

Report to: East Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board

Date of meeting: 5 March 2024

By: Assistant Director Education

Title: School Attendance as a Public Health Outcome

Purpose: To provide an overview of the school attendance indicator and the actions underway and plans to address it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Health and Wellbeing Board is recommended to consider the report, and to note the areas of challenge and the proposed course of action.

1 Background

1.1 Parents of children of compulsory school age (aged 5 to 15 at the start of the school year) are required to ensure that they receive a suitable education by regular attendance at school or otherwise. Education attainment is influenced by both the quality of education they receive and their family socio economic circumstances. Educational qualifications are a determinant of an individual's labour market position, which in turn influences income, housing and other material resources. These are related to health and health inequalities.

1.2 Improving attendance (that is, tackling absenteeism) in schools is a key component of the Government's approach to increasing social mobility and to ensuring every child can meet their potential.

1.3 Schools are required to take attendance registers twice a day - once at the start of the first morning session and once during the second afternoon session. Schools must meet for at least 380 sessions or 190 days during any school year to educate their pupils. Academy and free school funding agreements state that the duration of the school day and sessions are the responsibility of the academy trust.

2 Supporting information

2.1 Department for Education (DfE) guidance issued in May 2022 outlined the new roles and responsibilities for schools, local authorities, and Trusts around attendance. The guidance is still not statutory, but updates indicate it will be by September 2024. Attendance, and specifically persistent and severely absent young people, remain a key focus both nationally and locally. Following this publication there have been several other reports including; Centre of Social Justice, *'The Missing Link'*, House of Commons Select Committee, *'Persistent Absence and support for disadvantage pupils'*, Public First *'Listening to and learning from parents in the attendance crisis'*. The reports identify a breakdown in relationships and trust following covid between schools and families; socio economic crisis, including housing,

playing a factor; a rise in mental health issues for young people and within families; a rise in elective home education numbers and; a need for a robust multi-agency response to support.

2.2 COVID had a hugely disrupting effect on education provision and attitudes to school attendance. Many families experienced a form of post-pandemic social anxiety and found it hard to move on from the 'bubble-isolation mentality'. For others, the home learning experience led some to form the view that attendance at school was not necessary. There has been a big increase seen in Electively Home Educated (EHE) children since COVID and numbers are steadily increasing. In 2017/2018, numbers totalled 1254 and in 2018/2019 this had risen to 1361. Post COVID and in the last academic year, EHE numbers had risen to 2101. The data shows that for many more parents, they no longer feel that school adequately caters for their children's needs. It is also clear however that COVID exacerbated a wide range of existing vulnerabilities and issues for families, including illness and mental health, all impacting on school absence.

2.3 Trends should be interpreted with caution during the period 2020 to 2021 and 2021 to 2022, as recording practices changed over this period and schools were permitted to use a COVID related code that didn't appear in the absence statistics.

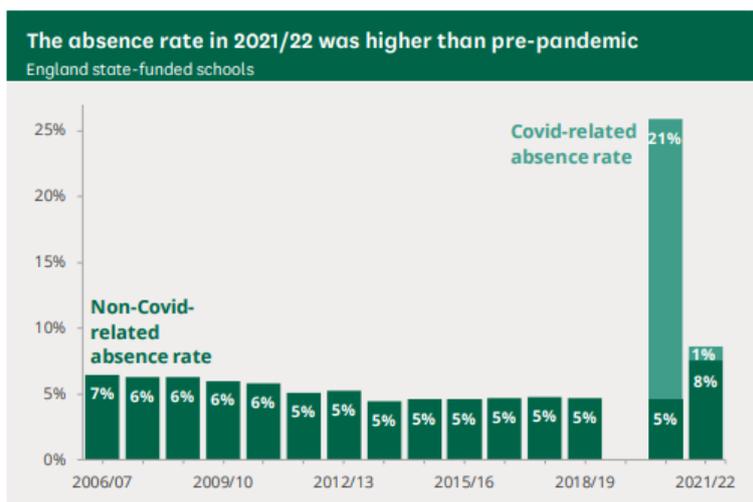
2.4 The governments research briefing paper, published in September 2023, on 'School attendance in England', [CBP-9710.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#) highlighted the following. For the Autumn term 2022/23 overall absence was 7.5%. This is the highest Autumn term rate recorded since comparable data was published in 2016/17. In the years prior to the pandemic, the Autumn term absence rate was fairly stable. Unsurprisingly, absence rates have increased since the pandemic started.

Autumn term absence rates have increased since the pandemic after stability for several years
State-funded schools in England

Autumn term	Overall absence rate	Covid-related absence rate	"Persistent absentee rate"	"Severe absentee rate"
2016/17	4.4%	n/a	11.6%	0.6%
2017/18	4.4%	n/a	11.7%	0.7%
2018/19	4.3%	n/a	10.9%	0.7%
2019/20	4.9%	n/a	13.1%	0.9%
2020/21	4.7%	7.0%	13.0%	1.3%
2021/22	6.9%	1.6%	23.5%	1.4%
2022/23	7.5%	0.0%	24.2%	1.7%

2.5 In 2021/22, 7.6% of state-funded school sessions were missed in England (this excludes Covid-related absence). When absence for **any reason** is included the overall absence rate was 8.5% in 2021/22. This is much lower than the previous year when absence was more affected by the pandemic (25.9% absence rate for any reason in 2020/21).

2.6 However, the absence rate remained higher than the years prior to the pandemic. The chart below shows that absence (excluding Covid-related absence) generally followed a downward trend between 2006/07 and 2013/14 (falling from 6.5% to 4.5%). However, it did not change much from 2013/14 up until the pandemic (ranging between 4.5% in 2013/14 and 4.8% in 2017/18). The 7.6% non-Covid related absence rate recorded in 2021/22 was the highest rate recorded since the series began in 2006/07.



2.7 Broken down by region, absence in 2021/22 (for any reason including Covid related absence) was highest in the South West region (9.0%) and lowest in Outer London (7.5%). The range in absence rates between local authorities was wider (from 4.3% in City of London to 10.0% in both Bradford and Torbay).

Absence rates vary by local authority more than by region
2021/22 absence rate for any reason, state-funded schools

Region	Absence rate	Local Authority	Absence rate
National average	8.5%	Highest absence rates:	
South West	9.0%	Bradford	10.0%
North East	8.9%	Torbay	10.0%
West Midlands	8.8%	Knowsley	9.8%
Yorkshire and The Humber	8.8%	Plymouth	9.8%
East of England	8.7%	Newcastle upon Tyne	9.7%
South East	8.6%	Lowest absence rates:	
East Midlands	8.4%	City of London	4.3%
North West	8.4%	Isles of Scilly	6.6%
Inner London	7.6%	Brent	6.9%
Outer London	7.5%	Tower Hamlets	7.0%
		Lewisham	7.0%

2.8 Current East Sussex absence data - *DfE data – 26.1.24*

	Overall Attendance	Overall Absence	Unauthorised Absence	Persistent Absence	Severely Absent
DfE National Overall	93.4%	6.6%	2.5%	20.3% (year to date)	
DfE overall – East Sussex	92.0%	8.0%	2.8%	22.6%	2.9%
DfE East Sussex - Primary	94.2%	5.8%	1.6%	16.9%	0.8%
DfE East Sussex - Secondary	89.8%	10.2%	4.2%	28.6%	4.8% (1305)
DfE East Sussex – Special School	86.0%	14.0%	3.5%	36.3%	8.0% (119)

2.9 Within East Sussex it is evident from historic and recent data that overall absence is impacted by illness as this is most frequently used code to record absence in schools.

2.10 The national absence rates for Autumn and Spring terms combined from 2016/17 to 2021/22 show:

	2016/17 Autumn and spring term	2017/18 Autumn and spring term	2018/19 Autumn and spring term	2020/21 Autumn and spring term	2021/22 Autumn and spring term
Illness rate	2.7%	2.8%	2.6%	1.7%	4.7%
Authorised absence rate	3.5%	3.6%	3.3%	3.0%	5.7%
Unauthorised absence rate	1.1%	1.2%	1.2%	1.0%	1.7%
Overall absence rate	4.5%	4.7%	4.5%	4.0%	7.4%
Rate of sessions recorded as not attending due to COVID circumstances	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	29.4%	1.3%

2.11 Nationally illness rates across Autumn and Spring term have slowly risen by 2% (except a dip in 2020/21) from 2016/17 to 2021/22 and sat at 4.7%. The table below shows, whilst illness is currently not as high as 2021/22 figures, for **secondary phase in East Sussex it is 0.4% higher** than national and at **primary phase 0.2% higher**. For both phases in East Sussex it continues to be the highest reason for authorised absence.

September 23 – January 24 (current)	National Primary	ESCC Primary	National Secondary	ESCC Secondary
Authorised absence	3.8%	4.1%	5.3%	6.1%
Unauthorised absence	1.5%	1.6%	3.1%	4.2%
Illness (authorised)	3.1%	3.3%	3.9%	4.3%
Holiday (unauthorised)	0.5%	0.5%	0.3%	0.3%

2.12 Research suggests that there are several risk factors associated with absenteeism¹ and some of these will be positively associated with areas of higher deprivation. These include.

- physical and mental problems of the child
- substance abuse
- antisocial or risky behaviour
- problems at or with school (including having a negative attitude towards school)
- characteristics of the school
- parenting problems and difficulties (including low parental school involvement)
- family problems

¹ [Risk Factors for School Absenteeism and Dropout: A Meta-Analytic Review | Journal of Youth and Adolescence \(springer.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11267-020-00700-0)

2.13 To develop and provide a targeted robust response across the authority around attendance, the restructure of the Education Division created the new Team Around the School and Setting (TASS) which sits geographically across East Sussex. The discrete area teams, (Eastbourne and Hailsham, Lewes, Coastal and Wealden and Hastings, Rother and Rye), work across localities supporting schools and settings with emerging issues around attendance.

2.14 The attendance core offer of support focuses on communication and advice, targeting support meetings with a single point of contact, multi-disciplinary support for families, including the new Early Help Key Work attendance team (level 2) and legal intervention support and training.

2.15 The Attendance Delivery Plan has been co-produced with schools, young people and parents/carers and will be launched in term 4. The key focus is around working in partnership with all stakeholders to address emerging needs as they arise and to support schools to develop robust strategies in managing attendance. The first annual Attendance conference saw 132 school representatives attend and there was a real sense of optimism that this is a challenge that will take a collective monumental effort to address.

2.16 New links are being established and developed with School Nursing Team and Primary care teams to create a consistent approach around attendance messaging and to ensure stakeholders in education can be signposted to health services at the point of need.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 The TASS team (Team Around the School and Setting) are introducing attendance forums across areas. These will be supporting schools and staff at operational level who are dealing with attendance issues and provide advice, guidance, and examples of good practice.

There will be a range of approaches including:

- termly targeting support meetings with all schools
- an attendance helpline
- a tiered approach, outlining to schools how to support attendance issues
- new Early Help Key Work team set up to support schools with young people you are severely absent (50% or lower).

3.2 Local Authority SPOC (single point of contact) was launched with all schools and settings from September 2023, to ensure robust and timely response to attendance concerns are managed and supported at the point of need. The SPOC will also lead the targeting support meeting with school leaders and ensure discussion and development of bespoke work to support emerging needs within schools is a priority.

3.3 The local authority has worked closely with primary schools to develop and embed the relational model which is impacting on overall attendance figures. Primary schools in East Sussex are in line with national rates for absence.

3.4 The Local authority has embedded the model for return to school contacting and monitoring absence with all schools and settings at the start of the new autumn term. This provides support for schools and a clear picture of initial concerns around specific cohorts. Schools are then advised with the best way to proceed, if needed.

3.5 The local authority will be launching Attendance forums for primary schools to attend where advice and guidance and school-led support can be offered.

3.6 Some schools have implemented a shared Education Welfare Officer across primary settings to provide a consistency approach and to also develop community knowledge and awareness of emerging attendance issues and patterns.

Proposals

- 1) TASS team to work with secondary schools to collaborate closely around issues with attendance. To share strategies and processes and broker and support working together.
- 2) Further analysis of pupil absence cohort and identifying groups of vulnerable young people for schools and attendance support team to work collaboratively to support.
- 3) Development of attendance partnership working across all stakeholders led by the local authority.
- 4) Further development of links with health to support and signpost around emerging needs within schools and settings.

3.7 The Health and Wellbeing Board is recommended to note the report and the proposals for tackling school attendance across the county.

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