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An analysis of UK local authority (LA) emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) guidance

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ABSTRACT

School attendance difficulties including emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) are an ongoing concern. Over recent years, local authorities (LAs) have provided guidance for school staff and other professionals in addressing EBSA. Educational psychologists (EPs) have written or contributed significantly to guidance. In order to establish what guidance UK LAs are providing for schools and to support future refinement of EBSA guidance through a newly created evaluation tool, this current review analysed 48 UK LA EBSA guidance documents obtained between June and August 2023. Common elements were consideration of context, underlying principles, evidence base, practical support and resources. Implications for practice, limitations, and potential future research are discussed.

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Attendance difficulties;
emotionally based school
avoidance; guidance;
educational psychology;
multi-agency

Introduction

School absence is a cause for concern with overall absence rates across primary, secondary and special school in England for 2023–24 of 7.2% (Department for Education [DfE], 2024); however the overall rate hides considerable variability, with 20.7% of children and young people (CYP) identified as persistently absent in 2023–24 (missing over 10% of sessions) (DfE, 2024). Precise absence rates due to specific causes are challenging to identify; however there has been an overall increase in absence since the COVID-19 pandemic (Lester & Michelson, 2024). Pre-pandemic figures suggest approximately 1–2% of the UK school-aged population were absent due to emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) (Halligan & Cryer, 2022). During the academic year 2022–23, schools in England reported significantly higher absence rates (Lester & Michelson, 2024), suggesting EBSA rates are likely to also be significantly higher than pre-pandemic figures. Certain groups are more likely to be absent: CYP with mental health needs, special educational needs or disabilities; those living in poverty; or where social care are involved (Bond et al.,

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2024). Higher rates of absence are associated with lower attainment rates (DfE, 2022) and impact on emotional wellbeing and resilience (Burtonshaw & Dorrell, 2023).

Various terms including “school refusal”, “school phobia”, and “truancy” have been employed interchangeably, providing limited distinction between the underlying causes of school absence (Kearney, 2008). When referring to attendance difficulties related to emotional factors, a number of terms have been employed with limited consensus regarding the most appropriate. The term EBSA is widely used across the literature when describing school attendance problems caused by emotional factors (Chian et al., 2024; Halligan & Cryer, 2022). Research amongst young people found that they preferred emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA; Corcoran et al., 2023). However, both terms have been criticised for taking a within-child perspective (Corcoran & Kelly, 2022). Instead, terms such as extended school non-attendance aim to support a greater understanding of the multifaceted difficulties (Corcoran & Kelly, 2022; Neilson & Bond, 2023). However, more recently terms favoured by stakeholders, such as extended school non-attendance (ESNA; Corcoran & Kelly, 2022; Neilson & Bond, 2023), barriers to school attendance (BtSA; Want & Gulliford, 2024) or barriers to education (BtE; Salford City Council, 2024) are being adopted, which reflect a shift away from within-person focused terminology. However, these terms broaden the focus beyond mental health-related factors, highlighting the challenge of defining attendance difficulties. This current paper will use the term EBSA (Halligan & Cryer, 2022) as this is commonly used in local authority (LA) guidance. This paper considers EBSA to be a subgroup of wider attendance concerns.

School approaches to attendance difficulties have changed in the post-pandemic landscape (ImpactEd, 2024). Although fines have recently increased, there is limited evidence of their effectiveness (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023). Literature relating to attendance has highlighted the complexity of this area and focused on interventions at different levels (Kearney & González, 2022).

Systems to improve wellbeing and early identification feature across the literature (Boaler & Bond, 2023), and national guidance (DfE, 2022; Public Health England [PHE] & DfE, 2021). It is suggested that attendance data collection and monitoring can enable timely support (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Heyne et al., 2022). However, Kearney and González (2022) urge against overreliance on attendance data due to its vulnerability to manipulation. Multi-tiered approaches, which include multi-agency working, can provide levels of flexible support in response to the heterogeneous nature of attendance difficulties (Kearney & González, 2022) and facilitate quick responses to complex underlying causes of non-attendance (Heyne et al., 2020).

Whole school relationship based (Boaler & Bond, 2023) or trauma-informed approaches (Popoola & Sivers, 2023) provide consistency for all pupils, including those at risk, establishing a sense of safety and connectedness, while valuing CYP’s views helps create a sense of belonging (ImpactEd, 2024). Similarly, clear and consistent home-school communication and collaboration with families facilitates trust and promotes attendance (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2022; ImpactEd, 2024). However, evidence suggests that home-school relationships have deteriorated post-COVID (Lester & Michelson, 2024).

For young people at risk of attendance difficulties, psychological frameworks such as ecological systems theory (Brown, 2020); risk and resilience/push-pull models (Thambirajah et al., 2008) and the four functions of school absence (Kearney &

Silverman, 1996) can support formulation of responsive interventions which target specific attendance barriers (EEF, 2022). Mentoring programmes have yielded mixed results (EEF, 2022) but are more promising for high-risk CYP (Boaler & Bond, 2023). Eklund et al. (2022) also found evidence that academic, behavioural and family-school interventions had a small, positive impact.

At the individual level, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) based approaches have been used to support EBSA (Maynard et al., 2015). However, evidence of their effectiveness in improving attendance is limited (Lester & Michelson, 2024) and a CBT model used in isolation fails to consider factors beyond the CYP (Chian et al., 2024) and may lack validity in the school context (Cunningham et al., 2022).

For those who struggle in mainstream, literature promotes alternative education opportunities including creative pathways, community-learning partnerships, and vocational training opportunities (Heyne et al., 2024). However, when considering alternative provisions it is paramount that LAs ensure safeguarding procedures are in place (Safeguarding and Child Protection Association [SACPA], 2023).

Rationale for the current paper

In recent years, many LAs have produced EBSA guidance for school staff and other professionals. Through a document analysis, the present paper aims to provide an overview and analysis of current UK LA guidance for schools. This may enable consideration of how the changing socio-political landscape has influenced adjustments to the ways that EBSA has come to be understood, spoken about, and managed over time.

Method

This current analysis of LA EBSA guidance documents was informed by previous policy analyses (Lomax, 2024; Smith, 2023). Its purpose was to provide an overview of this rapidly changing field and inform future guidance development. An initial internet search for freely downloadable documents using the search terms “emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) guidance” and “emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA) guidance” was conducted to establish the heterogeneity of guidance available and therefore the appropriateness of a document analysis.

To ensure a broad range of documents was captured, a general internet search and emailing the educational psychology network, EPNET, were undertaken. This enabled the inclusion of guidance relating to “emotionally based school avoidance” (EBSA), “emotionally based school non-attendance” (EBSNA), “anxiety-based school avoidance”, “extended non-attendance” and “prolonged non-attendance”. For guidance documents sourced through internet searches and LA websites, the researchers contacted LAs to ensure the most up-to-date version was sourced. If contact was unsuccessful, the available document was analysed with caution. The search process was undertaken from June to August 2023. Some services updated their guidance documents during the autumn term and shared updated versions directly with the researcher. All dated guidance documents were produced between 2020 and November 2023 and applicable to the academic year 2023–24.

Table 1. Development of the EBSA guidance evaluation matrix.

-
1. Content analysis of LA EBSA guidance documents
 2. Development of the initial framework
 3. Simplified matrix offering broader categories was developed
 4. Consultation with expert group to gather perspectives on the matrix
 5. Revision of the matrix based on discussion outcomes
 6. Application of the framework to all guidance documents
-

The document analysis followed the process outlined in [Table 1](#). The collated guidance documents ($n = 48$) were analysed using conventional content analysis to identify themes or codes, derived directly from the documents (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These codes evolved during the process. The identified themes formed the basis for an evaluation tool, with which the researcher and research supervisor identified features across the documents. The tool was refined further, and prompts added to support consistency of application. The research supervisor analysed a sample of eight guidance documents and populated a simplified evaluation tool.

Following Step 3, four additional prompts were added before sharing the tool with an expert group consisting of four practising educational psychologists (EPs) and an international attendance expert, David Heyne (Excellence in Attendance Support), to add rigour to the process. The revised matrix used for the analysis included nine principal themes reflecting the outcomes of feedback from the expert group and subsequent discussion between researcher and research supervisor. The expert group contributions also informed the discussion section as their reflections often linked to future guidance development. The researcher re-evaluated and summarised the entire guidance set (see findings).

Findings

The analysed EBSA guidance documents came from across Great Britain ([Table 2](#)) with 45 from England, two from Wales and one from Scotland. Due to the number of documents, illustrative examples are included in brackets.

The documents took different formats; two were summaries (Hertfordshire, York), one a strategy (Westmorland and Furness) and one consisted of three videos (North East Lincolnshire). In addition, some were described as “toolkits” (Buckinghamshire, Caerphilly), Wolverhampton as a “pathway” and Leeds a “graduated approach”. Although 16 documents were undated, all appeared to have been written between 2020 and autumn 2023.

A number of the documents were either based on, or drew ideas from, the West Sussex guidance; however, there is some variation amongst those purporting to use West Sussex as a template. This may in part be attributed to localisation or the version used.



Table 2. Summary of document analysis.

| Abbreviation | Abbreviation |
|--------------|--|
| EAS | Education access service |
| EP | Educational psychologist |
| EPS | Educational psychology service |
| | Multi-agency |
| | Schools and support agencies/professionals |
| | West Sussex |

| LA/date | Developer/target audience | Term | Informed by | | | | Prevent on/early identification | Process for intervening | | | Tools | | Support beyond school | | | Wider considerations | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|-------------|-------------|-------|---------------|----------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------|-------------------|------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------|----------------------|-------|-------|--------|---------|
| | | | Guidance | | EBSA-specific | | | Work with parents | Multi-agency | Approach | | Assessment | Interventions | Referral to services | Signpost | Transition | COVID | Legal | Groups | Funding |
| | | | National | Local | Models | Research | | | | Tiered | Ecological system | | | | | | | | | |
| Birmingham* 2020 | MA (North Somerset/South Gloucestershire); schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Brecknell Forest | EPS; school | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Bromley | Inclusion team; schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Buckinghamshire | EPS; school | EBSA/EBSN A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Bury* | MA; SSA | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Caerphilly* | EPS (Solihull) | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cardiff* 2021 | EPS; SSA | ABSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cheshire West and Chester 2021 | EPS/EAS; schools | EBSN | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

| LA/date | Developer/target audience | Term | Informed by | | | | Presenti on/early identifica tion | Process for intervening | | | | Tools | | | Support beyond school | | | Wider considerations | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|-------------|-------|---------------|----------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------|-------------|----------------------|--------|--------|---------|
| | | | Guidance | | EBSA-specific | | | Work with parents | Multi-agency | Approach | | Assess ment | Interv ention s | Referral to services | Sigppost | | Transi tion | COVI D | Lega l | Groups | Funding |
| | | | National | Local | Models | Research | | | | Tiered | Ecologica l system | | | | Local | Online | | | | | |
| Coventry 2021 | Schools | ENAS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Dudley | EPS | EBSNA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| East-Sussex* 2022 | Inclusion/SEND Services; (Sheffield/Tower Hamlets) | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Essex 2023 | SSA | School attendance difficulties | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Gateshead 2023 | Schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Glasgow | MA; schools | EBSNA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Hampshire and Isle of Wight* 2021 | MA; SSA | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Herefordshire 2022 | EPS; schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Hertfordshire 2021 | MA; schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Kirklees 2021 | EPS; schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lancashire* 2022 | EPS (Brighton & Hove/Cheshire West & Chester/ Derbyshire/ Sheffield); schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

(Continued)



Table 2. (Continued).

| LA/date | Developer/ target audience | Term | Informed by | | | | Presenti on/early identification | Process for Intervening | | | | Tools | | | Support beyond school | | | | Wider considerations | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------|---------------|----------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------|--------------------|------------|---------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------|-------------|--------|----------------------|--------|---------|--|
| | | | Guidance | | EBSA-specific | | | Work with parents | Multi-agency | Approach | | Assessment | Interventions | Referral to services | Signpost | | Transi tion | COVI D | Lega l | Groups | Funding | |
| | | | National | Local | Models | Research | | | | Tiered | Ecologica l system | | | | Local | Online | | | | | | |
| Leeds 2023 | EPS; SSA | ESNA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lincolnshire | | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Manchester* 2021 | MA; schools | ABSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Milton Keynes* | MA (Solihull/ Staffordshire); schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| North East Lincolnshire | EPS | EBBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Nottinghamshire 2023 | EPS; schools | EBSA/ARNA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Oldham* 2021 | EPS; schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Oxfordshire | EPS; schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Plymouth* | MA; schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Salford* 2022 | EPS; SSA | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sheffield* 2020 | EPS (Solihull); SSA | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Solihull* 2023 | EPS; professionals | EBSN | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

| LA/date | Developer/target audience | Term | Informed by | | | | Preventi on/early identifica tion | Process for Intervening | | | Tools | | | Support beyond school | | | | Wider considerations | | | |
|------------------------------|---|-------|-------------|-------|---------------|----------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------------|----------|--------|-------------|----------------------|--------|--------|---------|
| | | | Guidance | | EBSA-specific | | | Work with parents | Multi-agency | Approach | | Assess ment | Interv ention s | Referral or services | Sigmpost | | Transi tion | COVI D | Lega l | Groups | Funding |
| | | | National | Local | Models | Research | | | | Tiered | Ecologica l system | | | | Local | Online | | | | | |
| Somerset | EPS; schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| South Gloucestershire* 2023 | EPS (Solihull/Wakefield/Salford/Sherfield); schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Staffordshire 2023 | EPS; schools | SNA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Staffolk 2021 | MA; schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sutton* | MA | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tameside* | EPS; SSA | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Torbay 2021 | EPS (Staffordshire); schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tower Hamlets* 2021 | MA (Solihull/ Sherfield); SSA | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Trafford* 2023 | MA; professionals | EBSNA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| West Berkshire* 2020 | EPS (Babcock/ Derbyshire/ Dudley); schools | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| West Sussex 2022 | EPS; SSA | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Westmorland and Furness 2023 | | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

(Continued)



Table 2. (Continued).

| L.A./date | Developer/target audience | Term | Informed by | | | Prevent secondary identification | Process for Intervening | | | | Tools | | Support beyond school | | | | Wider considerations | | | | |
|----------------------|--|-------|-------------|---------------|----------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------|-------------------|------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------|--------|------------|----------------------|-------|--------|---------|--|
| | | | Guidance | EBSA-specific | Research | | Work with parents | Multi-agency | Approach | Ecological system | Assessment | Interventions | Referral to services | Local | Online | Transition | COVID | Legal | Groups | Funding | |
| | | | National | Local | Models | | | | | Tiered | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Wigan* | Professionals | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Wiltshire* 2021 | EPS; SSA | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Wolverhampton* 2023 | MA; schools | EBSNA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Worcestershire* 2023 | EPS (Staffordshire/Solihull/Cumden); schools | EBSN | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| York* 2021 | EPS | EBSA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Green shading indicates inclusion within the document. *Acknowledged West Sussex as model. Others in brackets.

Developer and purpose

Most documents were produced, or contributed to, by EPs (85%). However, 10% of the documents did not cite specific authors. Over one-quarter (27%) were developed by a multi-agency team consisting of a range of health (Bury, Sutton), education (Suffolk, Wolverhampton), and third sector professionals (Trafford). Birmingham's multi-agency document was not EP-led. The wide range of contributors across the documents signifies the importance of multi-agency collaboration to develop a shared conceptualisation.

The target audience tended to be schools, school staff and often other agencies or professionals (81%), with one document specifically targeting SENCOs (Coventry) and five documents not identifying an audience. Three documents (Solihull, Trafford, Wigan) were aimed at professionals more generally which may indicate a move towards a more multi-agency approach or the need to raise awareness amongst all professionals working with CYP experiencing attendance difficulties. Supplementary parent/carer and/or CYP guidance documents were provided by some LAs (East Sussex, West Sussex).

Terminology

There continues to be limited consensus regarding terminology. EBSA was the most frequent term (67%) followed by ESBNA/EBSN (15%). Authors felt that EBSA/EBSNA/EBSN acknowledged emotional difficulties associated with attending school, "which ultimately results in non-attendance to relieve them of their feelings" (Dudley). These terms spanned the date range; however some more recent documents have diversified. Leeds used extended school non-attendance (ESNA) owing to its neutrality and Staffordshire's school non-attendance (SNA) reflected parent/carer views. Documents that stated a *rationale for the term* noted the desire to avoid "within-child" terminology and the blame associated with "refusal" or "avoidance".

Context

As might be expected, the *context* for documents varied. Prevalence, impact of EBSA or local context/data provided a purpose for the guidance (73%, 33%, 27% respectively). Caerphilly highlighted the need for guidance to support a flexible education through education otherwise than at school (EOTAS) packages. South Gloucestershire reported high numbers of CYP electively home educated.

Some documents linked with relevant *national guidance* including the "Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (CoP)" (DfE & Department of Health [DoH], 2015), "Working together to improve school attendance" (DfE, 2022), with eight of the more recent documents referencing the most up-to-date guidance such as "Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance" (DfE, 2023). The eight principles from "Promoting children and young people's mental health and well-being: A whole school or college approach" (PHE, 2021) underpinned recommendations in a quarter of documents including promoting professional development (Sheffield, Torbay). "Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)", a Scottish national policy, underpinned Glasgow.

The *rationale* for guidance development included providing information requested by CYP, parents/carers and school staff (East Sussex), and increased local need potentially exacerbated by COVID (Glasgow, Kirklees).

Key principles underpinning the development of the guidance

The development of associated school *policies* was promoted including bullying/anti-bullying (46%), attendance (33%), behaviour (27%) and transition (17%). Although relationships were highlighted as important in just over a quarter, only Staffordshire explicitly mentioned relational policies. Wolverhampton suggested that sensory needs be considered within school uniform policies. Others referred to wider LA policies such as medical needs (Bromley, Essex), part-time timetables, graduated approach (Hampshire and Isle of Wight, Wolverhampton) and safeguarding (Kirklees). As the only document originating from Scotland, different frameworks including “Towards the nurturing city” and “Every child is included and *[sic]* supported” underpinned Glasgow.

Nine documents proposed a tiered approach offering different levels of intervention usually from universal through to bespoke/specialist depending on complexity (Kearney & González, 2022). Cheshire West and Chester’s phased approach outlined protocols at each stage alongside assess, plan, do, review cycles.

A *holistic* approach, including preventative and early intervention informed by CYP views was advocated by West Sussex County Council [WSCC] (2022). Four documents drew on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) to support conceptualisation of the complex systems surrounding the CYP and their impact on attendance. Nuttall and Woods (2013) ecological system for successful reintegration was central to Lancashire’s approach whilst the themes acted as prompts for intervention in Dudley. A systemic approach to risk and resilience factors influenced a small number of services.

Children and young people and their *parents/carers* were involved to varying degrees in the development of 12 documents. Involvement ranged from views captured through research projects (Lancashire, North East Lincolnshire), parents/carers guidance contributions (Sheffield, Wolverhampton), feedback (South Gloucestershire) and coproduction of parent/carer guide (Buckinghamshire). CYP’s views informed the development of Cheshire West and Chester.

How does evidence inform the guidance?

When considering how evidence informed the guidance, it was agreed *research/literature* would be noteworthy if discussed in some detail or if an *EBSA-specific model* or evidence base was referenced.

All documents incorporated *EBSA specific models* into their approach. Most (77%) utilised the four functions of school absence (Kearney & Silverman, 1996) as often inter-linked dimensions within their taxonomic hierarchy. The anxiety cycle, usually incorporating maintaining factors, demonstrated the impact of anxiety in 30 documents (Rae, 2020; WSCC, 2022). Risk/resilience factors often featured alongside push/pull factors (Thambirajah et al., 2008). In a small number (13%), only risk factors were acknowledged. Some documents (South Gloucestershire, Torbay) demonstrated the broad spectrum of EBSA through the continuum of school refusal (Kearney, 2008; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

The Thrive model (Wolpert et al., 2019) was embedded into Wigan and used as an intervention identification tool in three others. Other models included SPIRAL principles (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2023) (Trafford), the four Ps biopsychosocial model (Bolton, 2014) (Sutton) and Torbay adopted Five Ps (Rae, 2020). Buckinghamshire highlighted the key principles for rapport building, namely genuineness, respect and empathy. Nottinghamshire considered the effect of anxiety on physiology, thoughts, behaviour and attributed particular attention to executive functions (Dawson & Guare, 2009).

Sixteen documents were informed by Baker and Bishop's (2015) findings and LAs including West Sussex acknowledged the heterogenous nature of EBSA resulting from diverse and complex interacting factors (Maynard et al., 2015). Recent research influenced some of the later documents. Facilitators for a successful return to school (Corcoran et al., 2022) including effective home-school communication, positive relationships and engaging with professionals informed Dudley, Staffordshire and Trafford. Effective whole school support including proactive systems and focusing on relationships to enhance wellbeing (Boaler & Bond, 2023) also supported Trafford's approach.

How does the guidance support prevention and early identification?

Most of the documents (77%) promoted whole school approaches to *support mental health and wellbeing* and prevent EBSA (PHE, 2021). Almost one-third recommended a whole school audit to identify areas for development (Tower Hamlet, Wolverhampton), with Buckinghamshire suggesting school population screening to identify risk. Developing a sense of belonging and connectedness (25%), access to in-school mental health and wellbeing support such as mental health and wellbeing leads, emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs) or counsellors (15%), academic resilience (BoingBoing, 2021) (6%), Emotionally Friendly Settings (EFS; 6%) (Salford Educational Psychology Service, n.d.) and Therapeutic Thinking approaches (4%) (Therapeutic Thinking, n.d.) were identified to bolster preventative approaches. Inclusive school ethos and culture (Essex, West Sussex) and curricula were also recommended as preventative measures. A nurture framework underpinned Glasgow's whole school approach (Education Scotland, 2017) and Wigan promoted the use of the Lundy model of participation, underpinned by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, n.d.).

Does the guidance include recommendations for intervention?

The process for intervening, in most cases, advised early identification and intervention in line with research (Baker & Bishop, 2015) often supported by whole school approaches or staff awareness (Bracknell Forest, Dudley). The graduated approach formed the basis for intervening across most (77%) documents. Working in collaboration or partnership with parents/carers and CYP was deemed significant in nearly 80%. Multi-agency support was generally recommended where progress was limited or with more complex cases.

Flowcharts or pathways were included in almost half of the documents. Lancashire's flowchart proposed a staged, multi-agency approach, whilst Wigan's seven-step pathway provided detailed potential actions for each step interwoven within five levels of provision.

Although many documents supported a rapid return to school (Baker & Bishop, 2015), some advised caution to avoid further “setbacks” (Lancashire) or that reintegration should be taken at the CYP’s pace.

A range of *approaches* was promoted across the guidance. Over a third recommended using active listening (Milton Keynes, York), whilst relationships or relational approaches were considered important in just over a quarter (27%). Person-centred and solution-focused approaches were recommended in eight and nine documents respectively (Caerphilly, Suffolk). Other approaches included exposure/habituation (56%), emotion coaching (17%), trauma-informed practices (15%), CBT (15%), Playfulness Acceptance Curiosity and Empathy (PACE; 13%).

Nearly all documents (96%) included accessible *tools* for use during assessment, planning and intervention. Resources drew on a range of approaches including solution-focused (Trepper et al., 2013), person-centred (National Development Team for Inclusion, n.d.), personal construct psychology (Cummins & Moran, 2023) or CBT-based interventions (for example, Stallard, 2019). Tools such as a risk screening tool (Glasgow) or Trafford’s collaboratively produced early identification of need tool (Boaler et al., 2024) were advocated. Coventry, Lancashire, North East Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire all provided schools with the ATTEND framework (Tobias, 2021) for early intervention. Psychoeducation, emotional literacy and self-care were all promoted.

Professional development recommendations included bespoke EPS-led packages or whole school training. Wolverhampton and Cheshire West and Chester offered multi-agency supervision.

What wider support is available beyond the school?

Wider support available beyond school varied considerably. No external support was signposted in 10% of documents. Of the remaining, details ranged from clear processes for local service referral to signposting local services or national websites, including links for parents/carers.

Does the guidance discuss wider considerations or adaptations for specific circumstances/groups?

The guidance documents covered three main *circumstances*. Transition between schools/phases and smaller, daily transitions (Somerset, Torbay), were identified in almost two thirds (65%). Wigan’s transition guide highlighted the importance of control, competency, and consistency for successful transition. COVID (38%) and legal considerations (42%) were discussed, in some cases including reference to education, health and care plans or elective home education.

Many of the documents considered *specific groups* who may require additional support. Three fifths incorporated information for working with autistic CYP (Sutton, West Sussex). However, some 2023 documents excluded specific sections which may indicate a move towards neuroinclusive approaches. A few documents identified potentially vulnerable groups including, those in receipt of free school meals (Bromley), CYP with learning difficulties (Essex), mental health difficulties (Lancashire), cared for CYP (Manchester) and CYP who have experienced developmental trauma (Nottinghamshire).

Access to *alternative pathways/funding* varied across LAs with some referring to a range of alternative provision, such as remote learning/blended packages (17%), alternative provision (17%), community/home-based tutoring (15%) hospital school/home teaching (6%) or AV1 robots (6%). Wigan offered short-term attendance support programmes via engagement centres (Wigan Council, 2024). On occasion, a multi-agency panel determined provision. Where part-time timetables were mentioned (40%), the temporary nature was stipulated.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to establish what EBSA guidance UK LAs are providing for schools. A number of key findings were highlighted including considerable variation in the conceptualisation of EBSA, processes for intervening, support offered via assessment and intervention tools and the level of external support or access to alternative provision. The terminology continues to lack consistency with familiar terms such as EBSA (Halligan & Cryer, 2022) and broader terms such as extended non-attendance used despite the former now often considered to have a within-child emphasis (Corcoran & Kelly, 2022). The majority of documents were developed by EPs, some in collaboration with other professionals. All considered psychological theory or models and were underpinned by national or local guidance.

The relatively small number of multi-agency documents suggests potential barriers in engaging agencies, perhaps owing to lack of shared conceptualisation, competing demands on time or limited capacity. Although many promote multi-agency implementation, it is uncertain the extent to which this is practicable and achievable. Nevertheless, multi-agency approaches could facilitate a shared conceptualisation, ecological support systems and stakeholder engagement (Heyne et al., 2024). In addition, multi-agency approaches would alleviate difficulties identified by school staff when professionals are not aligned (Chian et al., 2024).

Most guidance documents were underpinned by research. Baker and Bishop (2015) advocated approaches which continue to have relevance including early intervention, personalised approaches (Boaler & Bond, 2023) and working with families (Boaler & Bond, 2023; EEF, 2022; ImpactEd, 2024). However, they also recommended a quick return to school; a strategy for which caution is now urged. Instead, a more gradual reintegration that aims to reduce pressure or even a period of respite for very significant needs, such as the recovery to rediscovery approach (Holder, n.d.), may be recommended. The exclusion of behavioural approaches such as push/pull factors, functional analysis and graduated exposure from some documents may reflect concerns of their potentially detrimental impact on wellbeing (Fisher, n.d.; Fricker, 2023) and their appropriateness with certain cohorts (Courtois, 2008) and contexts (Cunningham et al., 2022).

Documents reinforced the importance of whole school preventative and early identification approaches. Recent documents recommended developing belonging (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Sawyer & Collingwood, 2023) through inclusive, relational approaches (Chian et al., 2024; Corcoran & Kelly, 2022), with belonging found to support reintegration (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2023). Working in partnership with parents/carers and consistent home-school communication (Boaler & Bond, 2023; EEF, 2022; ImpactEd, 2024) were

evident across the documents. However, a post-pandemic deterioration in home-school relationships (Lester & Michelson, 2024), suggests significant effort is required in this area.

Although some documents referred to systemic approaches, few referenced frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Nuttall & Woods, 2013), to assess the interaction of factors (Brown, 2020) and gain a holistic perspective. Despite tiered approaches to intervention being familiar within education, only a small minority of documents used these to promote different levels of intervention (Kearney & González, 2022).

Most documents recommended tools for assessment and intervention, but there was variation in the range of tools and their accessibility. On occasion, tools lacked clarity which could lead to ineffective or potentially harmful use.

A shift towards neuroinclusive guidance was noted in some recent documents. With long NHS neurodiversity pathway waiting lists (NHS England, 2024), it is possible that some CYP experiencing EBSA are awaiting assessment. A holistic approach which is not dependent upon diagnosis would facilitate more timely intervention and provide a more neuroinclusive lens through which to explore EBSA (Neilson & Bond, 2023).

Some documents identified alternative provision including community or home learning (Kearney & González, 2022), or access to external agencies such as CAMHS, for CYP who are experiencing attendance difficulties, particularly where difficulties are entrenched. Documents which omitted such provision often focused on early identification and prevention. However, this may also be linked to the local context and availability of such resources. To facilitate the provision of alternative education, when appropriate, Kearney and González (2022) suggest focusing on engagement with learning rather than presence in school, which paves the way for more hybrid educational offers.

Implications for practice

The findings highlight areas for future EP practice. EPs are well-placed to provide a psychological perspective during multi-agency working and to support implementation through training on psychological approaches (Corcoran et al., 2023; Fisher, n.d.). EPs could support the development of LA-wide multi-agency approaches and the formation of local responses, as causes and rates of difficulties can vary considerably within neighbourhoods (Wood et al., 2024). Localisation of approaches might include supporting schools to develop their own processes and pathways to meet their cohort's needs and, alongside training, build capacity within settings.

EPs could also contribute to developing whole school approaches to supporting well-being through training such as EFS (Salford Educational Psychology Service, n.d.) or the nurture framework (Education Scotland, 2017).

Future guidance could further support processes for intervening through the use of ecological models (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Nuttall & Woods, 2013) to understand the complex factors around CYP and tiered approaches (Kearney & González, 2022) to support appropriate needs based strategies. There is some evidence to suggest broadening the guidance beyond EBSA. Klan et al. (2024) found that many CYP accessing mental health support displayed more than one attendance difficulty (EBSA, truancy, exclusion, withdrawal) with emotional needs identified in each case. Whatever the focus of the guidance, busy school staff require accessible resources. Therefore, familiar structures such as tiered approaches (Kearney & González, 2022), presented in user-friendly

formats such as collaboratively developed flowcharts (Boaler et al., 2024) would be appropriate.

Following the analysis, a modified evaluation tool containing additional prompts was also created to support future LA EBSA guidance development based on expert group feedback (Table A1). This evaluation matrix (Table A1), informed by the literature and expert knowledge, may contribute to the ongoing development of guidance documents reflecting up-to-date research and practice. Further clarification of the purpose of guidance could assist in creating accessible and meaningful guidance documents for a range of professionals. Through this process, engaging community members including CYP and parents/carers would also ensure their input and insights are effectively identified and considered as part of new guidance.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The analysis was limited to 48 documents. Although searches were repeated multiple times, some documents may have been missed. In addition, some services planned updates which may have reflected more up-to-date research, changing local contexts or updated service delivery models. This paper intended to explore patterns and changes regarding EBSA guidance; however few documents included the dates they were developed which restricted the depth of analysis.

As much of the attendance intervention literature has developed outside the UK (Boaler & Bond, 2023; EEF, 2022), further UK-based research regarding the effectiveness of guidance and interventions in their local context is necessary to fully understand their potential (EEF, 2022).

As noted regarding the methodology, the reliance exclusively on LA guidance is a limitation as there is often no information available concerning the intentions of the guidelines, individual contexts giving rise to their creation, and importantly, there is often minimal information as to how guidelines were constructed. Since this would be dependent on each LA's needs, political landscape, histories, and identities of the authors, this will inevitably lead to different perspectives. Therefore, a full literature review of local and national policy guidance in the context of existing literature may further consider how the changing socio-political landscape has influenced adjustments to how EBSA has come to be understood, discussed, managed. This may support the process of improving future guidance.

Conclusion

The current paper provides a synthesis of current UK LA EBSA guidance documentation. Despite its limitations, the paper provides a picture of current guidance in a rapidly evolving field, provides recommendations for future research and implications for future practice when developing future guidance and supporting settings with their EBSA approaches.

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Appendix

Table A1. EBSA* guidance evaluation matrix. This evaluation matrix is aimed to support organisations (including LAs) to reflect on the information captured within their EBSA guidance. Some of the prompts below are to support reflection on key components. The underlined elements are ideal.

| |
|---|
| <p>1. Developer and purpose</p> <p>Who developed the guidance? How was the guidance developed? For example, multi-agency, EPS</p> <p>Who is the intended audience?</p> <p>With what aim? Is the length/content of the document relevant to the aim/purpose? For example, clear, concise documents for school staff</p> <p>Date?</p> <p>Contact details of key person?</p> <p>Accessibility of the document, for example, clear contents page, headed sections, tools clearly explained</p> <p>2. Terminology used in relation to persistent/severe school avoidance</p> <p>Term used</p> <p>Rationale</p> <p>3. Context</p> <p>How is the context defined? For example, local context, national context</p> <p>How is the guidance positioned in relation to national guidance? For example, DfE docs</p> <p>What is the rationale for the guidance? Increased local/national prevalence; long term impact etc.</p> <p>4. Key principles underpinning the development of the guidance</p> <p>How does it dovetail with wider policies?</p> <p>Is it holistic? For example, tiered (universal, targeted, specialist) or just one level/ecosystemic model?</p> <p>What is the role of YP and parents? For example, views captured/involved in development</p> <p>Does the guidance adopt neuroinclusive approaches?</p> <p>Does the guidance promote multi-agency implementation?</p> <p>5. How does evidence inform the guidance?</p> <p>Literature</p> <p>General psychological literature?</p> <p>Attendance specific models/research?</p> <p>6. How does the guidance support prevention and early identification?</p> <p>Are there whole school approaches to supporting attendance? What systems are in place to identify and respond to needs early on?</p> <p>What is in place to support both staff and CYP wellbeing?</p> <p>7. Does the guidance include recommendations for intervention?</p> <p>What is the process of intervening? For example, early identification, more entrenched needs</p> <p>What approaches are used? (For example, relational approaches, PACE, SDT, MI, anxiety management)</p> <p>Tools For example, view gathering, assessment etc.</p> <p>Case studies or worked examples</p> <p>Does the guidance consider professional development of those supporting CYP and their families?</p> <p>8. What wider support is available beyond the school?</p> <p>Within education</p> <p>Other services</p> <p>Wider support (For example, community/youth support)</p> <p>9. Does the guidance discuss wider considerations or adaptations for specific circumstances/groups?</p> <p>Contexts For example, Covid/transition/legal considerations</p> <p>Groups For example, EY, post-16, neurodivergence, young carers</p> <p>Access to alternative pathways/funding for home tuition/telepresence if available</p> |
|---|

*EBSA is used to reflect its wide use within the documents to date, however the thinking around this is evolving.