

# School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening

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## School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening

Pupils across the UK have now returned to school on a full-time basis for nearly three months. Getting as many pupils back to school full-time is crucial to allow them to catch-up with any losses in learning over the period of lockdown. However, there are numerous challenges and barriers to getting attendance rates back to normal. This includes rising infection rates since September, parental confidence in safety measures and the very difficult decisions facing pupils with health conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus.

This report provides an update to our [work](#) comparing education policy responses across the UK, supported by the Nuffield Foundation. We show how school attendance rates have varied over time since full reopening across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We also analyse the extent to which attendance varies across local areas and different groups of pupils (where data allows), before then detailing the implications for policy, exams and the support needed by different groups of pupils.

### Overall levels of school attendance

Figure 1 shows the recorded attendance rates across all four UK nations. The precise way this is measured differs slightly across each country, with the implications noted below.

Starting in mid-August 2020, pupils in [Scotland](#) were the first to return in full. As shown in Figure 1, attendance rates started relatively high at 94 per cent in the week starting August 17<sup>th</sup>. Attendance rates then dipped slightly, before remaining just over 90 per cent for most of September and October (most local authorities had holidays for the week starting October 12<sup>th</sup>). Attendance rates then fell further to about 89 per cent for the second week of November.

According to the data, only about 2 per cent of pupils, on average, were absent for COVID-related reasons on any given day since full reopening in mid-August, though this reached about 3 per cent for the week starting October 19<sup>th</sup> and has climbed steadily to over 4 per cent of pupils in the week starting November 9<sup>th</sup>.

Scotland implemented a closure of pubs and restaurants in the central belt for three weeks from October 12<sup>th</sup> and has since implemented a five-tier system of local restrictions. In all areas, there have been no new restrictions on schools.

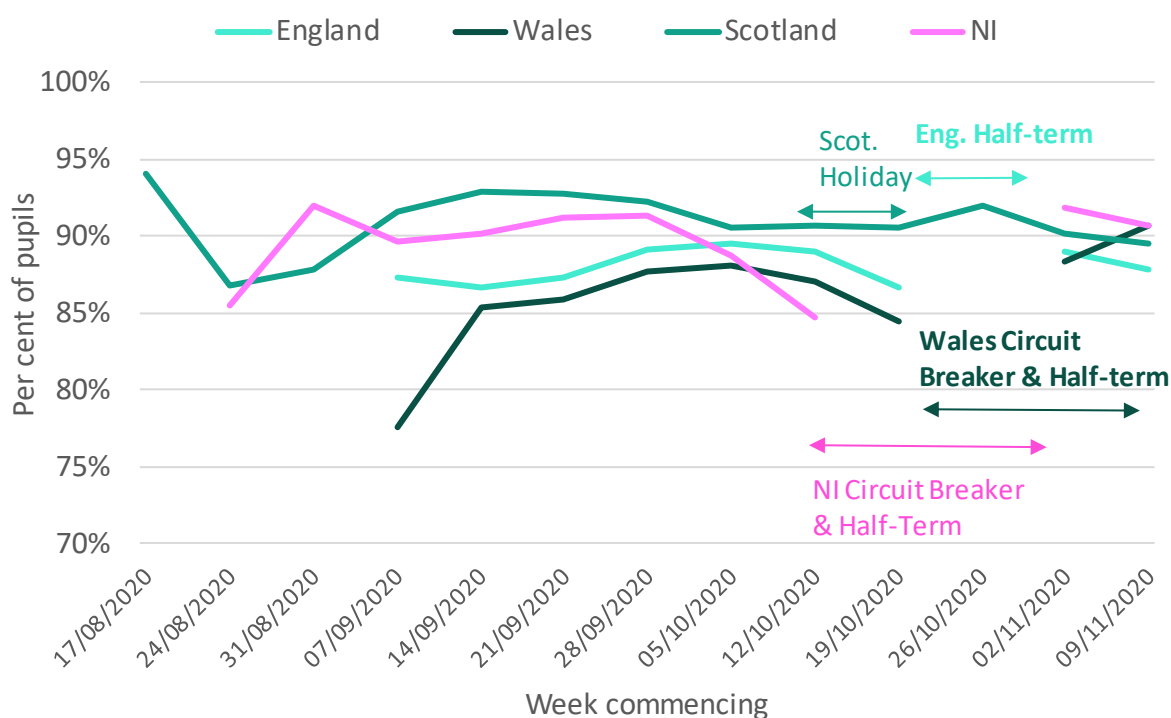
Pupils in Northern Ireland were the next to return from the last week of August 2020. The share of pupils in school started at about 85 per cent for the last week of August, before climbing to around 90 per cent in early October. This then dropped sharply to 85 per cent in mid-October. At this point, schools across Northern Ireland closed for two weeks (as part of a wider set of [restrictions](#) across Northern Ireland for four weeks).

These figures for Northern Ireland are below those we have previously published. This is because previous attendance figures for Northern Ireland, somewhat surprisingly, treated pupils who were self-isolating and learning from home as “present.” This related to about 2-3 per cent of pupils over September, but reached 8 per cent of pupils just before the two-week closure of schools in late October.

In school attendance climbed back up to 91-92 per cent when schools returned in early November and COVID-related absences were back down to about 3-4 per cent of pupils.

A further 2-week circuit breaker lockdown is now due to be implemented in Northern Ireland from November 27<sup>th</sup>, though schools will remain open this time.

**Figure 1: School attendance since reopening in August/September 2020**



**Notes and sources for England:** Covers all pupils in state-funded schools (except maintained nurseries) and averaged over each week (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>). **Notes and sources for Wales:** Figures covers all pupils in maintained settings (including maintained nurseries) (<https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools-7-september-13-november-2020>); Conwy, Powys and Pembrokeshire had a 2-week half-term from October 19<sup>th</sup> to November 2<sup>nd</sup>; schools were closed to pupils in year 9 and above in the week commencing November 2<sup>nd</sup> (except for pupils taking exams). **Notes and sources for Scotland:** Figures are averaged across each week in all local authority settings, excluding childcare settings (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-daily-data-for-scotland/>). **Notes and sources for Northern Ireland:** In school attendance across all primary and post-primary schools (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/management-information-attendance-pupils-and-workforce-schools>), schools in Northern Ireland were closed to pupils in Northern Ireland for two weeks from the week commencing October 19<sup>th</sup>

Pupils in England and Wales began to return in full from September 1<sup>st</sup>, though this was staged in many cases. In England, attendance rates started off at about 87 per cent in the week commencing September 7<sup>th</sup>, before growing to about 89 per cent in mid-October. Attendance rates then fell to 87 per cent for the last week before half-term (excluding schools that were already on half-term). These attendance rates are clearly below those seen in Scotland and Northern Ireland (before the significant drop in attendance rates in Northern Ireland in mid-October). Indeed, further data suggests that about 4-5 per cent of pupils in England were absent from school for COVID-related reasons during [October](#), rising to 6-7 per cent in the week before half-term (for most of England).

After half-term, school attendance rates climbed back up to 89 per cent, but then dropped back to just under 88 per cent in the second week after half-term. COVID-related absences also climbed back up to 6-7 per cent of pupils in the second week of [November](#).

A three-tier system of local restrictions was introduced in England in mid-October, with schools remaining open in all three tiers. A four-week lockdown has been implemented in England from November 5<sup>th</sup>, though schools remain open.

Whilst most schools in Wales started back in the first week of September, the first day all pupils in Wales were expected to be back in school was September 14<sup>th</sup>. As a result, attendance rates clearly took longer to pick up. From mid-September, attendance rates were still slightly below those seen in England, but increased to about 88 per cent in early October. As with the other UK nations, attendance rates dropped off during October, falling to 84 per cent in the last week before half-term.

Whilst data is not available on reasons for absence in Wales, attendance rates through to mid-October were clearly lower in Wales than in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This suggests that COVID-related absences are likely to be highest in Wales. Data for Wales does include pupils in maintained nurseries, whilst childcare and nurseries are excluded for other countries. This is likely to be playing only a small, if any, role in driving lower attendance rates in Wales given low infection rates amongst younger children.

For the last week of October and first week of November, Wales imposed a two-week lockdown. During the first week of November, only pupils up to year 8 and those taking exams were able to attend school. The lack of older age groups (with higher infection rates) in school could partly explain the high attendance figure of 88 per cent for the first week of November. However, even when older age groups returned the following week, attendance rates climbed to a high of 91 per cent. This puts attendance rates in Wales equal to those seen in Northern Ireland, and above those seen in England and Scotland, having been lower during September and October.

In summary, attendance rates were highest in Scotland and Northern Ireland over much of September and early October. Attendance rates have been lower in England, with a larger share of COVID-related absences. However, attendance rates were lowest in Wales through September and most of October. Whilst it is not possible to establish the precise reasons for these cross-country differences, it is notable that both Northern Ireland and Scotland did not reopen schools more widely in June or July, and thus had longest to plan for a full reopening. They also reopened at a time when infection rates were close to a low point in August 2020. Some of the differences will undoubtedly reflect different infection rates and trends across local areas. Indeed, the drop in attendance rates during late October across the four nations coincides with the upsurge in infections. Given the data available, this is something we explore further within England, Wales and Scotland.

It is then highly notable that attendance rates recovered by much more in Wales and Northern Ireland following short lockdowns. Indeed, attendance rates in the first two weeks of November were highest in Wales and Northern Ireland. In contrast, in England and Scotland, attendance rates were falling and COVID-related absences were climbing. This picture for England and Scotland could change again as more recent, tighter restrictions take their effect.

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## Differences by area and pupil characteristics

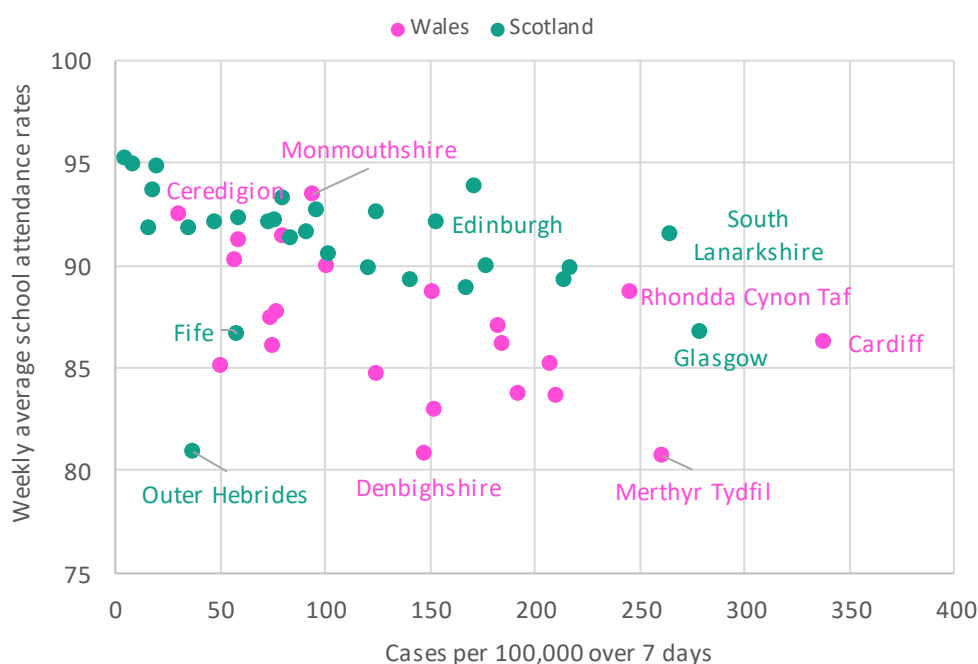
Partly reflecting differing rates of infection, there are significant differences in attendance rates within countries for different areas, types of school and by the age of pupil. The analysis that is possible differs by country, given the data available, but such differences are still revealing about the factors driving attendance. All these figures by local area relate to attendance and infection rates during October unless otherwise stated.

Within Wales and Scotland, we can observe differences in attendance rates across local authorities in October. Within Scotland, these varied from 87 to 95 per cent (excluding 81 per cent for the Outer Hebrides), but from 81 to 94 per cent in Wales. Figure 2 shows how these attendance rates by local authority correlate with confirmed cases (confirmed positive cases per 100,000 over a 7-day time horizon). This is shown for the week ending October 9<sup>th</sup> in Scotland (the last full week before the October holiday) and for the week ending October 16<sup>th</sup> in Wales (the last full week of complete and reliable data before half-term).

Figure 2 illustrates a number of key points. First, attendance rates were generally lower in areas with higher infection rates, as one would naturally expect. For example, attendance rates were 93 per cent in Ceredigion and 94 per cent in Monmouthshire, where case numbers (i.e. infection rates) were relatively low, but only 81 per cent in Merthyr Tydfil where case numbers were much higher. Second, attendance rates generally appear higher in Scotland than in Wales for areas with similar infection rates. For example, attendance rates were 87 per cent in Glasgow compared with 81 per cent in Merthyr Tydfil, despite higher case rates in Glasgow. This suggests there is much to be learnt from Scotland’s overall approach to school attendance.

Third, there is not a perfect relationship between case numbers and school attendance. Some of this will be due to infections occurring in other parts of the population. For example, the relatively high case numbers in student populations in Cardiff and Edinburgh are likely driving the high overall population infection rates in these areas, with school attendance rates able to stay relatively high. However, there are also cases with low attendance rates and low infection rates, such as Denbighshire and Fife, and areas with high infection rates and high attendance rates, such as Rhondda Cynon Taf and South Lanarkshire. Again, it is possible that such differences could be driven by the age-profile of infection rates. Policymakers within government with access to more granular data should be investigating these local area differences in more detail to find the best ways to encourage school attendance.

**Figure 2: Attendance rates and overall infection rates across local authorities in Wales and Scotland**



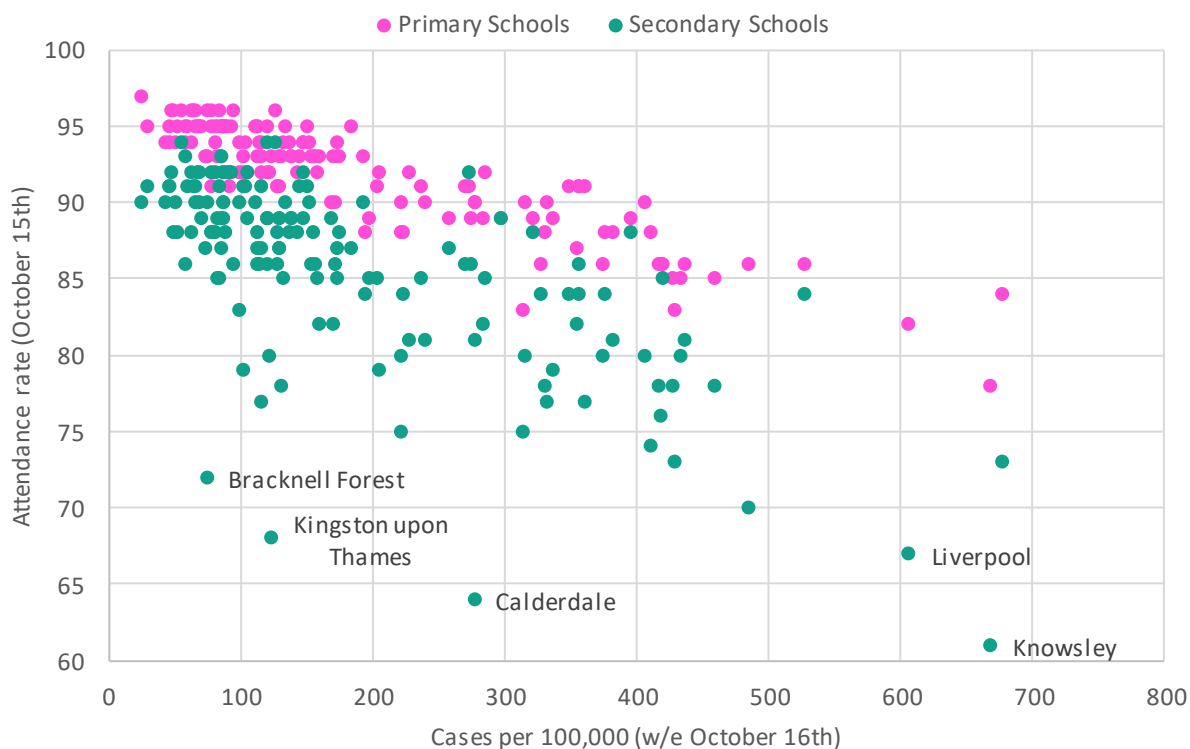
**Notes and sources for Wales:** Attendance rates cover all pupils in maintained settings (including maintained nurseries) in the week commencing October 12<sup>th</sup>; (<https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools-7-september-23-october-2020>); case rates relate to the number of confirmed positive cases over 7 days per 100,000 of the population in each local authority in the week ending October 16<sup>th</sup> (downloaded on October 27<sup>th</sup>, <https://public.tableau.com/profile/public.health.wales.health.protection#!/vizhome/RapidCOVID-19virology-Public/Headlinesummary>). **Notes and sources for Scotland:** Figures are averaged across each week in all local authority settings, excluding childcare settings (<https://public.tableau.com/profile/sg.eas.learninganalysis#!/vizhome/COVID19-SchoolsandChildcareInformation/Introduction>). Case rates relate to the number of confirmed positive cases over 7 days per 100,000 of the population in each council area in the week ending October 9<sup>th</sup> (downloaded on October 27<sup>th</sup>, <https://www.opendata.nhs.scot/dataset/covid-19-in-scotland>).

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Figure 3 shows the equivalent set of figures for primary and secondary school attendance rates in England (as recorded on October 15<sup>th</sup> and reported in answer to a recent written parliamentary question). A number of key points emerge. First, attendance rates are clearly lower in secondary schools than in primary schools for given infection rates. Indeed, the latest data for November confirms that overall attendance rates for secondary schools in England (83 per cent) are lower than for primary schools (90 per cent). This fits with ONS [evidence](#) showing higher infection rates for older children. Absence rates are [normally](#) higher in secondary schools than primary schools, though the difference is typically small. For the last five years, the overall absence rate in primary schools has been about 4 per cent and about 5-5.5 per cent in secondary schools.

Second, as with Wales and Scotland, there is a great deal of variation across local authorities. In the case of England, there is a much clearer negative relationship between case numbers and school attendance rates, particularly at secondary school level. There are also many local authorities in England with much higher case numbers than Wales and Scotland, which is almost certainly acting to reduce overall attendance rates in England. For example, Liverpool and Knowsley saw case numbers of over 600 per 100,000 in this week in October and secondary school attendance rates well below 70 per cent (67 per cent for Liverpool and 61 per cent for Knowsley). However, there are several local authorities with lower overall case rates, but also quite low secondary attendance rates: e.g. Bracknell Forest (72 per cent); Kingston upon Thames (68 per cent); and, Calderdale (64 per cent). Such differences might reflect the age distribution of cases across areas or potential data limitations. Nevertheless, it would be highly desirable for the Department for Education to produce these kind of local area comparisons every week in order to allow for debate and scrutiny of the factors driving school attendance levels across the country.

**Figure 3: Attendance rates in primary and secondary schools and infection rates across local authorities in England**



**Notes and sources for England:** Attendance rates as recorded in October 15<sup>th</sup> (<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-16/104751>); case rates relate to the number of confirmed positive cases over 7 days per 100,000 of the population in each local authority in the week ending October 16<sup>th</sup> (downloaded on October 27<sup>th</sup>, <https://coronavirus-staging.data.gov.uk/details/about-data#legacy-csv-downloads>).

Across the UK, the schools with the lowest attendance rates are special schools, with attendance rates of 87 per cent in Scotland, 84 per cent in Northern Ireland and 76 per cent in England (at the most recent data point in each case). Some of this will reflect rational decisions not to attend school, given that pupils at special schools are more likely to suffer from medical conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus. However, it also highlights the importance of providing extra support to pupils, particularly given the additional problems many pupils with special educational needs and disabilities faced during [lockdown](#).

Lastly, within Scotland we see that the latest attendance rates for November are lowest in the most deprived areas (84 per cent) and highest in the least deprived areas (93 per cent). This is a major source of concern given that [evidence](#) suggests disadvantaged pupils are likely to have lost greater learning time during lockdown right across the UK. This is also highly unlikely to be a uniquely Scottish phenomenon, with evidence of similar problems emerging for [England](#). Indeed, credit should be given to the Scottish Government for regularly publishing such detailed information about levels and differences in school attendance rates by area and pupil characteristics. This is a necessary step towards understanding the effects of this stage of the pandemic on pupils' educational progress.



## Implications for policy and support

In summary, school attendance rates during September and most of October were highest in Scotland and Northern Ireland. There was then a drop-off in attendance rates during mid to late October with the upsurge in cases. Following short lockdowns, attendance rates were then highest in Northern Ireland and Wales in the first two weeks of November, whilst attendance was beginning to drop off again in England and Scotland. Policymakers across the UK should be learning more from this cross-country experience. There are also potential lessons from differences within countries, where there are large differences in attendance rates, even for similar infection rates. Governments across the UK should be providing more regular, detailed data on how school attendance is changing across local areas to enable greater scrutiny and understanding.

Such differences also highlight the importance of providing the necessary support for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. Attendance rates appear lower for more disadvantaged areas and pupils, and lower attendance rates can also be seen for pupils in special schools. This is on top of a likely greater loss of learning time for disadvantaged pupils during [lockdown](#), and, as we documented in our recent [report](#), major difficulties in providing support to pupils with special and additional learning needs right across the UK. Where such pupils cannot attend school for COVID-related reasons, it is crucial that local and national policymakers provide appropriate support. This is in terms of access to necessary digital equipment and remote learning materials, but also replacements for free school meals.

Pupils absent from school will also be missing out on significant learning time, with big differences across pupils and areas. This has particularly strong implications for pupils in exam years, who are more likely to be absent from school through being older. Coming on top of variable losses in learning time during lockdown, continuing COVID-related absences are going to make it incredibly hard to implement a fair exam process anything like that in a normal year.

Policy is moving at a fast pace in this area. Policymakers in Scotland have announced that National 4/5 exams for 16-year olds will be replaced by internal/teacher assessments, with Higher exams going ahead a few weeks later than usual. In Wales, all GCSE and A/AS level exams will be replaced by internal assessments. In England and Northern Ireland, GCSE and A-level exams are due to go ahead, though a bit later and perhaps with fewer exams overall.

Whatever approach is taken, schools and policymakers all need to know which pupils are missing out on school and how much they are missing. This includes differences in school absence rates by local area (currently only published regularly for Scotland and Wales, but not in England) and differences by key pupil characteristics such as level of disadvantage (currently only published in Scotland). It also includes how much school pupils are missing out in total. In some areas, high infection rates are likely to mean multiple self-isolation episodes. We don't know this information for any part of the UK yet, but it is certainly possible that some pupils could have missed a month of school or more since the start of September. This would come on top of lost learning time during the lockdown earlier in 2020.

Armed with this information, policymakers could better target catch-up resources at the pupils who need them most, rather than making educated guesses. Policymakers and schools could also adjust grades to take account of the amount of lost learning time. If grades are not adjusted, then detailed data on lost learning would enable us to understand why inequalities widen in 2021. It would also help manage the consequences of lost learning time by enabling universities and others to relax or contextualise entry requirements in 2021 based on lost learning time.