme using the TIDieR framework, please refer to Appendix A.

The Attendance Mentors programme is based on the theory that building trust and a supportive relationship with a positive role model, alongside practical assistance to address attendance barriers, can lead to improvements in pupils' attendance and behavioural, emotional, academic and overall developmental outcomes.

Delivery of the intervention will be supported by two platforms provided by Thrive and ImpactEd. Thrive will provide a bespoke training package for mentors. Their platform will then be used to manage the mentoring sessions, administer assessments, support and record the development of personalised action plans, and monitor progress. ImpactEd will provide their School Impact Platform which will be used to collect data from schools' MIS (attendance patterns and characteristics), identify eligible pupils, and administer the SDQ questionnaire. Both platforms will provide data for monitoring reporting.

Mentoring is delivered by trained mentors who will work individually with pupils in up to 12 sessions. Mentors also aim to work with parents, carers and/or wider family members in up to two engagement sessions. The work is described in four distinct and flexible phases:

1. Building trust and identifying key attendance barriers (weeks 1-3)
2. Goal setting and action planning (weeks 4-7)
3. Implementing the plan and creating a support network (weeks 5-10)
4. Preparing for reintegration and long-term self-resilience (weeks 8-12)

Etio's model is school-based and is intended to work collaboratively with existing school structures such as attendance meetings. The model includes the flexibility to extend the mentoring period slightly by 1-2 weeks of additional mentoring. This model has been adapted from the delivery model used in the pilot study for use within a 12-week academic term.

The intervention specifically targets pupils identified as persistently absent or severely absent in schools in PEIAs. The intention is to identify pupils facing short-term attendance barriers who can benefit from this short-term mentoring model.

Pupils may not be offered mentoring if:

- The barriers affecting their attendance is known to be linked primarily to a health condition or illness (noting this may not be apparent at the time of selection, especially in the case of an undiagnosed mental or physical health issue such as anxiety or chronic fatigue; and that schools may include pupils in this category if they require support to re-integrate back into school)
- Their non-attendance is due primarily to transport issues (noting also that this may not be apparent initially, or may mask other barriers, so pupils would not be excluded without exploring this issue in detail)
- They have very complex needs, and another service would provide more suitable support
- They are known to be engaging in multiple services, such as through Early Help or Children's Social Care, and the introduction of another professional would be disruptive.

The delivery partner will deliver nine 'waves' of mentoring support across all participating schools spanning four academic years (2024/5 – 2027/8).

Pupils are selected for the intervention using a combination of objective data on attendance patterns (percentage attendance rates) and school staff's subjective judgements about barriers to attendance, informed by their knowledge of pupils' circumstances. Etio and school staff will work together to identify suitable pupils and will aim to structure referrals according to the following categories. However, these categories will be contingent on the flow and type of referrals and actual proportions may vary across school and waves.

- "Quick wins": Pupils where mentorship is most likely to improve attendance and/or with a single short-term barrier (60% of wave cohort)
- "Mixed barriers": Pupils facing 2-3 attendance barriers or a single medium-term barrier where mentorship will require distinct targeted approaches (30% of wave cohort)
- "Severely Absent": Pupils with multiple, complex barriers who are likely to need extended mentoring (10% of wave cohort)

These categories have been prescribed based on the findings from the pilot study and the Etio team's expertise. The duration and type of intervention offered here is likely to be most appropriate to support pupils facing a single, short-term barrier that can be addressed within 12 weeks. Pupils facing multiple or more complex barriers to attendance will also be considered for mentoring carefully in collaboration with schools, to ensure that mentoring is not considered a replacement for other more intensive support, and that it does not interfere with existing support plans.

Mentors are independent from the schools and are recruited and trained by Etio. A total of 50 mentors have been recruited and trained, with approximately 38 working in the 32 intervention schools within the trial areas. The remaining twelve mentors will work in schools that are not taking part in the evaluation. The mentor recruitment approach prioritised individuals with experience of working with pupils in programmes where identification of need was present.

Each intervention school will be allocated one mentor to provide a consistent point of contact, plus there will be an unallocated mentor per evaluation area who will provide additional mentoring capacity across schools, for example supporting mentors in larger schools. Mentors will be expected to develop an understanding of the local communities within their areas, to better address the unique circumstances of their mentees' non-attendance.

They will be supported by the central Etio team as well as 10 newly recruited Area Managers who will oversee mentoring in the PEIAs. Mentors will also be supported by a Family Engagement Lead, who will advise on engaging families with multiple complex needs. Mentors will be trained in the mentoring approach as described in full in Appendix A Table 1, by Etio's delivery partners. Mentors will also receive training on working with pupils who have SEND requirements and will be further supported throughout delivery by a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo). Each school will have one mentor assigned plus access to another mentor, depending on the school size and location. Each area will have an Area Manager who will work with School Attendance leads to optimise identification of pupils who could most benefit from the mentoring and match them with a mentor. Area managers and Family Leads have been trained by a range of experts, namely Thrive Lead Practitioner training for use when behaviour appears to be the barrier to regular attendance and internal training by the Family Liaison Lead who has extensive experience as a SENCo in secondary schools. Quality assurance will include regular check-in meetings between Area Managers and Partner schools.

School-based sessions will be most common, but they may take place at "safe spaces" which would include community centres or other local venues such as youth clubs. These safe spaces will be an important alternative for pupils who have been suspended from school. In very rare circumstances, sessions may take place at pupils' homes, though this is generally discouraged - both for safeguarding reasons, and to ensure that pupils are able to speak candidly about their circumstances without fear of being overheard. For example, when sessions happen out of term time or after school hours, sessions may be hosted in local community centres. On average, mentors are expected to have a 25-pupil caseload per standard 12-week wave, based on mentoring capacity to meet each young person once within a 37.5 hour working week. Figure 3 presents a possible working week for each mentor, demonstrating the amount of time available to spend with each pupil and the flexibility of the model. As shown, there are up to four sessions unallocated to ensure mentors have sufficient time to deliver the

programme. This provides each mentor with more than one hour per week per mentee, addressing the caseload issue identified in the pilot study.

Figure 3. Example of a mentor's working week

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8	8.00 Admin/ Staff Briefing/ Form visits	8.30 start Admin/ Form visits*	8.30 start Admin/ Form visits* 15 mins – reset task, updates (13)	8.30 start Admin/ Form visits	8.00 Admin/ Staff Briefing/ Form visits
9	Session 1 Reset + Strategy planning 20 mins	Session 7 20 mins Class Visits - mentee updates re: calls	Session 14 Reset + Thrive Strategy 30 mins Class Visits - updates	Session 20 Reset + Strategy planning 20 mins	Session 25 50 mins + notes
10	Session 2 30 mins BREAK	Session 8 50 mins + notes	Session 15 10 mins + Mentee Observation	Session 21 30 mins BREAK	Session 26
11	Session 3 15 mins + Pastoral Meeting	Session 9 BREAK 25 mins, Return calls	Session 16 (5 mins reset +10 problem solving walk through)	Session 22 (20 mins)	Session 27*
12	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
1	Session 4 10 mins + School Mtg	Session 10 PEP meeting + 15mins	Referrals, Attendance Debrief Meeting	Session 23 30 mins + Admin	Session 28
2	Session 5 35 mins + Calls	Session 11 30 mins + Admin	Session 17 30 mins + Admin	Session 24 10 mins + School Mtg	Session 29
3	(3-3.30pm Travel)	(3-3.30pm Travel)	(3-3.30pm Travel)	Admin	Admin
4	Community Setting 3.30-4.30pm Session 6 (Meet student at Boxing Club)	Community Setting 3.30-4.30pm Session 12 (Thrive session – 20 mins + referrals/Admin)	Community Setting 3.30-4.00pm Session 18 (30 mins of Referrals/Calls)	Admin	4.30pm Finish
5	4.30pm Finish	Community Setting 4.30-5.00pm Admin	Community Setting 4.30-5.00pm Session 19 (Reset + 20 mins intervention)	5pm Finish	
		5pm Finish			

Delivery of mentoring will begin in March 2025 and continue in waves until March 2028. Mentoring will be delivered in weekly sessions lasting an hour, with the option of two 30-minute sessions per week depending on mentee needs. Each mentoring wave lasts 12 weeks on average but the number of sessions for each mentee is flexible based on their needs. Additionally, in some cases support for parents, carers and families will be provided by the Oasis Encounter⁴ programme which helps whole families improve their mental wellbeing and is provided by trained coaches.

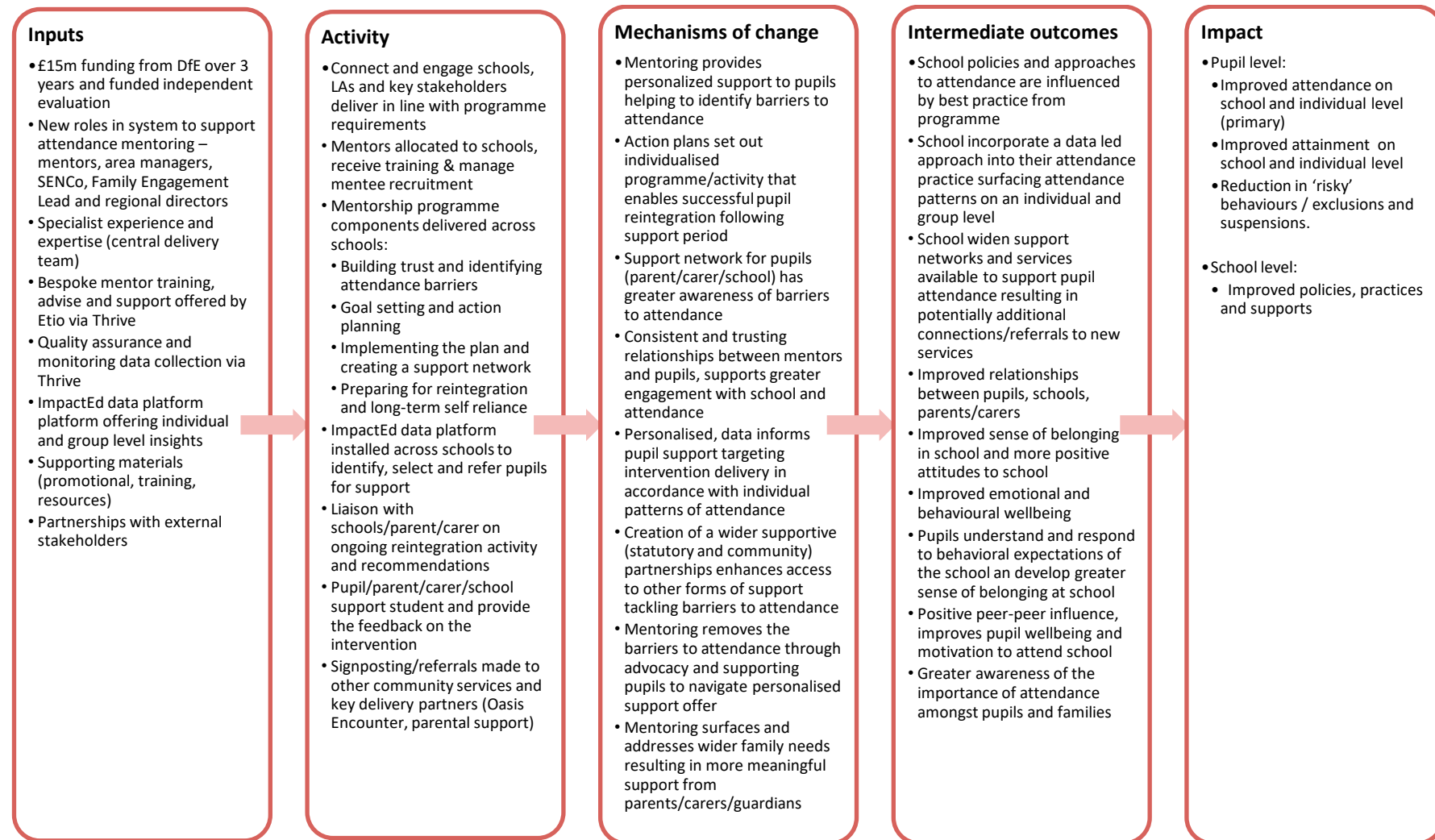
The intervention length and session content are tailored to individual pupil needs. Barriers to attendance are assessed on an individual basis, with targeted goals and personalised action plans developed for each mentee.

Theory of Change

To support evaluation activities, an updated programme ToC was developed during the co-design phase (see figure 1 below).

⁴ See <https://www.oasisuk.org/oasis-encounter/> for further details

Figure 2: Attendance Mentors theory of change



The primary objective of Attendance Mentoring is to improve the attendance of pupils with persistent or severe rates of absence. The ToC outlines the logical progression from inputs and activities that will be involved in delivering Attendance Mentors, to the outcomes and impacts that the programme aims to achieve.

For more detailed information about the intervention and the role of each partner, please see Appendix A.

Inputs: The delivery is funded by DfE. Inputs include new roles (mentors, area managers, SENCo and Family Engagement Worker) in the education system bringing specialist experience and expertise and drawing on specialist resources in providing mentoring. Further important inputs are the ImpactEd data platform which provides schools with better visualisation of attendance patterns and provides mentors with this information and the Thrive training and monitoring system. Schools use this data in the selection of pupils to be referred to mentoring and mentors use it shape their work with each pupil. Mentoring information will be systematically recorded using the Thrive digital platform.

Activities: Mentoring involves four core components (described on p.10 & 11) delivered over 12 sessions. In addition, mentors hold up to two sessions with parents, carers or other family members to support reintegration and sustained attendance. This could include highlighting areas of ongoing support mentees need, post mentorship goals and support planning and could also include use of the Oasis Encounters programme. They also work with schools to hand over a post-mentorship action plan.

Mechanisms of change: Mentoring offers personalised support to help pupils overcome attendance barriers. It involves creating individual action plans that focus on reintegrating pupils and improving their attendance. The support network, including parents, carers, and schools, gains a better understanding of these barriers and has access to the right resources. Consistent, trust-based relationships are key, and data-driven insights help identify and prioritise pupils who will benefit most from the support. A broader network of experts and partnerships provides additional assistance, addressing various factors that impact attendance and ensuring pupils receive comprehensive help.

Intermediate outcomes: It is anticipated that school attendance policies are shaped by best practices from the program, incorporating a data-driven approach to identify attendance patterns at both individual and group levels. Schools expand support networks, creating new connections and referrals to additional services. Improved relationships between pupils, schools, and families foster a stronger sense of belonging and help pupils understand behavioural expectations. Positive peer influence boosts student wellbeing and motivation to attend. Overall, there is a heightened awareness of the importance of attendance among both pupils and their families, leading to more consistent school engagement.

Impacts: The overall impacts that Attendance Mentoring is expected to improve, namely the attendance of pupils with persistent or severe rates of absence, attainment on school and individual level, a reduction in 'risky' behaviours and improved school policies and practices to support attendance.

The ToC is underpinned by a set of assumptions:

- Mentors and area managers introduced that form the enhanced expertise available and provide consistent support
- The definitions of persistent absence and severe absence are used to identify pupils for participation
- Schools access and use data and insight to identify and support the pupils who can most benefit from mentoring (this is described in detail in the Pupil participants section).
- Schools provide the necessary support to mentors including information and physical space and promote wider staff buy in.
- Schools provide necessary support to pupils during and after mentoring.
- Parents engage and support pupils with improved attendance.

Control condition

The services received by pupils in the control group schools consists of 'business as usual' (BAU), i.e. the provision and support provided by the school in the absence of the attendance mentors intervention.

Provision for pupils who are persistently or severely absent from schools varies greatly between schools and areas of the country, reflecting school differences (size, governance, culture, resources, pupil population) as well as Local Authority resources and priorities, and the nature and ease of access to supports in the wider system. The IPE will explore the kinds of support for attendance that schools provide as part of their BAU provision. We will use the school survey with all intervention and control group schools, to establish what is already being provided in schools to support pupils' attendance prior to the trial and how that changes over the course of the trial.

The types of support will include the involvement of school attendance officers or leads (including Attendance and Family Liaison Officers), attendance support plans, school-based support e.g. from pastoral staff or staff based elsewhere in a Multi Academy Trust, incentive and punishment schemes, engagement with parents or carers, referrals or signposting to community services, and support from Local Authority services. Some schools may already be accessing mentoring services in community provision, although it is expected that this is rare and unlikely to be available to large numbers of pupils.

In addition, both control group and intervention group schools will have the ImpactEd platform connected to their school MIS. However, we will limit the platform features available to control schools and put in place delays for reporting. It is possible that that participating in the trial and having access to this platform may lead to changes in schools' attendance policies or in their approaches more broadly. The platform will be set up to extract MIS data in the same way for all schools and will be used as the administration mechanism for the SDQ questionnaire. For control schools, the platform's features that provide an interface and visualisation of school data will be disabled. Data reports presenting summarised school data will be provided to schools in PDF format after a delay. This approach has been taken to prevent the data influencing school attendance policies while still acting as an incentive to continue participation in the control group.

The methods of comparison between the control schools and intervention schools, including selection of a matched sample of pupils to those selected for the mentoring, is described in detail in Section 4. Outcome measures, in the Analysis subsection.

3. Impact evaluation

Research questions

This will be a hybrid effectiveness-implementation study (Curran et al. 2012), exploring both the impacts of Attendance Mentoring and what it takes to deliver it effectively.

The primary impact evaluation question is:

RQ1: What is the difference in attendance rates (measured over 2 terms before/after mentoring; as measured by school administrative data, collected via the ImpactEd platform⁵) of pupils who were persistently or severely absent at baseline from before to after implementation of the **Attendance Mentors programme** in comparison with those in control schools receiving business-as-usual provision?

The secondary (exploratory) impact evaluation questions are:

RQ1(a) What is the difference in attendance rates of persistently and severely absent pupils **who take part in Attendance Mentoring**, in comparison with a matched control group of persistently and severely absent pupils in control schools?

RQ1(b): What is the difference in attendance rates **at the whole school level** for schools with Attendance Mentors in comparisons with those in control schools?

RQ1(c): Does the impact of Attendance Mentors differ by age, ethnicity, gender, baseline attendance, FSM eligibility, SEND status (including pupils with an education health and care plan (EHCP)), or for those who have previously been suspended?⁶

⁵ Note that NPD will be used as a back-up data source should issues with school uptake of the ImpactEd platform arise.

⁶ We are not proposing comparison with control group pupils by reference to the three categories used by Etio in pupil selection (see p.12) for several reasons, including effects expected outside of those bands by working with a young person in the band. Etio may also orient their selection to cases at the borderlines of group, and we cannot account for the operational of that human element of the programme working with the school to identify pupils within and across each band. In addition, selection may not follow the planned criteria and proportions precisely. Additionally, we cannot yet say what % of pupils fall into each category; severe absence was 3.1% of pupils in Autumn 2023/24 and we do not know the percentages in the participating schools, where it may be either higher or lower. We do think it is worthwhile doing subgroup analyses by these bands, but there will be less statistical power than taking the overall eligible group.

RQ1(d): Among pupils who have received Attendance Mentoring, what is the time course of impact on a termly basis (i.e., when are changes in attendance observed, and how long do they last)?

RQ2: What is the difference in social and behavioural difficulties (as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, SDQ) of persistently and severely absent pupils in Year 8 in schools with Attendance Mentors in comparison with those in control schools?

RQ3: What is the difference in exclusion and suspension rates and reasons (as measured by school administrative data and NPD data) of persistently and severely absent pupils in schools with Attendance Mentors in comparison with those in control schools?

RQ4: What is the difference in attainment rates (attainment 8 score) of persistently and severely absent pupils in schools with Attendance Mentors in comparison with those in control schools?

See the We will further exploratorily investigate the timing of impact, more specifically, when and for how long the intervention affects attendance, using termly data from pupils who received the intervention and matched controls.

Implementation and process evaluation section for research questions that address how the intervention worked, for whom and in which conditions, including an exploration of these issues with regard to race equity.

Impact evaluation design

Table 1: Trial design for the impact evaluation

Trial design, including number of arms		A school-level cluster randomised controlled efficacy trial with 1:1 allocation into two arms (treatment and control)
Unit of randomisation		School
Stratification variables (if applicable)		Geographical area
Primary outcome	variable	Attendance
	measure (instrument, scale, source)	School attendance (percentage, including both authorised and unauthorised absences) obtained from school administrative data, collected via the ImpactEd platform. Baseline is attendance for the three terms prior to January 2025, with follow-ups assessing attendance for the three terms prior to January 2026 and January 2027
Secondary outcome(s)	variable(s)	Social and behavioural difficulties, continuous variable Academic attainment , continuous variable Rates of exclusions, binary variable, and suspensions, categorical variable Reasons of exclusions and suspensions, categorical variables
	measure(s) (instrument, scale, source)	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, Meltzer & Bailey 1998) - total difficulties score self-reported by pupils at pre-randomisation and at 1 and 2-years post-intervention roll out, for Year 8 pupils only. Attainment 8 scores for pupils who complete their GCSEs during the study period school administrative data (ImpactEd platform) and NPD

		Rates of and reasons for suspensions and exclusions; school administrative data (ImpactEd platform) and NPD
Baseline for primary outcome	variable	Percentage attendance for the three terms prior to January 2025
	measure (instrument, scale, source)	School administrative data, collected via the ImpactEd platform
Baseline for secondary outcome	variable	As above
	measure (instrument, scale, source)	As above

Recruitment of schools

School recruitment is being undertaken by DfE with support from Etio. All schools invited to participate in this evaluation are located in one of seven PEIAs, namely Blackpool, Portsmouth, Ipswich, Rochdale, Nottingham, Walsall, and Norwich. Schools in a further three areas will be offered the intervention outside the context of the evaluation: Hastings, Somerset, and Hartlepool. This is because there are insufficient numbers of schools in these areas for the delivery model to be implemented as intended if only half are assigned to the intervention group.

DfE invited all schools in the PEIAs to complete an Expressions of Interest in being part of the Attendance Mentoring trial (please see Appendix C). DfE then contacted schools that had expressed interest, inviting them, via a letter from the Secretary of State, to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) confirming their commitment to taking part. Etio will ensure that the programme recruits adequate schools across the PEIAs to meet their target of 40 schools across the 10 areas that will receive mentoring.

Etio's funding from DfE enables them to deliver in a maximum of 40 schools in total. Due to the size of three of the PEIAs, they cannot be included in the evaluation as randomising 50% of schools to the intervention would not be sufficient for the delivery model. This means that a maximum of 32 schools across seven areas can be allocated to the intervention group, with a goal of matching the same number of control schools within each PEIA. Etio, with support from CEI, has modelled the school recruitment to ensure that adequate numbers of schools are recruited to meet the targets set by DfE for them as well as ensure that the evaluation has sufficient numbers.

A total of 94 schools expressed interest in taking part across the 10 PEIAs. A total of 90 of these schools (excluding those with <90 persistently absent pupils) were invited to formalise their interest in taking part by signing the MOU. Table 2 shows the number of schools who have fully signed up to the trial (they have signed the MOU and required data sharing agreement) and the projected numbers of schools that will be allocated to treatment and control in the seven PEIAs covered by the evaluation.

Table 2: School recruitment modelling

Region	Town	# Eols from schools	# Schools that signed MOUs and DSAs	Estimated # intervention group schools	Estimated # control group schools
Northwest	Blackpool	6	6	3	3
Northwest	Rochdale	12	10	5	5
West Midlands	Walsall	19	16	5	5
East Midlands	Nottingham	15	12	5	5
East of England	Ipswich	10	10	5	5
East of England	Norwich	10	9	4	4
Southeast	Portsmouth	10	9	5 ⁷	4

⁷ Note that the delivery partner's recruitment model allowed for delivery of the intervention to 5 schools in Portsmouth, yet 9 out of 10 schools signed MOUs and DSAs, meaning only 4 schools will be allocated to the control group in this region.

School retention

We will put in place a number of strategies to ensure that schools in both arms continue to take part throughout the duration of the evaluation:

- We anticipate that for intervention group schools the main incentive will be their access to free mentoring and support from ImpactEd
- Schools in the control group arm will also have limited access to the ImpactEd platform and delayed reports, as described in the previous section
- Schools in both arms will receive a quarterly newsletter to provide updates and encouraging stories from across the trial
- We will use a prize draw to incentivise ongoing participation for control schools. This will be offered at nine times during the trial, in sync with the delivery waves. Each prize draw will see one school win £100. Entering the draw will be contingent on having completed relevant evaluation activity at each stage (e.g. completion of SDQ; completion of school survey; nomination of pupils for the artificial control group – see below)
- We will also agree approaches with YEF and DfE around ongoing communication and messaging with schools, for example, short videos featuring high profile individuals that can be added to school newsletters etc.
- We also anticipate that the opportunity to participate in the evaluation of a major DfE intervention addressing an issue that is a key challenge to schools will be an incentive

Randomisation

School-level randomisation is optimal due to concerns about individual-level randomisation, namely:

- 1) The potential for contamination due to the intended influences on school policy and culture changes and/or peer influence
- 2) The emphasis in the programme aims on school-level change, as articulated in the Theory of Change (ToC)
- 3) Anticipated low acceptability of individual randomisation, as randomising pupils within a school to a control condition may be viewed as ‘withholding support’ from at-risk pupils, which might risk potential adverse impacts on their school engagement

Schools will be allocated to the intervention or control condition at a ratio of 1:1. This balanced ratio allows for the most precise estimates of impact, allowing any differences in outcomes to be attributed to the intervention rather than any other factors (such as school location, school size, Ofsted ratings etc.)

To minimise the risk of imbalance between intervention and control schools, stratified randomisation will be conducted. This will be based on local area (seven PEIAs) and rates of permanent exclusion. Additional variables were initially considered for stratification (rates of free school meal eligibility, rates of special educational needs, school size and attendance bands, however after stratifying within region, there remain relatively small numbers of schools (i.e., 6 per region), meaning that stratifying on multiple additional variables is unfeasible. We consider local area and permanent exclusion as important variables for stratification due to likely differences in provisions available at a local authority level, and that vastly differing rates of exclusions would indicate different approaches to behavioural management within schools that would be important to ensure successful randomisation and increase confidence and generalisability in findings. Stratification will be conducted on groups of schools by region, and by a median-split of rates of permanent exclusion (i.e., the median PE rate for all eligible schools⁸ will be calculated, and randomisation constrained within groups of 'above median' and 'below median' PE schools).

Randomisation will be conducted by CEI for all schools once they have signed and returned the MoU, set up of the ImpactEd data platform is complete, and SDQ and school survey have been administered. This activity will be completed by Katherine Young and Amy Hall, members of the CEI team who are independent of the intervention delivery. The outcome of the randomisation exercise will be communicated to schools in the intervention group by Etio and to schools in the control school by CEI. The evaluation team will receive the required information about all participating schools and use R (randomizr package) to randomise them at baseline based on random number generation. Schools allocated to the intervention arm will receive the Attendance Mentors intervention across all eight waves of delivery, as described in the Intervention section, including full access to the ImpactEd School Impact Platform. Schools allocated to the control arm will not receive the intervention and will continue to support their pupils with BAU and have reduced access to the ImpactEd School Impact Platform, as described in the Control condition section above.

Outcomes

Outcomes will be established at a school-level at two follow-up timepoints (January 2026, January 2027) in both the intervention and control groups.

⁸ Based on DfE Census data, Autumn term 2023/24: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england>

The primary outcome of interest is attendance of students identified as persistently and severely absent at baseline, as measured by administrative data obtained from schools via the ImpactEd data platform.

Secondary outcomes are:

- Social and behavioural difficulties of persistently and severely absent pupils (as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, SDQ) - administered to only to pupils in Year 8 at baseline
- School attainment of persistently and severely absent pupils taking GCSEs during the intervention period
- Exclusions and suspensions of persistently or severely absent pupils (measured by the rates of and reasons for exclusions and suspensions)

Further details about the outcome measures are provided in section 4.

Pupil participants

Within each school, all pupils in Years 7 to 11 whose attendance is between 50-90% (persistently absent) or <50% (severely absent) in the two academic terms prior to school randomisation (one previous term for those in Year 7) will be eligible to receive the intervention. Etio will aim to support pupils in these categories at the following rates:

- “Quick wins”: Pupils where mentorship is most likely to improve attendance and/or with a single short-term barrier (60% of wave cohort)
- “Mixed barriers”: Pupils facing 2-3 attendance barriers or a single medium-term barrier where mentorship will require distinct targeted approaches (30% of wave cohort)
- “Severely Absent”: Pupils with multiple, complex barriers who are likely to need extended mentoring (10% of wave cohort)

Selection of pupils to receive the intervention will be established separately at each wave on an individual basis, using both attendance data and school staff’s informal knowledge, to select the most appropriate pupils at each time point.

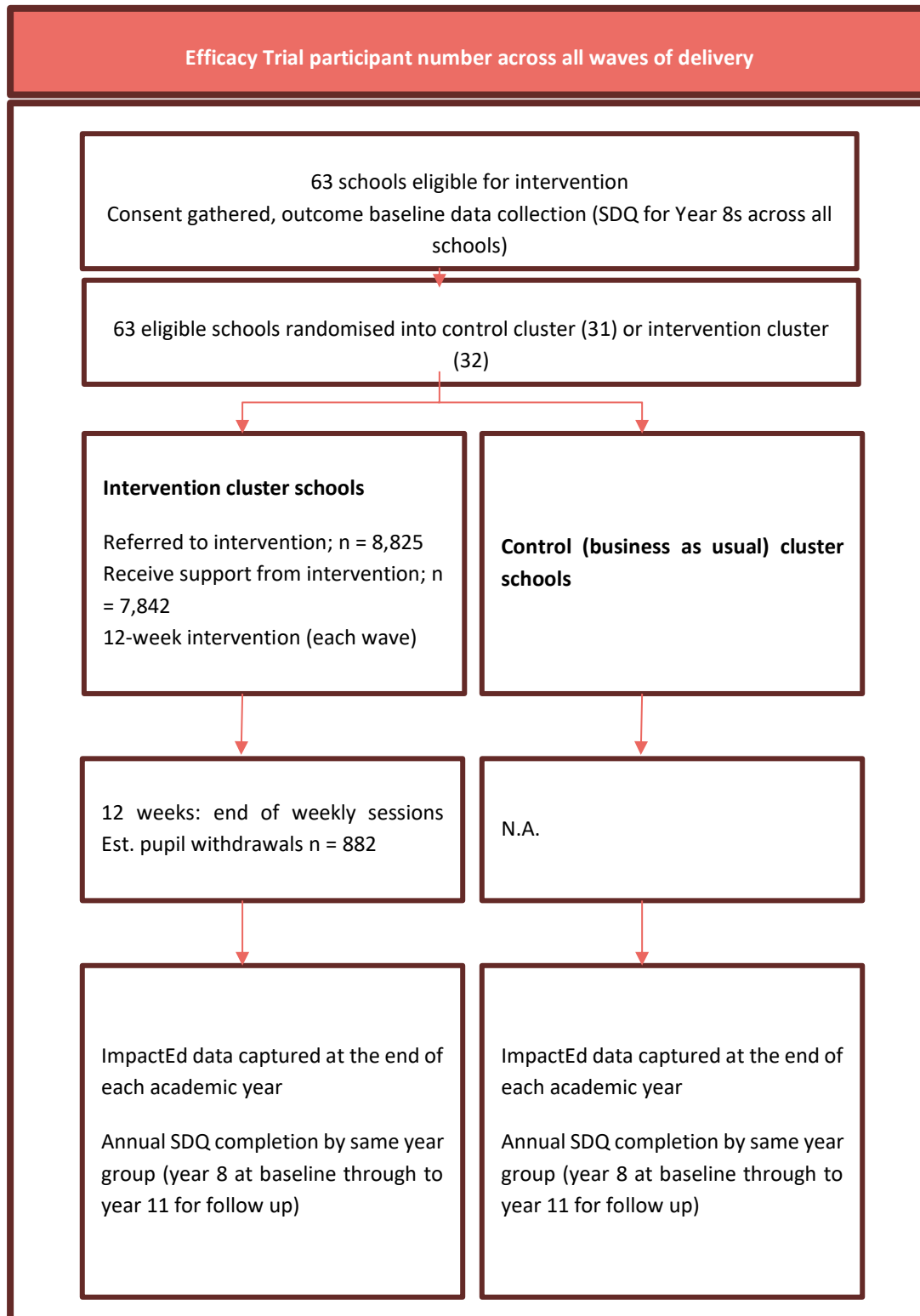
Mentoring will primarily be offered to pupils in Years 8-10. Pupils in Years 7 and 11 will also be offered mentoring in the Summer and Autumn terms respectively, and this will be established through conversation with the relevant school staff to ensure it is timely and appropriate. As we cannot access primary school attendance data, there will be insufficient data to identify Year 7 pupils based on the prior two terms until the Summer term. Year 11 pupils will be considered on a case-by-case basis to ensure the mentoring positively reinforces, rather than interferes with, their lesson and exam timetable.

Etio's intention is to identify pupils facing short-term attendance barriers who can benefit most from the intensive and rapid mentoring model. After an initial eligible sample is identified using objective attendance rates, a subjective approach will be taken to identifying individuals for whom the intervention could be beneficial, based on school and other professionals' knowledge of individual pupils' situations. Examples of situations when this 12-week mentoring model would not be appropriate may include pupils whose absenteeism is driven by long term illness or mental health challenges that cannot be addressed during this period. It may also include those for whom an additional professional could interfere with pre-existing intensive and/or multiagency support. Each case will be assessed individually – SEND, mental illness or other complex issues will not automatically exclude a young person from the intervention.

All pupils in years 7-10 who have been persistently or severely absent in the previous three terms (one term for year 7s due to less available data) at baseline will be included in the evaluation in both the intervention and control schools.

Participant flow diagram for intervention school

Figure 1: Participant flow diagram



- Numbers based on current estimates set out in referral/recruitment table submitted separately

Sample size calculations

Etio's funding from DfE restricts them to delivering in a maximum of 40 schools in total. As eight schools will receive the intervention without participating in the evaluation, a maximum of 32 schools will be able to be allocated to the intervention group, limiting the overall number of randomisable schools to 64. As randomisation will be stratified within each PEIA, and an uneven number of schools was recruited in Portsmouth, the final number of schools included will be 32 in the intervention group and 31 in the control group (63 in total). For ease of calculation, sample size estimates were based on equal numbers of schools in the intervention and control groups (31 in each).

We estimated the minimum detectable effect size (MDES) based on the maximum sample size ($N=17,050$; based on 38 mentors for intervention schools in trial, 25 mentees, 9 cycles, $38 \times 25 \times 9 = 8550$ pupils in intervention schools + 8550 pupils in control schools), as well as the expected final sample size based on a rate of 10% attrition⁹ ($N=15,345$). We conducted power calculations using PowerUpR (<https://powerupr.shinyapps.io/index/>; Ataneka et al., 2023) of a multilevel model of a cluster RCT, using a range of conservative parameters (described below). Randomisation at the cluster-level was 1:1 allocation with 62 schools and 275 pupils per school, with a (two-tailed) $\alpha = 0.05$ and power = 0.8.

In the absence of a pilot RCT providing estimates for pre-post and intra-cluster correlations (ICCs), existing – albeit limited – literature on similar mentoring intervention designs was consulted. A rapid evidence assessment of Attendance Interventions (EEF, 2022) included only two RCTs, both conducted with individual-level randomisation (Converse and Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; McQuillin and Lyons, 2016). However, correlations were not reported. These trials (Converse and Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; McQuillin and Lyons, 2016) estimated medium to large effect sizes ($d = 0.56 - 0.82$). However, given the difference in intervention (i.e. different dosage and eligibility criteria from this study), study design (individual-level randomisation) and the small ($N=31$ and $N=72$) sample sizes, we are not confident assuming this size of effects will be observed in the proposed trial.

Table 3 provides estimated ranges of MDES based on conservative standard estimates for pre- and post-test correlations and intra-cluster correlations (ICC) with the corresponding

⁹ The attrition rate is estimated, and represents the target attrition in the trial. Attrition will be closely monitored, further details on attrition and its impact on analysis will be discussed in the Statistical Analysis Plan.

assumptions. We use a range of $r = 0.50 - 0.75$ for both pupil- and school-level correlations pre- and post-intervention. A preliminary analysis of the school-level correlation in attendance data in schools eligible to participate in the trial between 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years indicated a correlation of $r = 0.91$ for all pupils, or $r = 0.89$ among persistently absent pupils (source: DfE pupil attendance in schools dataset; <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-attendance-in-schools/2023-week-50>). We anticipate this correlation will be lower within the trial, given the hypothesised impact of the intervention on increasing attendance. We therefore estimate MDES with a minimum $r = 0.50$ and a maximum of $r = 0.75$ (noting that the higher the correlation, the smaller the MDES, so by lowering this value, we make a more conservative estimate of the MDES).

In the absence of a reliable ICC estimate, we also use a range of ICC values to estimate the range of MDESs observable. We use $ICC = 0.01 - 0.2$, as indicated in guidance for conducting cluster randomized trials in school health research (Goesling, 2019). We also note that the median ICC observed in 26 studies identified through a systematic review of school-based cluster RCTs for health outcomes was $ICC = 0.028$ (range 0.0005 to 0.21; Parker et al., 2021). To our knowledge, there is no comparable systematic review for attendance outcomes, but note that a cluster RCT with a primary outcome of attendance, used an $ICC = 0.05$ in their power calculations (albeit in a different age group and setting; Mhurchu et al., 2013). In sum, we believe this range to be a reasonable estimate of the likely observable ICC in this study.

Table 3. Minimum detectable effect sizes based on estimated ranges of correlations.

Pre-test / Post-test correlation Level 1 – pupil	Pre-test / Post-test correlation Level 2 – school	Intra-cluster Correlation	Minimum Detectable Effect Size
0.5	0.5	0.01	0.060
0.5	0.5	0.05	0.118
0.5	0.5	0.1	0.165
0.5	0.5	0.2	0.230
0.5	0.75	0.01	0.047
0.5	0.75	0.05	0.086
0.5	0.75	0.1	0.118
0.5	0.75	0.2	0.164
0.75	0.5	0.01	0.056
0.75	0.5	0.05	0.116
0.75	0.5	0.1	0.163
0.75	0.5	0.2	0.230
0.75	0.75	0.01	0.042

0.75	0.75	0.05	0.084
0.75	0.75	0.1	0.116
0.75	0.75	0.2	0.163

The largest MDES within the range of calculations conducted was 0.230. We therefore present the details of this calculation in the summary table as the most conservative estimate of the MDES in Table 4. Simplified approximation of this effect size in terms of percentage attendance indicates sensitivity to 6% change (e.g., from 80% to 86% attendance, or an increase from 152 to 163 days attendance within a school year). This is considered a conservative estimate. Note that more accurate estimates of both the MDES and sensitivity to change in percentage terms will be calculated for the statistical analysis plan, within which preliminary data will be used to estimate required estimates of correlation and variance.

Table 4: Sample size calculations

		PARAMETER
Minimum Detectable Effect Size (MDES)		0.23 95% CI [0.069, 0.392]*
Pre-test/ post-test correlations	level 1 (participant)	0.5
	level 2 (cluster)	0.5
Intraclass correlations (ICCs)	level 1 (participant)	n/a
	level 2 (cluster)	0.2
Alpha		0.05
Power		0.8
One-sided or two-sided?		Two-sided
Average cluster size (if clustered)		275
Number of clusters	Intervention	31

		PARAMETER
	Control	31
	Total	62
Number of participants	Intervention	8,550
	Control	8,550
	Total	17,050

*with attrition of 10%, this will change to: 0.231 95% CI [0.069,0.393]

4. Outcome measures

Primary outcome measures of attendance, and secondary outcome measures of behavioural strengths and difficulties, educational attainment, exclusion and suspension rates and reasons will be collected at three timepoints: at baseline prior to randomisation and a two follow up points (12- and 24-months post-baseline)¹⁰.

Data on most outcomes (attendance, educational attainment, risky behaviours) will be collected via data from schools' Management Information Systems (MIS). We will collect this from two sources: the ImpactEd School Impact Platform and the NPD. Using the ImpactEd platform makes it easier for schools to share administrative data as the platform gathers it from their MIS with no work required by school staff. It also simplifies the process of collecting survey data and acts as an incentive to school participation, as school level reports can be provided (following a delay for control group schools). The platform provides us with swifter access. However, it is possible that a small number of schools might withdraw from the trial and discontinue use of the platform. We will therefore also collect data from the NPD, making a series of data applications (NPD data is currently made available 9-12 months after the end of the school year in which it was collected, so applications will be made with this time lag in mind for each school year). Our expectation is that the data will be identical. In the event of differences, we will use only NPD data.

Social and behavioural difficulties will be measured using self-report Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

Primary outcome

Attendance: This will be measured using administrative data on overall attendance (including authorised and unauthorised absences). Reducing pupils' absences by removing barriers to attendance is the primary goal of the attendance mentors, as described in the ToC (Figure 2).

Baseline attendance will be defined as attendance during the two terms prior to January 2025 (apart from for children in Year 7 for whom we will only have one term of data available). Attendance at the subsequent follow up points will be defined as attendance during each school year from January 2025 onwards (i.e., the three terms prior to January 2026, and the three terms prior to January 2027).

¹⁰ Exploratory analyses will also descriptively examine the time course of changes in attendance among those who receive mentoring on a termly basis

Attendance rates will be used to compare intervention and control group schools on three levels:

- all pupils who were eligible for the attendance mentors programme at baseline,
- overall school-level attendance,
- pupils who receive mentoring in the intervention group, compared with a matched sample of persistently and severely absent pupils in control schools: this analysis is exploratory and indicative only.

Secondary outcomes

Social and behavioural difficulties: This will be measured by the self-reported Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).¹¹ The scale is valid^{12,13} (e.g., Achenbach et al., 2008; Deighton et al., 2014), has good test-retest reliability¹², and is sensitive^{14,15} (Keating et al., 2016; Nitsch, et al., 2015).

The SDQ is a 25-item questionnaire that includes 5 subscales that measure: Emotional symptoms; Conduct problems; Hyperactivity/inattention; Peer problems; Prosocial behaviour. Each item is scored on a 3-point Likert scale (Not True which is scored as 0; Somewhat True is scored as 1; Certainly True is scored as 2), and from each of the 5 sub-scales the score can range from 0 to 10, where a lower score is a better outcome. Three scores will be created to study behaviour difficulties: internalising score composite of emotional and peer subdomains (0-20), externalising score composite of conduct and hyperactivity subdomains (0-20), and prosocial score (0-10). We will look at the total difficulties score and scores from the five subscales to assess outcomes in line with the barriers identified from the pilot of attendance mentors and the ToC. We will explore these components separately in line with the ToC where the programme aims to improve peer relationships, and prosocial behaviour through the group elements of the programme and reduce externalising behaviour mainly through the key trusted adult mentoring sessions.

The SDQ will be administered to one year group only in all intervention and control schools with in-class completion, to minimise data collection burden for schools. The survey will be

¹¹ Goodman R, Meltzer H, Bailey V (1998) The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A pilot study on the validity of the self-report version. *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 7, 125-130.

¹² Achenbach, T.M., Becker, A., Dopfner, M., Heiervang, E., Roessner, V., Steinhausen H. C., & Rothenberger A. (2008). Multicultural assessment of child and adolescent psychopathology with ASEBA and SDQ instruments: Research findings, applications, and future directions. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49(3).

¹³ Deighton, J., Croudace, T., Fonagy, P., Brown, J., Patalay P., & Wolpert, M. (2014). Measuring mental health and wellbeing outcomes for children and adolescents to inform practice and policy: A review of child self-report measures. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 8.

¹⁴ Keating, A., Sharry, J., Murphy, M., Rooney, B., Carr, A. (2016). An evaluation of the parents plus-Parenting when separated programme. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 21(2), 240-254.

¹⁵ Nitsch, E., Hannon, G., Rickard, E., Houghton, S., & Sharry, J. (2015). Positive parenting: A randomised controlled trial evaluation of the Parents Plus Adolescent Programme in schools. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 9(1), 43.

administered with all children in Year 8 as of January 2025 and then with the same cohort again at follow up (that is, when the same group of children are in Year 9 and then Year 10). Year 8 has been selected as they will be eligible based on two terms of attendance data; will be within the school throughout the evaluation period; and will not have GCSE mock examinations during the evaluation period, thus minimising the burden on schools. SDQ will be administered to the whole year group to minimise the burden on school staff of needing to identify eligible pupils, and to avoid possible stigmatisation of pupils identified as part of the eligible group.

SDQ will be administered to whole classes or year groups during normal school time in a specific period. This approach incurs a risk of missing data from the pupils targeted by the intervention who are characterised by their absence from school, and we will ask schools to follow up by emailing the survey to pupils absent on the relevant day or at the relevant time and will follow up with non-completers to encourage high completion rates.

The ImpactEd School Impact Platform will be used to administer the SDQ online to pupils. We will provide support to schools including:

- Template resources to support survey administration (including clear guidance to teachers on how to deliver it and a “menu” of delivery options such as whole-class or in a whole year-group assembly)
- Videos to support with use of the platform where needed
- Ongoing trouble shooting and school level communication for technical queries as required.

Pupils will access the survey using a randomly assigned code, which will allow their responses to be linked to their administrative and demographic data held within the ImpactEd platform, including attendance rate, whether they receive the intervention, ethnicity, SEND status, FSM status, etc.)

Attainment: Attainment data will be measured using pupils’ Attainment 8 scores, a secondary school performance metric that captures the academic achievement of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 (Year 11). It is calculated from each pupil using their scores across 8 subjects, including English and Maths (double-weighted), 3 subjects from the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) (i.e., sciences, history, geography, computer science, languages), and 3 additional approved subjects.

The data will be accessed via the ImpactEd platform and the NPD for all pupils eligible at baseline who completed GCSEs during the evaluation period. A continuous score, ranging from 0-90 where higher scores indicate stronger academic performance, will be obtained for

each pupil. The evaluation will include two cohorts of Year 11 pupils who complete their GCSEs during the evaluation period. This includes all pupils who were eligible at baseline and sat GCSEs within the evaluation timeframe. The outcome will not be averaged at the school level; instead, individual pupil-level Attainment 8 scores will be used in the analysis to enable group-level comparisons between intervention and control schools.

As this is an administrative outcome, no additional burden will be placed on schools for data collection. However, we will work closely with ImpactEd to ensure the correct matching of individual pupil records.

Exclusions and suspensions: This will be drawn from ImpactEd and the NPD, capturing both the rates and reasons for permanent exclusions and suspensions recorded for each pupil over the academic year. Exclusions will be operationalised as a binary variable (permanently excluded, not permanently excluded). Suspensions will be operationalised as a categorical variable (0, 1, >1). Where possible, the number of days/sessions suspended will also be extracted for exploratory analyses, although these will not be modelled as a primary outcome due to expected non-normality and sparsity of data. Reasons for exclusion and suspension will be descriptively analysed. All exclusion/suspension variables will be derived for the evaluation period aligned with the intervention delivery (from the term the programme begins until end of the academic year).

Other outcomes considered

The outcomes measures have been designed centring the importance of minimising data collection from pupils and families and minimising the burden on schools. We carefully considered the use of the Self-Reported Delinquency Scale as a more targeted measure of risky behaviour. However, in discussion with Etio and ImpactEd it was decided that this raised concerns relating to ethics and data quality, as well as participant burden and practical concerns. We also decided not to use a measure of school engagement, again to reduce reliance on pupils characterised by poor attendance and the burden on them and schools.

We also considered including a parent/carers outcome relating to school engagement collected via a survey, but discounted this since such efforts are likely to result in high levels of non-random missing data. Finally, we considered implementing the measures as part of school behaviour management but had concerns about the feasibility of this and the burden placed on school staff.

Compliance

Compliance will be defined as pupils attending at least seven of the intended twelve delivery sessions (hour long, with adjustment to number of sessions if half-hour sessions are used).

Compliance will be assessed using programme monitoring data, based on session information as recorded by mentors.

Due to the school-level randomisation there is no risk of control group schools receiving the intervention.

Analysis

The trial overview will be reported in accordance with the CONSORT statement for cluster randomised trials (Campbell et al., 2012). Multilevel models will be used (pupils nested within schools, with random intercepts for school), to analyse both the primary and secondary outcomes. Post-intervention attendance will be the dependent variable, with predictors at the school level (intervention condition), and the pupil level (pre-intervention attendance). Variables initially considered for stratification of randomisation (rates of free school meals, special educational needs, attendance bands and school size) but were unfeasible to implement will be considered for inclusion as covariates, based on the distribution across groups. Outcomes data will be examined to determine the most appropriate modelling approach, including considerations to transform the data to a normal distribution or models based on alternative distributions (e.g., zero-inflated models for count data). To examine subgroups of interest (e.g., pupils who have received a first suspension, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds), interaction effects will be included in multilevel models to assess the statistical significance and effect size of differential impact. Descriptive data of subgroup analyses will be reported according to the YEF Demographic Data Policy, and variables will be assessed for inclusion in analyses based on distribution and variance. Subgroups with $\geq 5\%$ of the sample will be included in exploratory analyses, while smaller subgroups ($< 5\%$) may be recategorised for analysis or reported descriptively. All subgroup analyses will be clearly identified as exploratory, especially where power is limited. To correct for multiple comparisons, we will use the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure for familywise error correction. Our primary model will be an intention-to-treat (ITT) analysis, examining outcomes for all pupils in the baseline eligible group for attendance mentoring (plus matched controls), independent of whether the mentoring was taken up. Noting findings from the pilot study demonstrating 30% non-engagement for those referred into attendance mentoring (York Consulting, 2024), we will also conduct a 'per protocol' analysis, examining outcomes only for pupils who engaged in at least 7 mentoring sessions).

Exploratory analyses will be undertaken of the difference in attendance rates of persistently and severely absent pupils in two alternately defined groups of pupils (RQ1(a), RQ1(b)). RQ1(a) will examine differences in attendance rates among those who participated in mentoring (as opposed to those *eligible* for mentoring in the primary research question), compared to a matched sample of pupils from control schools. Pupil matching in control schools will be conducted by asking schools to complete a form in which they identify which

pupils would have been put forward to *receive* mentoring from within their pool of pupils who would have been *eligible* for mentoring (had they been randomised to the intervention arm). This approach aims to approximate the subjective element of the selection process conducted within intervention schools, albeit with the acknowledged limitation that the process will not be an exact match. Since randomisation and the beginning of delivery, we now agree that the priority is to minimise the burden on control schools to avoid drop-out from the trial. As such, we are proposing to conduct the matching only once during delivery. To match procedures in intervention schools as closely as possible, we will request that control schools identify 30 pupils from any year who they would have put forward for mentoring, aligning with recruitment for Wave 3 (Nov/Dec 2025). Power calculations indicate that this would provide a MDES = 0.24 [CI = 0.072, 0.415].

RQ1(b) will examine differences in attendance rates at the whole school level. We will also explore how impacts vary including for pupils with different attendance rates at baseline, from minoritised ethnic groups, and who have previously been suspended. We will further exploratorily investigate the timing of impact, more specifically, when and for how long the intervention affects attendance, using termly data from pupils who received the intervention and matched controls.

5. Implementation and process evaluation

An implementation and process evaluation (IPE) will be used to assess the reach, differentiation of the Attendance Mentors programme from BAU, feasibility, fidelity, acceptability, and mechanisms of change with focus on sub-groups of pupils. The IPE approach will be informed by the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research¹⁶ (Damschroder et al., 2015), which identifies the determinants of effective implementation and is widely used and validated.

The IPE will also explore the effect of the programme on school policies, practices and support as measured by a school survey at baseline and 24-months post-baseline.

Research questions

RQ5: What is the difference in school policies, practices and supports (as reported by schools in a survey) in schools with Attendance Mentors in comparison with those in control schools?

RQ6: Perceived impacts: What impacts are described by schools, pupils and parents? What influences the delivery and impact of Attendance Mentoring?

RQ7: Recruitment and participation: Are recruitment strategies effective at reaching, engaging and retaining the intended group(s) of pupils including those with worst attendance?

RQ8: Activities and differentiation: What activities were undertaken by mentors and what forms of support provided? What is delivered as BAU in the control schools? How does Attendance Mentoring add to BAU?

RQ9: Feasibility: Was Attendance Mentoring feasible for delivery as intended, including with fidelity, consistency and tailored provision? What does it take to implement Attendance Mentoring with quality? What implementation strategies are involved?

RQ10: Dosage: Is mentoring provided at the intended frequency and duration? What 'dosage' is optimal for securing impacts? What are the characteristics of pupils who end mentoring early?

¹⁶ Damschroder, L., Hall, C., Gillon, L., Reardon, C., Kelley, C., Sparks, J., & Lowery, J. (2015). The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR): progress to date, tools and resources, and plans for the future. In *Implementation science* (Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 1-1). BioMed Central.

R11: Acceptability and appropriateness: Is the model of Attendance Mentoring acceptable to pupils, parents, mentors and school staff? Is it appropriate to pupil, family and school contexts?

RQ12: Unintended consequences: Are there any unintended consequences or adverse effects of taking part in Attendance Mentoring?

RQ13: Mechanisms of change: How and why does the Attendance Mentors programme lead to improved attendance, for which individuals or groups does it work best, and under what conditions or contexts?

IPE Research design

We have designed a hybrid effectiveness-implementation study (Curran et al., 2022), integrating the analysis of impact and implementation to add nuance and context. The approach is informed by two widely used and validated implementation science frameworks: the Implementation Outcomes Framework (Proctor et al., 2011) for data collection and analysis, and the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR, Damschroder et al., 2022) for analysis of barriers and facilitators.

IPE methods

The following methods will be used to collect the data required for the IPE.

Programme administrative data: Etio staff will provide programme administrative data about the delivery of the mentoring, logged on the Thrive portal by mentors. This will involve collection of information about pupils referred to and participating in mentoring including:

- Details about pupils involved in each wave, including demographics: age; sex and gender; ethnicity; absence level; FSM, SEN status
- Mentoring period: start/end dates, dates of sessions, duration of sessions, number of sessions offered, attendance at sessions
- Mentoring activities: using a drop-down list of activities, completed for each session
- Quality dimensions: these are to be discussed further with Etio and finalised, but we expect to capture data including on action plan completion and use; preparation for end of mentoring, and transition plans

Analysis of Action Plans: Action Plans will be completed by mentors and uploaded on the Thrive platform. We will carry out content analysis of a sample of 30 Action Plans. If possible,

these will be purposively sampled to capture a range of pupil characteristics, such as school, region, attendance level, and reasons for absenteeism. If purposive sample is not possible (for example due to data sharing restrictions), action plans will be selected at random. We will use this to capture issues documented (e.g. pupils' needs and attendance barriers), the mentoring activities involved, and to assess consistency with administrative data.

Survey of schools: The schools survey will also be used for two key purposes, to understand schools' attendance policies and practices and how they change over the course of the intervention (all schools), and to understand the implementation of the programme (intervention schools only). The key content will explore what schools deliver as BAU, collect information about implementation barriers, facilitators, strategies and outcomes, and perceptions of impacts of the programme including for pupils with vulnerabilities.

The survey will include items to explore the presence of dedicated attendance support staff such as an Attendance and Family Liaison Officer, how attendance is perceived and prioritised by school leads, how pupils are supported to attend school, and whether new policies or practices are put in place during the course of the project.

Understanding BAU activities provided in schools to support pupils' attendance is important for both the intervention and control schools. The survey will be used to understand schools' current approaches to absence management and the resources and supports available, and how that changes across the course of the evaluation. This will help us to understand differentiation between the services received in the intervention and control schools and identify any contamination.

Implementation determinants will be assessed incorporating validated measures of feasibility, acceptability and appropriateness such as Weiner et al., 2017.

School surveys will be administered online, carried out at two time points during the delivery window – prior to randomisation and towards the end of the programme. One member of staff per school will complete the survey, primarily the attendance leads. The survey will be administered online using the Qualtrics survey platform.

The school survey will be developed based on review of similar surveys in published evaluations, further analysis of BAU services, and further discussion with Etio about the specific types of changes in school policies, practices and supports they expect to see. We will need to use only rapid and light touch piloting to adhere to the intended timetable. We will aim for no more than 15 minutes completion time.

Survey of mentors: We will administer an online survey of mentors (at the start and towards the end of delivery) to collect data on:

- Mentor characteristics: age, sex and gender, ethnicity, professional background, qualifications
- Training for the mentoring programme
- Implementation processes, barriers, facilitators and outcomes
- Perceived impacts including for pupils with different vulnerabilities

The mentor survey will be developed based on the survey used in another recent evaluation by the evaluation team (Hall et al., 2024), and surveys from other published evaluations. It will incorporate validated measures of feasibility and acceptability (Weiner et al., 2017) and will be piloted, if possible, with Etio mentors not involved in the evaluation.

Qualitative research with mentors, schools, pupils and parents: We will carry out fieldwork at two time-points, to enable early insights for interim updates to YEF and DfE and for improvements to implementation, four months into implementation and again towards the end of the delivery. Interviews are expected to be split evenly across these two time-points but will be responsive to the delivery timeline and changes to the core delivery team. We will conduct:

- 5 mentor manager interviews with Area managers and those involved in senior roles setting up/overseeing the programme
- 15 mentor interviews
- 15 interviews with school leads for the mentoring programme/classroom teachers
- 30 pupils participating in mentoring
- 30 parents/carers whose young person participated in mentoring

Mentor managers and mentors will be purposively sampled to ensure coverage of a representative range of school characteristics (region, locality, size, pupil population). These interviews will explore experiences of programme set up and delivery, including adaptations made and variation in delivery, and perceptions of impacts and mechanisms of change.

Pupils and parents/carers will be reached either through schools or mentors, to be decided with further discussion with Etio. Each pupil and parent/carer participant will be given a £20 shopping voucher, to incentivise participation. We consider the optimal approach will be to

ask them to pass on information about the interviews to the sample of pupils and parents/carers, with a link for those interested in participating to provide more background information and book an interview slot. This minimises work for schools/mentors and avoids the need for pupils and parents/carers to share personal information with the evaluation team. However, we will explore whether purposive sampling would be feasible, drawing on a combination of school and programme administrative data to identify and approach pupils with different characteristics to ensure diversity in e.g. sex, ethnicity, age, year group, SEN and FSM status and engagement with mentoring. This would involve asking schools or mentors to approach designated pupils (or those with designated characteristics) and places more burden on them to liaise with pupils on our behalf.

For the qualitative interviews, we will develop interview guides covering the research questions, drawing on our knowledge of the programme. These will not be piloted but will be used flexibly and adapted based on early interviews. Interviews will be digitally recorded with consent, for verbatim transcription.

Table 5: IPE methods overview

Research methods	Data collection methods	Participants/ data sources (type, number)	Research questions addressed
Administrative data	Will come from Etio's records, the ImpactEd platform and the Thrive portal for mentors.	All pupils referred and participating in the mentoring. Includes: Demographics, Mentoring periods, Mentoring Activities and Quality Dimensions	RQ 7, 8, 9, 10
Analysis of Action Plans	Action Plans and session delivery information will be recorded on the Thrive platform.	Random sample of 30 Action Plans	RQ 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
School Survey	Online survey distributed to attendance leads	One attendance lead per school. Includes usual services, policies and practices, implementation experiences (intervention schools only) and perceived impacts.	RQ 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13

Mentor Surveys	Online survey distributed via Etio.	All Mentors in trial schools. Includes: Mentor Characteristics, Training, Implementation process, barriers, facilitators and outcomes, perceived impacts including for pupils with different vulnerabilities.	RQ 8, 9, 11,12, 13
Qualitative Research with Mentors, Schools, Pupils and Parents	Conducted by evaluation team. Pupils and parents/carers to be contacted through schools or mentors.	5 mentor manager interviews, 15 mentor interviews, 15 interviews with school leads for the mentoring programme/classroom teachers, 15 pupils participating in mentoring, 15 parents/carers whose young person participated in mentoring.	RQ 6, 7,8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13

Analysis

Survey data will be analysed descriptively. For qualitative data, we will use the Framework method for thematic analysis (Spencer et al., 2003; Gale et al., 2013), with themes identified both deductively and inductively and using systematic theme-based comparison within study populations and between study populations as well as within case analysis (e.g. exploring how the set-up of mentoring in a school links with referral rates, feasibility and perceived outcomes).

Data from the different sources in the IPE will be analysed separately, but the learnings will be integrated to inform findings. Interview data will be transcribed verbatim, then analysed thematically, using the Framework approach¹⁷ (Spencer et al., 2015). Themes will be identified both deductively (reflecting the ToC, and research questions) and inductively (to include unexpected and arising themes). Data from the referral systems, monitoring systems, and CYP surveys will be analysed descriptively.

¹⁷ Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., & Dillon, L. (2004). Quality in qualitative evaluation: a framework for assessing research evidence.

6. Cost data reporting and collecting

We will follow the requirements specified in the YEF Cost Reporting Guidance. Data will be collected from Etio and a random sample of schools including staff and labour costs, costs relating to intervention procurement, buildings and facilities, materials and equipment, in-kind contributions, and other relevant costs.

We will work with Etio in the set-up period to identify the data required and to set up feasible approaches for cost reporting and pilot these with a small group of schools at the start of the evaluation. We envisage using two versions of a short proforma to be completed by Etio and by one school representative. For schools, we envisage collecting data for a sample time period (e.g. a term) and extrapolating this to the evaluation period. A similar approach may be needed with Etio, or it may be feasible to collect ongoing costs throughout the evaluation period. We will run a short online webinar for school representatives where we will explain the data required, provide accompanying guidance notes, and check initial returns. Existing financial reporting arrangements will be used as far as possible.

Cost data will be analysed and reported for the programme overall, and cost per participant. Total costs will be broken down between pre-requisites, set-up and recurring costs.

7. Promoting Diversity, equity and inclusion

We specialise in working with communities facing adversity and in promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout our design and trauma-informed approaches. We recognise the structural inequality and structural racism from which racial disparities, trauma, violence, and inequities often stem. Dr Ariel Lindorff specialises in educational effectiveness, improvement, and equity, including her research finding marked ethnic disproportionality for certain SEN categories (Strand & Lindorff, 2021).

The delivery and evaluation teams worked together during the mobilisation phase using the CEI Equity in Evaluation Framework to surface equity issues in the programme, evaluation processes, our conduct of the evaluation, and communication of evaluation findings. The CEI Framework was informed by Child Trends (Andrews et al., 2019) and recent writing on equity in implementation, covering:

- The specific equity groups in focus: we will discuss and agree this with the delivery organisation
- The programme itself: how it promotes equity, potential risks
- Equity-focused evaluation questions: including reach, acceptability, impacts and harms

Through independent and group reflection, the delivery and evaluation teams have considered what programme and evaluation data needs to be collected to monitor racial inclusion, acceptability and appropriateness to different ethnic groups. We will collect data on ethnicity and gender and will disaggregate findings while maintaining confidentiality; additionally, we will sample individuals from diverse backgrounds for interviews. The evaluation team is experienced interviewing children and carers of children engaged with or at risk of involvement with youth violence and reflecting on how their own identities and power affect interviews.

Key equity points regarding the evaluation that arose through our discussions include:

- Using objective measures of impact to avoid unconscious bias (i.e. attendance)
- Collaboratively selecting appropriate secondary measures (i.e. the SDQ) with the delivery team to ensure they are ethical and appropriate
- Engaging with a youth panel to ensure data collection materials are accessible and enable pupils to provide informed consent
- Engaging with a youth panel to support the “sense making” of early findings, to ensure any subconscious evaluator biases do not lead to misinterpretations
- Cultural awareness and sensitive interviewing training to ensure ongoing reflexivity within the research team

Key equity points regarding the intervention that arose through our discussions include:

- The intervention is highly flexible and tailored to each individual young person’s needs. The mentor training and the Thrive strategy enables mentors to deliver unique and responsive sessions – the goal is to give each young person what they need to attend school rather than to give all mentees the same support
- Ongoing awareness of mentor biases and assumptions to ensure the mentoring is provided to those who need it most, sensitivity around the social and cultural contexts that influence attendance, and not assuming that the same approach will work for different pupils facing the same barriers
- Mentors will be equipped to push back on perceived school biases regarding who is offered mentoring
- Sensitivity around the possible stigmatisation of pupils being selected for mentoring and, for example, stepping out of class for their sessions

To ensure that materials, interpretation of findings, and dissemination activities are appropriate for use by pupils, we will work with a youth panel at three key points: during the co-design phase, in the design of interview guides, and in the initial interpretation of findings. We will not establish a specific group for this project, as the limited touch points across the extended project period would make it challenging to achieve meaningful engagement. Rather, we will engage with established groups. During the co-design phase, we met with the YMCA George Williams College youth panel, who provided vital feedback for the development of information sheets and consent forms.

In the analysis, we will both consider equity in impact findings (described above) and use an equity in implementation science lens to examine the factors, processes, and strategies at different levels that influence the take-up and usefulness (Baumann & Cabassa, 2020). This is particularly important given the questions raised about take-up from the pilot. We will also reflect on our own positionality and biases, stay close to participants' language, and, as far as feasible, come together to offer different perspectives. We will consider in cost analyses how certain costs may allow for greater equity and present accompanying narrative (e.g., costs for translation and interpretation, more time to reach pupils who experience structural marginalisation). We also consider equity in disseminating the findings.

8. Ethics and registration

The trial will be registered and assigned an International Standard Randomised Control Trial Number (ISRCTN) which will be included in the protocol once issued, and all publications and reports about the trial.

We seek formal ethical appraisal from the Social Research Association (SRA) Ethics Service. The SRA's ethics appraisal service¹⁸ provides an independent ethical review of research methods and will provide comments and guidance on ethical issues. The service aims to provide guidance that will enhance the ethical appropriateness of the research project, advising on measures to protect stakeholders from undue risk of harm or violation of their rights, and highlighting any potential risks of the research.

9. Data protection

The legal basis for processing participants' data for this evaluation is public task (Article 6(1)(e): processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller. CEI has received a grant from

¹⁸<https://the-sra.org.uk/SRA/SRA/Ethics/Ethics-appraisal-service.aspx?hkey=7e2de368-863d-436a-b490-1eaec5424fc2>

the Youth Endowment Fund to undertake the evaluation based on its mission to support the use of the best evidence in policy and practice to improve the lives of people facing adversity.

A Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) will be undertaken for the evaluation. All CEI employees take mandatory data protection training to understand the risks involved and are briefed on best practices by our independent data protection officer (DPO). Data privacy notices will be included in information sheets for all evaluation participants – for examples of the information sheets and consent forms see Appendix B.

We will establish data sharing agreements with all relevant parties (schools, CEI and Etio) in accordance with the UK regulator's code of conduct for data sharing. CEI and Etio will be joint data controllers. A visualisation of the data sharing arrangements is included as Appendix D. Egress¹⁹ or similar secure system will be used for the transfer of personal and/or special category data.

All data collected will be treated as confidential and pseudonymised for analysis, using a randomly generated unique participant identification number. The key linking this identification number to the names and contact details of the participants will be stored separately in an encrypted file.

There may be scenarios where we are subject to a legal obligation to disclose or share personal data, such as with law enforcement agencies, regulatory bodies, or public authorities in order to prevent or detect crime. The study team will only ever disclose personal data to these third parties to the extent we are required to do so by law.

For the purpose of archiving data into the YEF Data Archive, consistent with YEF providing a service to the youth sector as required by its funder, the Home Office, archiving activities are conducted under the authority of the Home Office and are therefore processed under Article 6.1(e) of the GDPR: "Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest" at the point the data is in the YEF Data Archive.

Data archived within the YEF Data Archive is held within an instance of the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service ("ONS SRS") for the purposes of secondary research and shall be governed under the UK Digital Economy Act 2017 and the UK Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007. Any activities to match data to the DfE National Pupil Database

¹⁹ Egress is a cloud-based email security platform which facilitates the transfer of sensitive information in emails. See www.egress.com for more information

will also be processed under Article 6.1(e) of the GDPR and CEI is acting under instruction from YEF for these activities.

Any processing of special category personal data or protected characteristics as defined by the UK Equality Act 2010 shall be processed in accordance with UK GDPR Article 9.2(j) which states “processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes”.

CEI is acting as a Data Processor on behalf of a Data Controller (YEF) for this transfer, via a controller-to-controller agreement. Once the dataset has been successfully transferred into the YEF archive, YEF will be the sole Data Controller for the copy of this data and CEI relinquishes all responsibility or controllership of the dataset residing in the YEF Data Archive.

CEI will retain copies of all personal data collected throughout the project for a further 2 years as a reasonable retention period should the data require reanalysis or repeat analysis sometimes desired of research datasets in this field of study. CEI will remain the Data Controller for this data until the data is securely deleted.

A note on consent: Ethical practices within research require informed consent (“Ethical Informed Consent”) to be gathered for a person’s participation in the project as a research participant (when interviewed or completing a survey). Ethical Informed Consent is not equivalent to consent as a lawful basis under GDPR (“GDPR Consent”).

We will provide parents/carers with an information sheet including a link to the DPN and invite them to opt their child out of our access to school data (via ImpactEd and NPD), archiving, and completion of the SDQ. We will make it clear that if they opt out, their child will not be able to participate in the trial and would not be eligible for mentoring.

We will provide pupils with an information sheet incorporating a link to the DPN and invite them to opt out of our access to school data (via ImpactEd and NPD) and archiving, again making it clear that opting out would exclude them from the trial and from being eligible for mentoring. The information sheet will explain that those in Year 8 will be invited to complete the SDQ, and opt-in consent for the SDQ will be embedded in the online survey.

Information sheets will be provided to school attendance leads and mentors and managers, and an opt-in incorporated in surveys.

Those invited to take part in qualitative interviews will be provided with an information sheet and asked to provide written consent to participating.

Should a data subject withdraw their Ethical Informed Consent before any analysis has begun CEI will delete that personal data and not include it in the project, to meet data privacy legislative obligations.

Our partner, YMCA George Williams College, will convene an advisory group made up of pupils with characteristics similar to those of the intended pupil population. They will be involved in the design of consent forms, information sheets and research instruments to ensure suitability for this population.

10.Stakeholders and interests

Evaluation team

Table 6: CEI project team

Name and affiliations	Roles and responsibilities
Jane Lewis, CEI	Associate Director and Co-Principal Investigator Responsible for overall direction of study
Katherine Young, CEI	Associate Director and Co-Principal Investigator Leading on trial design and impact analysis
Amy Hall, CEI	Advisor, Lead Researcher and project manager
Sharon Lee, CEI	Principal Advisor, Researcher and Trial Analyst
Jamie Rowland, CEI	Advisor, Researcher
Shania Rankin, CEI	Research Assistant Research support throughout
Ariel Lindorff, University of Oxford	Associate Professor, Project Advisor advising on NPD data access and impact analysis

Delivery team

Table 7: Etio project team

Name and affiliations	Roles and responsibilities
Laura Bell, Etio	Programme Director Overall programme governance and accountability
Holly Yorston, Etio	Senior Project Manager Programme management
Natalie Lewis, Etio	Head of Solutions Technical Lead for programme (Etio role – not programme specific)
Elaine Stables, Etio	Product Owner Technical support for programme (Etio role – not programme specific)
Jude Yoxall, Etio	Regional Director, North of England Management of 5x Area each and key strategic relationships
Tyrone West, Etio	Regional Director, South of England Management of 5x Area each and key strategic relationships

Area Manager, Etio	Management of each Area and mentors within and key local relationships.
Carolyn Hall-Hughes (Hartlepool)	
Melanie Kelsall (Blackpool)	
Victoria Swallow (Nottingham)	
Kurt Turner (Walsall)	
Andrew Zallmann (Rochdale)	
Kirsty Hackett (Hastings)	
Sarah Searle (Portsmouth)	
Andrew Kirby (West Somerset)	
Jamie Caley (Norwich)	
Rich Eastman (Ipswich)	

Table 8: ImpactEd project team

Name and affiliations	Roles and responsibilities
Owen Carter, ImpactEd	Director Project governance and oversight
Beth Williams, ImpactEd	Senior Manager Project manager and day to day lead
Rosie Dammers, ImpactEd	Manager Project support; analysis; report writing
Holly Waddell, ImpactEd	Associate Director Project support; quality assurance
Tabitha Dodd, ImpactEd	School Manager School relationship management, data collection and onboarding

Thais Donovan, ImpactEd	- School Manager School relationship management, data collection and onboarding
Tom Shirley, ImpactEd	Head of Data Visualisation Report production and design
Zoe May, ImpactEd	Analyst Data checks, cleaning and analysis

Funders:

The Department for Education (DfE) is funding delivery of the intervention. The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) is funding the evaluation.

11.Risks

Table 9: Risks Overview

Risks	IMPACT LEVEL (1 = lowest; 5 = highest)	PROBABILITY LEVEL (1 = lowest; 5 = highest)	Mitigation
Low referrals	3	4	We will work with the delivery partner to monitor recruitment and selection progress, re-modelling as needed. Etio will create robust plans to raise awareness of the programme in schools and support the schools to establish referral systems.
Complexity of Data Requirements	3	2	Delivery and evaluation colleagues are working to map and identify potential conflict and reduce any duplication of reporting requirements or frequency.
Survey Fatigue	3	4	Mapping young person experience in detail in co-design phase with CEI and will subsequently explore options together to reduce number of individual surveys, look at sequencing and frequency and consider impact on participants.
High Attrition (particularly in control schools)	3	3	We will minimise burden on data collection for control schools and incentivise participation using ImpactEd platform reports. Prize draw provided for control schools. We will keep schools engaged by providing ongoing communication from a named evaluation team contact and

			newsletter. All teams will work at communicating to schools, in an engaging way, the importance of being in the evaluation as control or intervention.
Inability to reach most marginalised	3	2	CEI will work with Etio using the equity framework in order to support the programme to develop plans and systems to ensure adequate referral and to consider the barrier and enablers to participation from marginalised groups. We will review through monitoring programme administrative data, flag progress and gaps and discuss with the delivery partner to jointly problem solve.
Low participation rates	4	4	Recruitment to trials can be challenging due to concerns around data, RCTs and the need for consents from pupils and parents/carers. We will work with the delivery partner and youth advisory group to design sensitive and feasible consent procedures, providing well-designed documentation. CEI will ensure data collection tools are concise and flexibly scheduled. CEI will offer vouchers to individuals and design all materials to be engaging and accessible.
Staff absences	3	2	CEI has a wide staff base with relevant skill sets and experience in its UK team and across its international offices.
Evaluation Complexity	4	2	CEI leading co-design in such a way to uncover any such issues and drawing in expertise and partners as needed to find solutions where needed
Ethical approval	3	3	Early engagement with ethics appraisal organisation to pre-empt issues and find solutions.

12. Timeline

Table 10: Project Timeline

Dates	Activity	Staff responsible/ leading
01/10/24 - 31/01/25	School Recruitment and Engagement	Etio
14/10/24 – 14/11/24	Co-Design Workshops (3 sessions)	CEI, ImpactEd, Etio
22/11/24	Protocol, Referral and recommendations form, Joint Risk Register, Gantt submitted to YEF (budget to follow 27/11/24)	CEI
22/11/24	Data sharing documents finalised	CEI
15/11/24 – 17/01/25	Ethics appraisal sought	CEI
01/11/24 - 30/12/24	Recruitment of Mentors	Etio
16/12/24 - 23/12/24	Evaluation documents drafted and shared with Etio and ImpactEd (consent forms, information sheets, privacy notices)	CEI
01/01/25 – 28/02/25	ImpactEd Platform set up and training with schools	ImpactEd
01/01/25 – 01/03/2025	Mentor training	Etio
01/02/25 – 14/02/25	Establish relationships with schools	Etio
01/02/25 - 05/01/28	ImpactEd Data Collection (detail TBC)	Etio
17/01/25 – 31/01/25	Parental opt out	CEI
01/02/25 - 14/01/25	Baseline SDQ	Etio
15/02/25	School Randomisation	CEI

Dates	Activity	Staff responsible/ leading
15/02/25 – 01/03/25	Identify pupils for wave 1 delivery	Etio
01/26 and 01/27	Annual SDQ follow up	Etio
01/03/25 - 31/03/25	Mentors start across intervention schools	Etio
01/03/25 - 14/03/25	Pupils referred for Year 1 Wave 1 across intervention schools	Etio
01/03/25 - 20/06/25	Year 1, Wave 1 Etio delivery across intervention schools	Etio
01/07/25 - 31/07/25	Pupils referred for Year 2 Wave 1 across intervention schools	Etio
01/09/25 - 31/12/25	Year 2, Wave 1 Etio delivery across intervention schools	Etio
01/12/25 - 31/12/25	Pupils referred for Year 2 Wave 2 across intervention schools	Etio
01/01/26 - 31/03/26	Year 2, Wave 2 Etio delivery across intervention schools	Etio
01/04/26 - 30/04/26	Pupils referred for year 2 Wave 3 across intervention schools	Etio
01/05/26 - 31/07/26	Year 2, Wave 3 Etio delivery across intervention schools	Etio
01/07/26 - 31/07/26	Pupils referred for Year 3 Wave 1 across intervention schools	Etio
01/09/26 - 30/11/26	Year 3, Wave 1 Etio delivery across intervention schools	Etio
01/12/26 - 31/12/26	Pupils referred for Year 3 Wave 2 across intervention schools	Etio
01/01/27 - 31/03/27	Year 3, Wave 2 Etio delivery across intervention schools	Etio

Dates	Activity	Staff responsible/ leading
01/04/27 - 30/04/27	Pupils referred for Year 3 Wave 3 across intervention schools	Etio
01/05/27 - 31/07/27	Year 3, Wave 3 Etio delivery across intervention schools	Etio
01/07/27 - 31/07/27	Pupils referred for Year 4 Wave 1 across intervention schools	Etio
01/09/27 - 30/11/27	Year 4 Wave 1 Etio delivery across intervention schools	Etio
01/12/27 - 31/12/27	Pupils referred for Year 4 Wave 2 across intervention schools	Etio
01/01/28 - 31/03/28	Year 4 Wave 2 Etio delivery across intervention schools	Etio
01/03/25 - 10/12/28	IPE Evaluation Activity Window. Detailed on next 5 rows:	CEI
	School Survey	CEI
	Mentor Surveys	CEI
	Qualitative Research with mentors, schools, pupils, and parents	CEI
	Administrative Data Collection (mentoring timelines and content)	CEI
	Analysis of Action Plans	CEI
01/08/25 - 10/08/28	Attendance Data (primary outcome)	CEI
01/08/25 - 10/08/28	Educational Attainment (secondary outcome)	CEI
01/08/25 - 10/08/28	Exclusion and suspension rates and reasons (secondary outcome)	CEI

Dates	Activity	Staff responsible/ leading
01/08/25 - 10/08/28	School policies, practices and support (secondary outcome)	CEI
01/01/25 - 01/05/28	Data monitoring meets	CEI/ImpactEd/Etio
01/05/25 - 01/06/28	Submit Quarterly monitoring reports to YEF	CEI
01/03/28 - 31/05/28	Qualitative Analysis	CEI
01/06/28 - 30/10/28	Quantitative Analysis	CEI
01/06/28 - 30/10/28	Reporting (Draft)	CEI
20/11/28 - 28/11/28	Data Archiving	CEI
01/09/28 - 21/11/28	Final Report Drafting	CEI
20/11/28 - 21/11/28	Submit End of Project Report	CEI

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Appendices

Appendix A: TIDieR framework

Appendix B: Example information sheets and consent forms

Appendix C: MOU and cover letter

Appendix D: Data sharing: Contractual relationships and data flows

APPENDIX A – TIDieR framework

1. Brief Name

Attendance Mentors programme

2. Why (Rationale/Theory)

The Attendance Mentors programme, which draws on the Oasis360 and TKAT Ace Mentor programmes, is based on the theory that building trust and a supportive relationship with a positive role model, can lead to improvements in pupils' behavioural, emotional, academic and overall developmental outcomes, ultimately increasing school attendance and enabling pupils to interact better with parents and peers. Overall, it aims to build trust-based mentor-mentee relationships that provide pupils with practical assistance to address attendance barriers and promote sustained school engagement.

3. What (materials)

Key Materials include:

- Thrive-Online Wellbeing Assessments²⁰: Etio Mentors will use the Thrive online assessments to obtain a baseline and end point assessment of pupil/mentee wellbeing. This is a comprehensive online tool that can be used to assess pupil wellbeing, create action plans and measure progress. The online tools will also be used to document strategies to address the key identified barriers to attendance (top 2-3), agreed by mentor and mentee.
- Personalised Structured Action Plans: Developed collaboratively with mentees and families, setting SMART targets to tackle attendance barriers and improve attendance.
- ImpactEd School Impact Platform: Synchronised with schools' Management Information System (MIS) and provides the Etio delivery team and relevant school staff access to each pupil's current and historical attendance patterns, pupil-specific characteristics (e.g., age, gender/sex, ethnicity, SEND status) and manage mentorship progress. Mentors will also have access to the platform to monitor daily attendance data of their own mentee when required.

4. What (procedures)

²⁰Control group schools will not receive these assessments. See <https://www.thriveapproach.com/thrive-online> for further details

Mentorship is delivered by trained mentors working individually with pupils in up to 12 sessions. They work together through four distinct and flexible phases:

5. Building Trust and Identifying Key Attendance Barriers (Weeks 1-3)
6. Goal Setting and Action Planning (Weeks 4-7)
7. Implementing the Plan and Creating a Support Network (Weeks 5-10)
8. Preparing for Reintegration and Long-term Self-Resilience (Weeks 8-12)

The table below provides further detail about these phases.

Table 1: Mentoring phases

Phase/Timings:	What & How:	Outputs:	Evidence of success:
1. Building trust and identifying key attendance barriers (weeks 1-3)	• Mentors triangulate pupil survey response and attendance patterns • Mentors work with mentees identifying from a menu of attendance barriers which 2-3 are most affecting the pupil now • Mentors guide mentees through Thrive-Online pupil wellbeing assessment	• Pupil's baseline assessment on Thrive-Online • Top 2-3 attendance barriers identified • Key contextual challenges facing the pupil captured • Early Mentor hypotheses to reduce barriers	• Continued mentee engagement • School staff perceptions of mentee engagement levels
2. Goal setting and action planning (weeks 4-7)	• Mentors work with their mentee to explore strategies and agree goals which directly address their key identified attendance barriers. • Mentee contributions to SMART targets are vital in creating ownership/accountability • Mentors have regular check-ins with their mentees and their families between in-person sessions (e.g. via WhatsApp and/or phone calls)	• Action Plan, setting out key solutions to tackle barriers quickly • SMART targets jointly agreed and shared with mentee and family • Mentor activates school/other resources where appropriate (e.g. transport to school)	• Updated strategies on Thrive-Online student progress log • Mentee achieving early SMART targets in line with action plan • Family/parent perceptions of mentee engagement levels

3.Implementing the plan and creating a support network (weeks 5-10)	• Mentors drill down with mentees on individual barriers and solution sets • Where mentors/mentees identify dependencies and/or areas of additional support needed, that support is signposted or activated now • Mentee troubleshooting with pursuing the agreed solutions is worked through with mentor, to foster mentee motivation and celebrate early progress	• Action Plan and barrier solution sets updated • SMART Targets updated • Signposting to mentee for any available resources regarding additional support • Mentor analysis of mentee efficacy at pursuing agreed solutions	• Early mentee progress celebrations • Additional mentee support identified and activated • Mentee confidence levels about progress to date continue to improve
4. Preparing for reintegration and long-term self-reliance (weeks 8-12)	• Mentor will work with the mentee, family, and school support staff to highlight areas of mentee support required post-mentorship (and from which sources) • Mentee will rehearse with the mentor aspects of self-reliance that can be maintained over the longer term for improved school attendance • Mentor will work directly with school staff to hand over post-mentorship action plan and organise reintegration meeting with in-school named staff member • Mentor will communicate end of mentorship goals achieved and post-mentorship support plan to parent/family, where appropriate	• Action Plan progress and completion, with accompanying notes for named school staff member handover • Celebration of mentee completion of course, with communications to family • Mentee reintegration meeting with school staff member planned • Final assessment completed by mentor, including analysis of pupil self-reliance growth/areas of concern	• Mentee and family end of mentorship survey, showing levels of satisfaction and future confidence • End of course student wellbeing assessment captured on Thrive-Online • School staff perceptions about mentee progress and long-term prospects for sustained school attendance • Family engagement with post-mentorship support plan

Although the focus of work is with pupils, mentors also aim to work with parents, carers and/or wider family members in up to two engagement sessions.

5. Who (recipients)

The intervention specifically targets pupils identified as persistently absent or severely absent in schools in PEIAs. The intention is to identify unsupported pupils facing short-term attendance barriers and who therefore can benefit most from the intensive, rapid mentoring model, filtering out pupils receiving long-term support for complex barriers or with chronic illness for example. The delivery partner will ultimately roll out eight 'waves' of mentoring support across all participating schools spanning four academic years (2024/5 – 2027/8).

Pupils are selected for the intervention by Etio and school staff through a process that combines objective data on attendance patterns (percentage attendance rates) with school staff's subjective judgements about barriers to attendance, informed by their knowledge of student's circumstances. Etio intend to structure referrals by year group in three separate segments:

- "Quick wins": Pupils where mentorship is most likely to improve attendance and/or with a single short-term barrier (60% of wave cohort)
- "Mixed barriers": Pupils facing 2-3 attendance barriers or a single medium-term barrier where mentorship will require distinct targeted approaches (30% of wave cohort)
- "Severely Absent": Pupils with multiple, complex barriers who are likely to needed extended mentoring (10% of wave cohort)

6. Who (implementers)

Mentors are independent from the schools and are recruited and trained by Etio. A total of 50 mentors will be recruited and trained. They will be allocated to schools, providing a consistent point of contact. They will be supported by the central Etio team as well as 10 newly recruited Area Managers who will oversee mentoring in the PEIAs.

Mentors and Area Managers will undertake an intensive 8 week induction programme prior to commencing in school delivery. This includes a core training curriculum from Etio's partner Thrive based on their Adolescent practitioner course, covering a multitude of both theoretical and practical approaches to working with pupils underpinned by neuroscience, as well as the use of their platform for undertaking action planning and assessments. Etio's other partner Oasis will deliver training more specifically around mentorship, sharing their expertise in this area including sessions on topics such as rapport building. The rest of the programme will

include internal Etio training, programme specific learning, as well as a range of sessions provided by specialist organisations/trainers on topics such as safeguarding, mental health, restorative practice, SEND, working with the LGBTQA+ community, and working with Young Carers, amongst others.

7. How (mode of delivery)

The mentoring sessions are conducted primarily as 1-1 sessions within schools. However, when sessions happen out of term time or after school hours, sessions may be hosted in local community centres or “safe spaces”. Mentors will also have regular check-ins with their mentees and their families between in-person sessions via WhatsApp and/or phone calls. On average, mentors will have a 25-pupil caseload per standard 12-week wave.

8. Where (setting)

School-based sessions will be most common, but alternatively they may take place at “safe spaces” which would include community centres or other local venues. For example, if it is identified that a barrier to a young person attending school is due to a lack of sense of belonging, a “safe space” outside of school may be utilised to create connections with the wider community or youth workers in a community setting.

9. When and How Much (dosage)

Delivery of mentoring will begin in March 2025.

Mentoring will be delivered in weekly sessions lasting an hour, with the option of two 30-minute sessions per week depending on mentee needs.

Each mentoring wave lasts 12 weeks on average but is flexible based on mentee needs. Each mentee receives 10-15 weekly sessions, with an additional 1-2 hours dedicated to an Oasis Encounter family/parent engagement session. Oasis works nationally and in local neighbourhoods to build stronger communities. Their Oasis Encounter²¹ programme helps whole families improve their mental wellbeing. The service is offered via trained coaches direct to parents, carers and families.

Etio plan to stagger the delivery of mentorship over nine waves, starting in March 2025 and ending in March 2028.

10. Tailoring

²¹ See <https://www.oasisuk.org/oasis-encounter/> for further details

The intervention is tailored to individual pupil needs by adapting session frequency and duration. Barriers to attendance are assessed on an individual basis, with targeted goals and personalised action plans developed for each mentee.

11. How well (planned)

Mentors will be provided with structured training and have access to the ImpactEd platform for monitoring attendance patterns and barriers in real time. Each Area Manager will work with School Attendance officers to optimise the matching of individual mentors with mentees, based on pupil preferences, gender role models and mentor specialist skillsets/domain experience. Quality assurance will include regular check-in meetings between Area Managers and Partner schools. During these meetings, attendance data for pupils is collected and tracked to monitor programme progress and impact, as well as fidelity checks on mentoring activities and goal progression.

APPENDIX B – Information sheets and consent forms (representative sample)

Attendance Mentoring Programme

Trial Information and Opt-out Form for Parents

What is the Attendance Mentoring Programme?

Your child's school is participating in the Attendance Mentoring Programme, delivered by **Etio** and **ImpactEd**. This programme aims to improve school attendance and engagement for students who have been identified as persistently or severely absent. It is being implemented across ten Priority Education Investment Areas (PEIAs) across England and is funded by the **Youth Endowment Fund** and the **Department for Education**.

The mentoring programme is based on the idea that building a supportive, trust-based relationship with a mentor can help pupils improve their behavioural, emotional, academic and overall development outcomes.

The programme is being evaluated by the **Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI)** to understand how the mentoring impacts pupils and how effective it is at identifying and addressing attendance barriers.

What does the evaluation involve?

- As part of the evaluation, we will **collect administrative data about your child**. This includes demographic information (gender, ethnicity etc.) and data about your child's attendance, exclusions (if applicable) and attainment (i.e. GCSE results, if your child takes them during the programme). You do not have to do anything for us to collect this, as your child's school already collects this data.
- **If your child is in Year 8, we will also ask your child to complete the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)**. This is a short survey that helps us understand your child's wellbeing and behaviours.
- If your child takes part in the mentoring programme, you and/or your child may also be asked to participate in an interview. If relevant, you will receive separate information about this at a later stage.

This information will help us understand how mentoring is helping students and how the programme can be improved.

What happens to the data?

- All data collected will be **kept anonymous and confidential**. This means that your child's name will not be connected to their evaluation data. Personal details will be removed from any reports to ensure no individual can be identified.
- The only reason that data would be shared outside the evaluation team is if safeguarding concerns arise during the research (i.e. if we have reason to believe that anyone is at risk of harm), in which case appropriate safeguarding procedures will be followed.
- All data will be stored securely and handled in line with data protection laws (GDPR).
- Please see the Data Privacy Notice (DPN) for more detail.

Data Withdrawal: You can request to withdraw your data up to 90 days after ending your involvement in the research. However, it will not be possible to remove any data that is already contained within a published report.

Data Archiving:

- Data will be pseudonymised so that it is impossible for anybody accessing the data once it's been stored to identify the children on whom data is held.
- The Department for Education will receive the data collected from the project when it ends and replace anything that could identify a child (like names or dates-of-birth, addresses etc.) with a unique reference. The Department for Education will then send the data to the Office of National Statistics, where it'll be held in a secure archive.
- The Youth Endowment Fund will become legally responsible for the data and how it's protected once the project has finished. The Youth Endowment Fund will never allow the data in the archive to be re-identified, and the Department for Education would never facilitate this.
- For more information on data archiving please visit this [link](#).

Do I need to do anything?

If you are happy for your child's data to be used in the evaluation, you do not need to take any action.

If you **do not want** your child's data to be used in the evaluation, please complete the opt-out form below and return it to your child's school.

If you choose to opt out, your child will not complete the SDQ, and we will not use their administrative data as part of this evaluation.

If we do not receive an opt-out form, we will assume you are happy for your child to participate.

Any further Questions?

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Amy Hall at amy.hall@ceiglobal.org.

What if I would like to make a complaint?

If you would like to make a complaint about the mentoring intervention, please contact Laura Bell from the Etio delivery team at laura.bell@etioglobal.org.

If you would like to make a complaint about data handling or the evaluation, please contact Anna Riggall from the CEI evaluation team at anna.riggall@ceiglobal.org.

Thank you!

Parent Opt-Out Form

I do not want my child to take part in the evaluation of the Attendance Mentoring programme. I understand that this means they will not be asked to complete the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and none of their administrative data will be used as part of this research.

Name of Child (First and Surname):.....

Name of Child's School:.....

Name of Parent (First and Surname):

Parent Signature:

Date:.....

Information Sheet for Students: Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

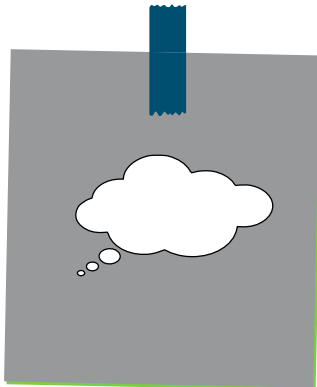


What is the SDQ and why am I being asked to fill it in?

Your school is taking part in the Attendance Mentoring Programme. This aims to help students attend school more.

As part of this programme, we would like you to fill in a short survey called the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The SDQ helps us learn more about your feelings and behaviour. It is not a test. It will help us see if the programme is working and how it can better support students.

It will take around 5 – 10 minutes to complete.



What does the SDQ ask about?

There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to see what you think about yourself.

The SDQ asks you questions about:

- Your feelings and emotions.
- How you behave.
- How you get along with friends and others.
- Things you like to do.

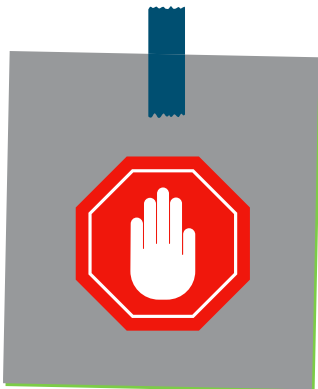


What will happen to my answers?

Your answers will be kept private. This means no one at your school or home will see them unless we are worried about your safety or someone else's safety.

Your answers will be looked at by the **Centre for Evidence and Implementation** team who will be evaluating the programme, to help us see how mentoring is impacting students.

The funder of this project, the Youth Endowment Fund, will store some of your information for at least five years. This is to assess the long-term effects of this programme. This data will not be linked to your name.



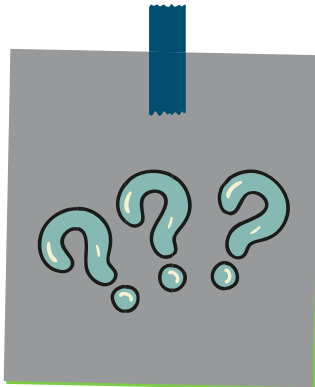
Do I have to complete the SDQ?

No, it is a choice. You do not have to complete it if you do not want to. If you start the survey and change your mind, you can stop at any time without giving a reason. You can also ask for your data to be taken out of the research up to 90 days after completing the survey. For more details, see our Data Privacy Notice (DPN).



I am happy to complete the SDQ. What should I do?

If you are happy to participate, please complete the attached consent form.



What if I have a question or need help?

If you have a question or don't understand how to complete the SDQ, please ask for help from a teacher or a mentor. For questions or concerns about the programme, please contact Amy Hall from the evaluation team at amy.hall@ceiglobal.org.

Attendance Mentoring Programme

Student - Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Consent Form

Before filling out the questionnaire, please complete this consent form. Please read through each of the following statements and tick whether you agree or not.

If you have any questions, please talk to your teacher.

	I agree	I do not agree
I have read and understand the information sheet about the SDQ.	[]	[]
I know that my answers will stay private, unless there is a concern about my safety or someone else's safety.	[]	[]
I understand that I don't have to take part if I don't want to, and I can stop at any time without giving a reason.	[]	[]
I agree to fill out the questionnaire.	[]	[]

Name:

Year Group:

Date:

You will now be asked to fill out the SDQ. If you have any questions or need any help, please ask a teacher or your mentor.

APPENDIX C – MOU and cover letter

Dear school leader,

I am writing to you about the exciting next steps for our attendance mentors programme. As you know, we recently signed a contract with the education provider Etio to deliver attendance mentoring support to 10,800 persistently absent pupils across secondary schools over the next 3 years.

You have already expressed an interest in your school receiving support. To confirm your school's participation, please read and sign the attached memorandum of understanding (MOU). The MOU sets out expectations for participation, and requirements around data collection and sharing.

As you will know, this programme is being evaluated as a randomised control trial. This means that not all schools will receive mentoring support. Some schools, who will be randomly selected, will get a dedicated attendance mentor who will work closely with pupils in their school. The remaining schools that are not selected will be asked to participate in the wider evaluation so we can better understand the impact of mentoring.

I appreciate that those schools that are not selected will be disappointed. Even if your school is not selected to receive mentoring support, by engaging in this trial you will be playing a vital role in helping us to develop the evidence base about effective attendance interventions and support for some of the most vulnerable pupils in the country, and directly supporting the government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity. Ultimately, the findings from this project will be shared with all schools, trusts and local authorities nationally.

As well as the chance to receive free mentoring support, schools not selected for support, will receive a financial or other incentive, which could include access to ImpactEd's school data platform and reports providing insight into attendance factors in your school. The ImpactEd platform would facilitate automated collection of relevant pupil level data for the evaluation, reducing data collection burden for schools.

Please read and sign the attached the MOU and return it to us by email to school.attendance@education.gov.uk by Friday 13 December to confirm your school's participation in the trial.

Thank you in advance for your engagement in this important work.

Department for Education (DfE) Attendance Mentors Trial

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

Introduction

Supporting as many children and pupils as possible to attend school is one of the biggest challenges facing the school system today. In the 23/24 academic year, around 1 in 5 children were persistently absent from school (c. 1.5 million pupils nationally).

By engaging in this attendance mentors' trial, your school is playing a vital role in helping us to develop the evidence base about effective attendance interventions for some of the most vulnerable pupils in the country, and directly supporting the government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity.

Please read this memorandum of understanding, sign and return it by 13th December to school.attendance@education.gov.uk to secure your school's place on the trial. The requirements that all schools need to agree to are set out on page 5, and the agreement itself is on page 7.

1. Overview of the project

Attendance mentoring involves trained mentors providing one-to-one targeted support to pupils to help address barriers which are affecting their attendance. Support will typically involve weekly one-hour sessions between a persistently absent pupil and mentor, in school, over a 12-week period. Mentoring will follow four phases: 1) building trust and identifying barriers with pupils, 2) setting goals and actions, 3) implementing action plans and creating a pupil support network, and 4) planning for school reintegration and long-term self-reliance after mentoring has finished. If your school is assigned to the intervention group, you will be allocated a dedicated mentor to work with pupils in your school. Mentors will begin working with schools from March 2025 through to April 2028.

Etio, formerly known as Tribal Group Education Services, will coordinate and deliver the project. Etio are a specialist consultancy that provides education services, and will collaborate with three specialist partner organisations to deliver:

- **ImpactEd**, who will provide the platform that links to a school's management information system (MIS) to facilitate the automatic collection of pupil data.
- **Thrive**, who will provide licenced practitioner training and the online journal for mentors to record their interactions with each pupil.
- **Oasis Community Partnerships**, a community transformation movement who provide support to families.

The evaluation

The Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) is evaluating this programme, funded by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF). The primary aim of the evaluation is to find out the impact of attendance mentors on the attendance rates of pupils in Years 7 to 11 who are persistently absent from school. The evaluation also aims to determine the effects of attendance mentors on the rates of, and reasons for, pupils' suspensions and exclusions from schools, social and emotional difficulties, academic attainment, and under what conditions the programme works. The evaluation will be reviewed by the Social Research Association ethics service, who will appraise the ethical aspects of the study before any data collection takes place.

Structure of the evaluation

Attendance mentors will be evaluated using a randomised controlled trial. Schools that agree to take part will be randomly assigned to either the intervention group or the control group. Schools cannot choose which group they are in. The random assignment will be carried by the evaluation team at CEI, using a statistical package and random number generation. This ensures that each school has an equal chance of being placed in any group, which helps to reduce bias and the effect of external factors that could influence the results. The control group will continue with their normal school practices, while the intervention group will receive the attendance mentoring support. Schools allocated to the control group will receive financial or other incentives in exchange for their continued participation in the evaluation, there is also the potential for them to access the ImpactEd attendance platform for free for the duration of the trial. By comparing the outcomes between intervention and control groups, we can determine the impact of the mentoring on outcomes with a high degree of confidence. RCTs are considered the gold standard in education research.

- **Intervention group** – Schools in this group will receive the Attendance Mentors intervention. In February 2025, intervention schools will be provided with a list of eligible pupils (those with less than 90% attendance in the previous one or two school terms), and work with Etio to select pupils for the project. These schools will be expected to coordinate participation with Etio and the Attendance Mentor, and to support facilitation (see 'Requirements' section).
- **Control group** – Schools in this group will not receive the Attendance Mentors intervention. They will continue with their normal school practices (business-as-usual).
- **Both groups of schools** – All schools will install and keep live the ImpactEd platform for the duration of the evaluation, which will link to the School Management Information System (e.g. SIMs, Arbor), and record and share data integral to the intervention and evaluation. All schools will also administer the Strengths and

Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to one year group of pupils on an annual basis, and will participate in other data collection activities across the evaluation (see 'Use of Data' and 'Requirements for schools' sections).

Ethical approval

Ethical appraisal will be sought from the Social Research Association ethics service. No evaluation activities will take place until positive ethical appraisal has been confirmed. If you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact Dr Anna Riggall, Director at CEI, using this email address: anna.riggall@ceiglobal.org

2. Use of data

For the purposes of identifying eligible pupils, research and archiving evaluation data, the following pupil data will be collected from all schools (both intervention and control) via the ImpactEd platform:

- Pupil characteristics (e.g. UPN, age, school year, gender/sex, ethnicity, SEND status, Free School Meal status).
- School attendance.
- Rates and reasons for exclusions and suspensions.

This data will be linked to the following information about pupils held within the National Pupil Database (NPD):

- Pupil characteristics (age, school year, gender/sex, ethnicity, SEND status, Free School Meals status).
- School attendance.
- Rates and reasons for exclusions and suspensions.
- Pupil attainment (number of GCSEs attained).

Pseudonymised data will be shared with Etio, CEI, the Department for Education, the YEF, and with the Office for National Statistics and potentially other research teams. Further matching to NPD and other administrative data may take place during subsequent research.

A Data Sharing Agreement will be set up between the School, CEI and Etio to make it clear to all parties involved in the research how all personal data will be used, secured and shared appropriately. This is a document that follows the Information Commissioner's Office 'Data Sharing Code of Conduct'. Further detail about data protection is set out in Annex A.

In addition to the above:

- Schools will administer the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to pupils in one year group. Only one year group will be asked to complete this questionnaire, once per year, across the 3 years of the trial (envisaged that this would be in form time or PSHE lessons).
- School staff in intervention and control groups will complete a school survey at baseline and at the end of the trial collecting data on school policies and practices concerning attendance and support.
- Some schools will be asked to take part in a qualitative interview with a member of the evaluation team, to discuss the schools' attendance policies and practices and experiences of the mentoring programme.

Some pupils receiving mentoring, and some parents/carers of mentored pupils, in some intervention group schools, will also be invited to take part in a qualitative interview with a member of the evaluation team, to discuss their experiences.

3. Requirements for schools

All schools will be required to:

- **Accept the connection to the ImpactEd platform and assign a data manager/ main point of contact** to link with the School Management System and address any issues.
- **Share pupil characteristic, attendance, exclusion and suspension data** with Etio and CEI. This will automatically be facilitated through the ImpactEd platform that schools will be given free access to.
- **Share trial consent materials with families and eligible pupils**, providing them information about the study and an opportunity to discuss the research with their child and to withdraw them from the trial (including all data processing, in line with GDPR). Pupils who withdraw from the trial will be ineligible to receive the attendance mentors support. Schools will retain a list of pupils who have been withdrawn from data processing and ensure their data is not shared with the delivery or evaluation teams.
- **Sign a Data Sharing Agreement (DSA)** to establish the terms and conditions for sharing personal data.
- **Administer the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to all pupils within Year 8** (as of February 2025) and then annually to the same cohort thereafter. Schools will need to administer the survey in a designated time during the school day, and

follow up by email (and other methods if possible) with a) pupils who did not attend school at the designated time and b) pupils who have not completed the survey. Schools should identify a staff member who is responsible for overseeing this and ensuring survey completion.

- **Ensure that one member of staff completes the school survey** at two time-points.
- **Agree to the evaluator obtaining the relevant pupils' attendance, attainment and demographic data (gender, ethnicity, SEND status) from the National Pupil Database.**
- **Be prepared to work closely with CEI and to support the evaluation as required.**

If the school must withdraw from the project for operational or other unavoidable reasons, it will notify CEI and Etio straight away and continue to provide test data for the evaluation. Schools will be expected to engage with CEI and/or Etio to try to resolve any issues prior to withdrawal.

Intervention schools will also be expected to:

- **Work with Etio to identify eligible pupils** who fit the study criteria and will benefit from the support of a mentor.
- **Prompt parents/caregivers to provide consent** for pupils to be included in the mentor programme.
- **Support the delivery of the attendance mentors programme** where required, including providing spaces for pupils to meet their mentors, coordinating initial sessions between mentor and pupils, supporting the attendance team and parents to discuss pupil progress and emerging issues.
- **Agree to facilitate pupil surveys** undertaken through the ImpactEd platform, which may include pre and post delivery surveys.
- **Provide feedback** to help refine and improve the mentoring process throughout the trial.
- **Ensure that a designated member of staff takes part in a qualitative interview** about the school's approaches to supporting attendance and experiences of the mentoring programme.
- **If required, liaise with mentored pupils and with the parents/carers of mentored pupils** to ascertain willingness to take part in a qualitative interview.

4. Headteacher agreement

☐ I agree for my school to take part in the attendance mentors trial and I accept the eligibility requirements listed in the MoU.

☐ I understand and agree that pupil data will be processed as per the GDPR and DPA 18 lawful conditions outlined in Annex A, and understand I will be obliged to review and sign the Data Sharing Agreement between the School, CEI and Etio.

School Name			
Head Teacher Name			
Head Teacher Signature		Date	__ / __ / __
Head Teacher Email Address			
School Telephone Number			
Attendance Lead Name			
Attendance Lead Email Address			
Data Manager Name			
Data Manager Email Address			

This MoU constitutes the school's agreement with Etio, CEI, ImpactEd, the DfE and the YEF to participate in the Attendance Mentors evaluation and trial.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research.

Annex A: Data protection

All pupil data will be treated with the strictest confidence and will be stored in accordance with the data protection legislation, including the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 18). The GDPR lawful bases for processing will be:

- Within the research, personal data will be processed as per condition 6(1)e of the GDPR under public interest purposes, because the research is considered to be a “task carried out in the public interest” based on the funding being from the Department for Education as an exercise of official authority that has been vested on the research team.
- Any uses of personal data to manage the research will be processed as per condition 6(1)f of the GDPR under the purposes of legitimate interests pursued by the controller.
- Any personal data processed for any incentivisation will be processed as per condition 6(1)b of the GDPR for the performance of a contract to which the data subject is party.
- Where there may be scenario where a person is subject to a legal obligation to share any personal data, this will be processed as per condition 6(1)c of the GDPR (e.g. reporting a crime).
- Should there be any reason for a requirement to protect someone’s life, including safeguarding concerns, the use of personal data for this will be processed as per condition 6(1)d of the GDPR, in order to protect the vital interests of the data subject.

The research will involve some ‘special category personal data’ (for example, but not limited to, ethnicity). For these data, we rely upon GDPR Articles 9(2)(g) and 9(2)(j), and Schedule 1, Part 1.4 of DPA 18 as the lawful basis for data processing, i.e. where the processing is necessary for substantial public interest, for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes and carried out in accordance with GDPR Article 89(1).

To ensure that parents/carers, and the pupils themselves, are comfortable for their, or their child's, data to be processed in this way, we are also providing an opportunity for parents/carers to discuss the research with their child and to withdraw their data from the research and any data processing (see requirements below for details).

All results will be anonymised so that no schools or individual pupils or teachers will be identified in any report arising from the research. Further information about how CEI uses participant information can be found here: [Privacy Policy | ceiglobal.org](https://ceiglobal.org/privacy-policy)

Following the evaluation, CEI will de-identify and transfer the quantitative data of all pupils who have participated in the evaluation to the Youth Endowment Fund’s Data Archive. The Data Archive is a secure platform hosted by the Secure Research Service (SRS), and processed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The SRS can only be accessed by approved researchers for documented and approved research purposes. Archiving data is standard practice on YEF-commissioned evaluations, which allows long-term follow-up of what happens to pupils involved in YEF programmes, including youth offending (by matching with

Ministry of Justice or police data). The Data Archive also allows for further pooled analysis to identify what works for different groups of pupils. Further information about the Data Archive [can be found here](#).

To ensure the safe passage of personal data into the Youth Endowment Fund's Data Archive, CEI shall set up a Data Sharing Agreement between CEI, YEF and Etio.

If you are concerned about how personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact CEI in the first instance at: anna.riggall@ceiglobal.org

Annex B: Responsibilities of Etio, ImpactEd and CEI

Responsibilities of Etio:

- Recruit, assess and screen Attendance Mentors for the programme
- Support with identifying appropriate pupils to be assigned a mentor.
- Coordinate delivery of the Attendance Mentors programme with schools and pupils.
- Deliver the programme within the context of an evaluation.

Responsibilities of ImpactEd:

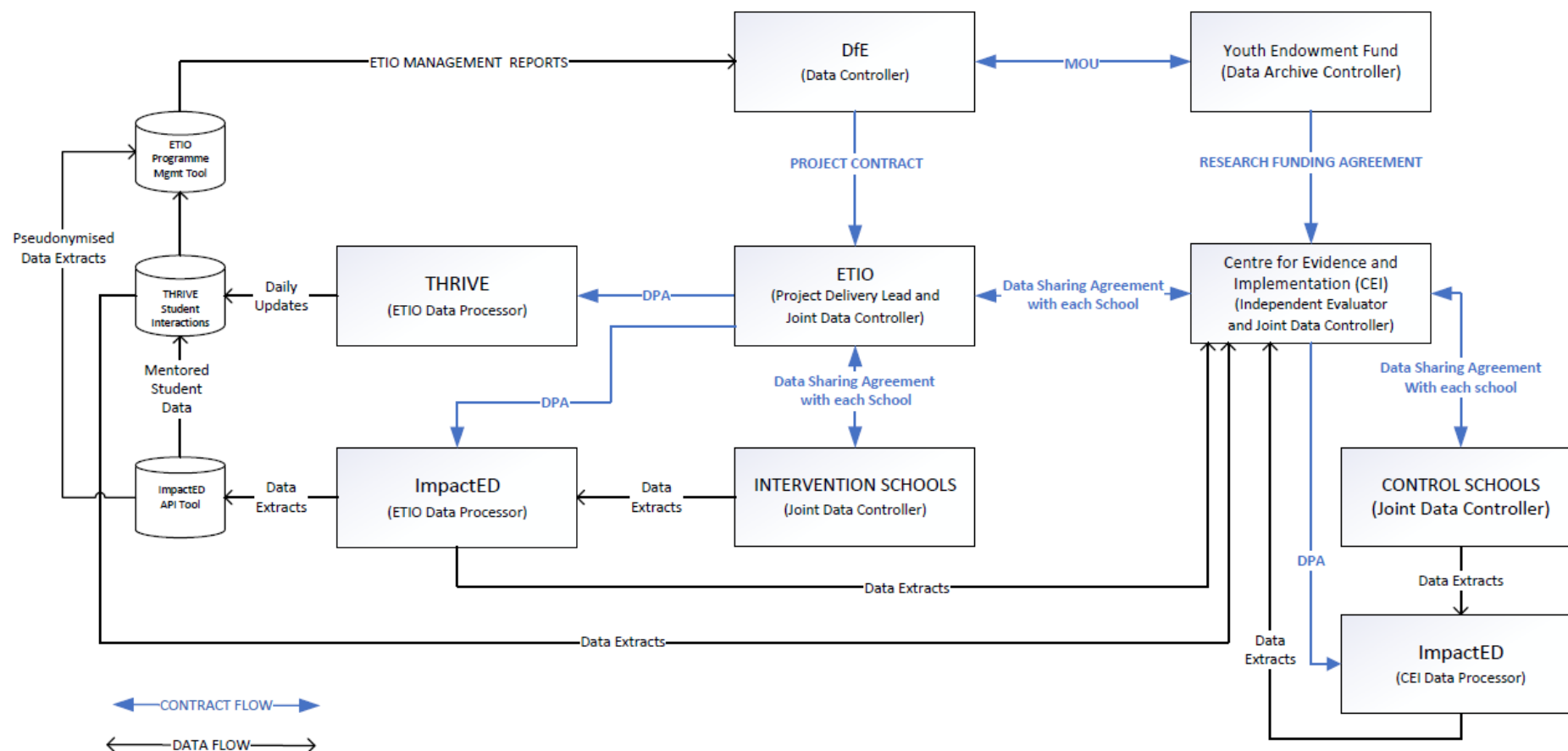
- Support schools to connect to and maintain the ImpactEd platform, including linkage with the School Management Information System.
- Share data with Etio, CEI, the DfE and the YEF as required.
- Provide guidance to schools on how to collect and return data safely and securely.

Responsibilities of CEI:

- Act as the first point of contact for any questions about the evaluation.
- Provide information sheets and withdrawal forms for parents/carers and for pupils.
- Conduct data collection exercises with pupils, parents and school staff.
- Request NPD data using pupil details.
- Analyse the data from the project.
- Disseminate the research findings.

APPENDIX D – Data sharing: Contractual relationships and data flows

DfE ATTENDANCE MENTORS: CONTRACTURAL RELATIONSHIPS AND DATA FLOWS



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The Youth Endowment Fund Charitable Trust

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