

Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Attendance Update

Wards All

Service: Access Service

Portfolio: Councillor Statham

1. Aim

The aim of this report is to provide an update of school attendance data in Walsall and advise how Walsall continues to meet its statutory responsibility in regards to improving school attendance.

2. Recommendations

That the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the contents of this report and decides whether there should be further information or updates.

3. Report detail

Attendance – overview

The law entitles every child of compulsory school age to an efficient, full-time education suitable to their age, aptitude, and any special educational need they may have. It is the legal responsibility of every parent to make sure their child receives that education either by attendance at a school or by education otherwise than at a school. Where parents decide to have their child registered at school, they have an additional legal duty to ensure their child attends that school regularly.

Attendance – Statutory Duties of the LA

In May 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) published non-statutory guidance, 'working together to improve attendance'. From September 2022, this document replaced all previous guidance on school attendance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools, and local authorities except for the existing statutory guidance on parental responsibility measures.

The guidance makes clear that all local authorities are expected to:

- Rigorously track local attendance data to devise a strategic approach to attendance that prioritises the pupils, pupil cohorts and schools on which to provide support and focus its efforts on to unblock area wide barriers to attendance.
- Have a School Attendance Support Team which provides the following core functions free of charge to all schools (regardless of type):
 - Communication and advice: regularly bring schools together to communicate messages, provide advice and share best practice between schools and trusts within the area.
 - Targeting Support Meetings: hold termly conversations with schools, using their attendance data to identify pupils and cohorts at risk of poor

- attendance and agree targeted actions and access to services for those pupils.
 - Multi-disciplinary support for families: provide access to early help support workers to work intensively with families to provide practical whole-family support where needed to tackle the causes of absenteeism and unblock the barriers to attendance.
 - Legal intervention: take forward attendance legal intervention (using the full range of parental responsibility measures) where voluntary support has not been successful or engaged with.
- Monitor and improve the attendance of children with a social worker through their Virtual School.

The pressures on the Parliamentary timetable remain and legislation to make the guidance statutory was not in place before the beginning of the new academic year and therefore the guidance is not yet statutory. It remains a legislative priority for the Department and will continue to be pursued. This means that schools and local authorities should continue with their implementation as it may become statutory at short notice.

4. Attendance – Data

The school year

Generally, the academic year is made up of three terms - autumn, spring and summer. Each term has two parts (half-terms) which are usually separated by a half term break. To account for high levels of study leave and other authorised absences for pupils aged 15 in the second half of the summer term, all possible sessions and absences relating to this period for 15-year-olds (as at the start of the academic year) are removed prior to any analysis being undertaken and are not included in any published statistics.

Current termly publications

The DfE publishes termly pupil absence data and statistics via the following 3 National Statistics releases each year:

- autumn term data and statistics - published in May
- autumn and spring terms data and statistics - published in October
- full year data and statistics - published in March

Only the full year absence release gives a definitive view of pupil absence. Termly publications can be affected significantly by term length. Findings from these releases should be used for indicative purposes only and the results should be treated with caution.

Cohort used in absence measures

Absence information is collected and disseminated at enrolment level rather than pupil level. This means where a pupil has moved school throughout the year, they will be counted more than once as they have recorded attendance and absence at more than one school. All the enrolments at a school over the period in question

are included in the absence measures, not just the pupils on roll at a particular date.

Key absence measures

The DfE monitors pupil absence levels using two key measures - overall absence rate and persistent absence (PA) rate. These key measures are calculated for pupils who are of compulsory school age - i.e. aged between 5 and 15 as at the start of the academic year.

- Overall absence is the aggregated total of all authorised and unauthorised absences.
- Authorised absence is absence with permission from a teacher or other authorised school representative - including absences where a satisfactory explanation has been provided. For example, through illness.
- Unauthorised absence is absence without permission from the school. This includes all unexplained or unjustified absences and arrivals after registration has closed.

Latest data

The latest published statistical release includes data until Spring Term 2022/23 academic year.

		2021/22 Autumn term	2021/22 Autum and Spring term	2021/22 Full academic year	2022/23 Autumn term	2022/23 Autumn and Spring term
England	Authorised absence rate	5.30%	6.10%	5.10%	5.40%	4.70%
	Unauthorised absence rate	1.60%	1.90%	2.90%	2.10%	2.30%
	Overall absence rate	6.90%	7.90%	8.00%	7.50%	7.00%
	Percentage of persistent absentees - 10% or more sessions missed	23.50%	27.20%	26.40%	24.20%	20.60%
Walsall	Authorised absence rate	4.70%	5.60%	4.50%	5.00%	4.10%
	Unauthorised absence rate	2.20%	2.80%	4.10%	3.00%	3.60%
	Overall absence rate	6.90%	8.40%	8.60%	8.00%	7.70%
	Percentage of persistent absentees - 10% or more sessions missed	23.60%	28.60%	29.00%	26.50%	23.10%

This data shows a significant improvement in school attendance and reducing absence compared to previous published data for the 2021/22 academic year.

In addition to the published data, local authority indicative local data collection for the Autumn Term 2023/34. Whilst this data remains unpublished and should be treated with caution, it again shows an improvement in overall school attendance and reduced absence compared to the published data for 2022/23.

	2022/23 Autumn Term	2023/24 Autumn Term
Authorised absence rate	5.00%	3.65%
Unauthorised absence rate	3.00%	3.30%
Overall absence rate	8.00%	6.95%
Percentage of persistent absentees - 10% or more sessions missed	26.50%	22.49%

How the Local Authority and schools are continuing to support improvements in school attendance

A strategic working group of headteachers and other partners including Early Help, Social Care, Health, Police has been established over the last academic year, and half termly meetings take place. This group provides opportunities for all partners to shape improvements across Walsall focusing on attendance, refreshing expectations, sharing good practice and coordinating communication campaigns for schools, parents and carers that focuses on the attendance.

Appendix 1 is a copy of strategic working group newsletter that has been produced and circulated to all schools in Walsall.

Working with a research agency, the Department for Education has published a toolkit to support effective communication with families about school attendance.

The toolkit has been shared with all schools and can be accessed here [Toolkit for schools: communicating with families to support attendance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/toolkits/toolkit-for-schools-communicating-with-families-to-support-attendance)

It includes:

- top tips for communicating with parents and carers about attendance.
- research that supports the suggested messages parents and carers engage with most and adaptable templates for communicating with parents and carers.

Walsall learning Alliance has also agreed a strategic priority to ensure all children attend and stay in school. With a focus on 'Belonging' they have developed a working group with representatives from all partners to identify barriers to attendance and causes of exclusions.

As well as sharing national research and best practice they are currently surveying schools to build the Walsall picture. The survey has been developed by the alliance to find out what support is on offer for children who are not attending and/or at risk of exclusion. The survey and is going out to all schools before half term and covering, in summary:

- What 'provisions' are currently operating in schools?
- What is their purpose?
- What training do staff have?
- What Alternative Provisions are schools using?

Information is also being gathered on 'Behaviour' policies in schools, looking for common themes, presence of relational practice, blanket policies for academies etc

The alliance are then planning a 'Belonging' conference later in the year to bring all schools together to share the findings, barriers to attendance/inclusion and

begin borough wide development planning to support full inclusion of all children in every school.

Attendance campaign

From 8 January, Government launched a national campaign to remind parents and carers of the importance of school attendance.

Local authorities and partners have been provided with a ready-made toolkit to support the campaign, and to shine a light on attendance on a national scale.

The campaign strapline is “moments matter, attendance counts”. Messaging for the communications have been developed from research into parental attitudes, as well as two local authority pilots at the end of 2023.

Campaign messages aim to primarily reach those parents and carers whose children are taking preventable odd days of absence – or “avoidable absence” – rather than children who face greater barriers to attendance, such as those with long term medical needs or special educational needs and disabilities.

Cross-council messaging – sharing resources with front-line services to promote attendance materials.

5. *Financial information*

There are no direct financial implications of the report.

6. *Reducing Inequalities*

In accordance with the Walsall Right for Children Strategy, the School Attendance Service is committed to ensuring that all children and young people are able to access appropriate, high quality, inclusive education to ensure the best possible outcomes, whatever their abilities or needs. We strive to encourage good school attendance to enable an environment where all children can achieve, feel safe and included.

7. *Decide*

Scrutiny may decide to note the current position.

The Committee may decide to request further information or assurance in respect of the progress of elective home education.

8. *Respond*

Any recommendations made by the Committee will be assessed against the Access and Inclusion work programme and performance board.

9. Review

All areas are under constant monitoring and assessment via Children's Services Performance Board.

Background papers

Scrutiny Paper – Children not in School – September 2023

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