

Research Briefing

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School attendance in England



Summary

- 1 School attendance rules and guidance
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- 3 The importance of school attendance
- 4 Policy proposals on attendance
- 5 Education Committee report on persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils (2023)

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Summary

Responsibility for school attendance

Parents in England are responsible for ensuring that their child receives an appropriate full-time education. When a child is registered at school, parents are responsible for securing their child's regular attendance.

There are reasons that absence from school in term-time may be authorised, most commonly for pupil illness. Authorisation of absence for other reasons is a matter for schools, but should only be granted in exceptional circumstances. It is unlikely to be granted for a family holiday. Parents may be fined for unauthorised absences.

The Department for Education has published non-statutory guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#) which sets out the relevant roles and responsibilities of schools, academy trusts, governing bodies, and local authorities.

Concerns about school attendance levels

Since the relaxation of restrictions on schools imposed during the height of the Covid pandemic, [there have been concerns about increased absence from school](#), and in particular an increase in the proportion of pupils with high levels of absence.

At the time of writing, the [estimated absence rate for the 2022/23 academic year](#) was 7.5%. This is not directly comparable to final data that has been published for previous years.

[The most recent final Department for Education attendance statistics for a complete academic year is for 2021/22](#), when the absence rate for any reason was 8.5%. This is much lower than the previous year when absence was affected much more by the pandemic (25.9% absence rate for any reason in 2020/21). However, it is higher than in the six years prior to the pandemic (when absence ranged between 4.5% and 4.8%).

The figures below exclude absence due to Covid-19 related reasons.

[In 2021/22, 22.5% of pupils were recorded as "persistently absent"](#) (defined by the Department for Education as missing 10% or more of possible school sessions). This equates to around 1.6 million pupils.

Some groups of pupils are more likely to be absent or persistently absent than others. For example, in 2021/22, 37.2% of free school meal eligible pupils were persistently absent compared with 17.5% of pupils that were not eligible.

Policy proposals

Following a consultation, in May 2022 the Government published [Working together to improve school attendance](#), non-statutory guidance aimed at supporting schools to maintain high levels of attendance.

Also in May 2022, the Government published a [Schools Bill](#). The Bill as introduced proposed to:

- Require local authorities to try to improve school attendance in their area, and to have regard to any related guidance produced by the Secretary of State
- Require all schools in England to have an attendance policy
- Allow the Secretary of State to make regulations to set out when a fixed penalty notice for school absence should be considered, and for co-ordination of these processes locally
- Extend the Secretary of State's power to regulate the granting of leaves of absence from school to include all academies

The Schools Bill, however, was abandoned in December 2022. The Education Secretary cited wider pressures, outside education, for leading to the Bill being dropped. The Education Secretary has said that post-pandemic attendance levels remain a focus for the Government.

A [consultation on potential national thresholds for fixed penalty notices](#) was open in June-July 2022. The Government [published its response](#) in August 2023. The response did not make any concrete proposals for national thresholds for triggering fixed penalty notices.

School attendance and attainment

On average, [pupils with higher absence over key stage 4 \(year ten to year eleven\) had lower GCSE attainment in 2019](#). This is the most recent data available, although data for 2023 is due to be published in October 2023.

Pupils who did not achieve grades 9-4 in English and maths GCSEs in 2019 had an absence rate of 8.8%, compared with 5.2% among pupils who achieved grade 4 in both subjects, and 3.7% among pupils who achieved grade 5 or above.

Pupils who were persistently or severely absent (who missed more than 10% and 50% respectively of possible school sessions) had lower average attainment. 35.6% of persistently absent pupils, and just 11.3% of severely absent pupils achieved grades 9-4 in English and maths (compared to 67.6% of all pupils).

1 School attendance rules and guidance

1.1 Parental duties to ensure attendance

Under [section 7 of the Education Act 1996](#), parents are responsible for ensuring that their children of compulsory school age receive efficient full-time education that is suitable to the child's age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs the child may have. This can be by regular attendance at school, alternative provision, or by 'education otherwise' (such as elective home education).¹

Where a child is registered at school, parents are responsible for securing their child's regular attendance at that school. Under [section 444 of the Education Act 1996](#), parents who fail to secure a child's regular attendance are guilty of an offence, as are parents who know that a child is failing to attend school regularly and fail to ensure that they do so.

1.2 Guidance

In May 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) published non-statutory guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#), effective from September 2022, replacing previous guidance on school attendance.

The guidance was produced following a consultation (see section 4.1 of this briefing), and was published alongside wider proposals for strengthened requirements on school attendance, including for this guidance to be made statutory – meaning that schools must have regard to it, rather than it being advisory.

In May 2023, the Department for Education published a blog, [Why is school attendance so important and what are the risks of missing a day?](#), which said that being in school is important to children's achievement, wellbeing, and wider development.²

¹ Education Act 1996, section 7

² Department for Education, [Why is school attendance so important and what are the risks of missing a day?](#), 18 May 2023

1.3

When a child is not regularly attending school

The Government has published information on the type of measures that may be used by schools or local authorities may use [where a child is missing school without good reason](#):

Parenting Order. This means you have to go to parenting classes. You'll also have to do what the court says to improve your child's school attendance.

Education Supervision Order. If the council thinks you need support getting your child to go to school but you're not co-operating, they can apply to a court for an Education Supervision Order.

A supervisor will be appointed to help you get your child into education. The local council can do this instead of prosecuting you, or as well.

School Attendance Order. You'll get a School Attendance Order if the local council thinks your child is not getting an education.

You have 15 days to provide evidence that you've registered your child with the school listed in the order or that you're giving them [home education](#). If you do not, you could be prosecuted or given a fine.³

Parents may also be issued with a **penalty notice – a fine** – of £60 which rises to £120 each if they do not pay within 21 days. If parents do not pay the fine after 28 days they may be prosecuted for their child's absence from school. Fines may be issued to both parents.

Holidays during term time

Parents cannot authorise absence; only schools can do this. Head teachers have discretion to grant leave during school term-time, but this is not an automatic entitlement. The law governing such leave of absences was tightened up from September 2013.

The [Education \(Pupil Registration\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2013](#), SI 2013 No 756, amended the [Education \(Pupil Registration\) \(England\) Regulations 2006](#), SI 2006 No. 1751, to remove references to family holiday and extended leave as well as the statutory threshold of ten school days.⁴

Under the revised regulations, **head teachers may not grant leave of absence during term-time unless there are exceptional circumstances**. The new regulations took effect from 1 September 2013. Background on the

³ GOV.UK, [School Attendance and Absence](#).

⁴ The [2006 regulations](#) said that a leave of absence could be granted for a holiday where an application had been made in advance and the school believed "special circumstances" applied to grant that application. The regulations said that, save in "exceptional circumstances", a pupil should not be granted more than ten days leave per school year for holidays.

change is contained in the DfE's [Explanatory Memorandum](#) on the 2013 regulations.

The DfE guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#) states :

As head teachers should only grant leaves of absence in exceptional circumstances it is unlikely a leave of absence will be granted for the purposes of a family holiday.⁵

Persistent and severe absence

The DfE's guidance on [improving school attendance](#) highlights particular action that should be taken relating to children who have a good deal of school absence:

- Where pupils are persistently absent – for more than 10% of school time, or one day a fortnight – schools and local authorities are expected to work together to put additional targeted support in place to remove any barriers to attendance and re-engage these pupils
- When pupils are severely absent – for more than 50% of school time, and therefore absent more than they are present – the guidance states that a “concerted effort is therefore needed across all relevant services to prioritise” those pupils, which:

may include specific support with attendance or a whole family plan, but it may also include consideration for an education, health and care plan or an alternative form of educational provision where necessary to overcome the barriers to being in school.⁶

⁵ Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#), May 2022, p13

⁶ Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#), May 2022, p32

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School absence rates data

Estimated absence for the 2022/23 academic year

The Department for Education has published [estimated absence rates in state-funded schools for the 2022/23 academic year](#) (12 September 2022 to 21 July 2023). These figures are estimates because they are based on survey responses from schools which are then adjusted for non-responses. This data is therefore not directly comparable with final data published for previous academic years.

At the time of writing the estimated absence rate for any reason during the 2022/23 academic year in state-funded schools was 7.5%. The estimated absence rate was highest in secondary schools (14.7%), followed by special schools (14.2%), and primary schools recorded the lowest absence rate (7.5%).⁷

The highest weekly estimated absence rate was in the final full week of the Autumn term (14.1%). The Department for Education attributes this increase to illness related absence which was “in line with increases in rates of seasonal flu and other seasonal respiratory illnesses”.⁸

In 2022/23, 22.3% of pupils were estimated to be “persistently absent” (defined by the Department for Education as missing 10% or more of possible school sessions or around 19 days per academic year).

[The Department for Education data dashboard](#) provides the most recent data available broken down by region and local authority.

Autumn term 2022/23 absence rates

At the time of writing the most recent final absence rate data that has been published is for Autumn term 2022/23 when it was 7.5%. This is the highest Autumn term rate recorded since comparable data was published in 2016/17.⁹

In the years prior to the pandemic, the Autumn term absence rate was fairly stable. Unsurprisingly, absence rates have increased since the pandemic started.

The table below provides additional information.

⁷ Department for Education, [Pupil attendance in schools](#), 10 August 2023

⁸ Department for Education, [Pupil attendance in schools](#), 10 August 2023

⁹ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn term 2022/23](#), 20 July 2023

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%

Note: Absence expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon). See Box 1 for definitions of the absence rates.

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn term 2022/23](#), 20 July 2023

Box 1: Covid-related absence definition

During the pandemic, Covid-related absence was reported by the Department for Education separately to overall absence rates and specifically referred to pupils who were not attending school due to public health guidelines.

This included pupils staying home due to lockdown requirements (schools were expected to provide remote education instead). Other reasons included pupils isolating with Covid-19 symptoms, awaiting a test result, or pupils required to stay home due to contact with someone with Covid-19.

Pupils with confirmed Covid-19 were recorded as absent due to illness, not due to Covid-19 related reasons.

Persistent absentee definition

The “persistent absentee rate” is defined by the Department for Education as the proportion of pupils missing 10% or more of possible school sessions. This is around 19 days per academic year. In each school day there are two sessions (morning and afternoon).

Severe absentee definition

The “severe absentee rate” is defined by the Department for Education as the proportion of pupils missing 50% or more of possible school sessions. In each school day there are two sessions (morning and afternoon).

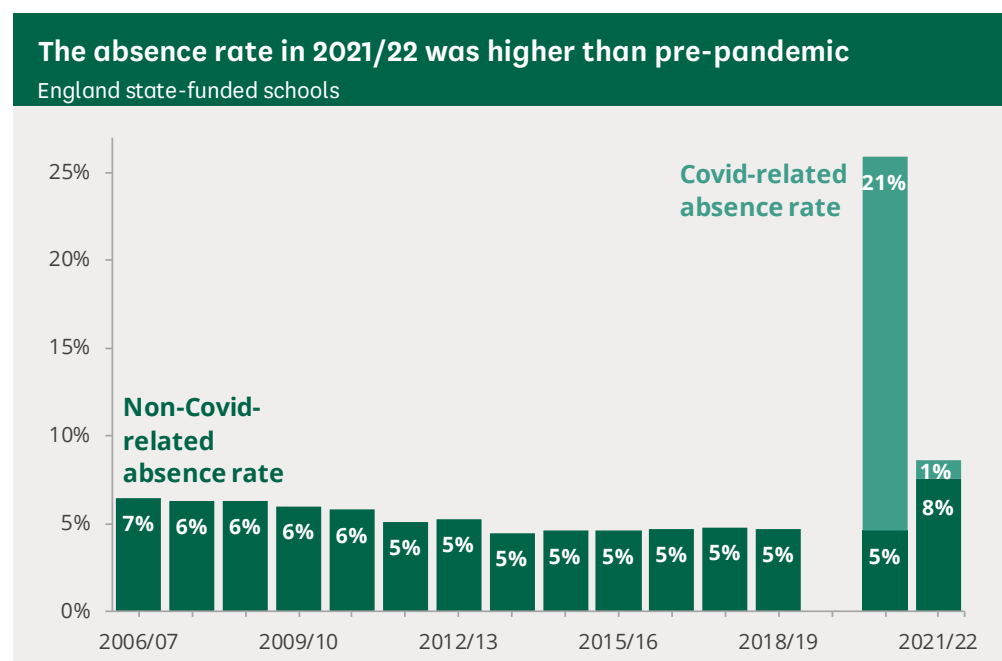
2021/22 academic year absence rates

The most recent Department for Education attendance statistics for a complete academic year is for 2021/22, when the Covid-19 pandemic continued to disrupt school attendance, but schools were consistently open to all pupils (unlike in the previous year).

In 2021/22, 7.6% of state-funded school sessions were missed in England (this excludes Covid-related absence – see Box 1 for further detail).¹⁰

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). However, the absence rate remained higher than the years prior to the pandemic.¹¹

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 2006/07.¹²



Note: Absence expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon). Data for 2019/20 was not published. See Box 1 for definition of the Covid-related absence rate.

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

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

¹⁰ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

¹¹ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

¹² Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

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).¹³

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%

Note: Absence expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon). Includes Covid-19 related absence – see Box 1 for definition.

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

Persistent absence

In 2021/22, 22.5% of pupils were recorded as “persistently absent” (defined by the Department for Education as missing 10% or more of possible school sessions or around 19 days). This equates to around 1.6 million pupils. These figures exclude absence due to Covid-19 related reasons.¹⁴

The proportion of persistent absentees increased from the previous year (2020/21) as well as compared with before the pandemic. It was 12.1% of pupils in 2020/21, and 10.9% in 2018/19 (data for 2019/20 was not published).

The Department for Education suggests that the increase in the last year is because in 2020/21 there was disruption to attendance for most pupils due to the pandemic, this means that over these periods pupils would be recorded as not attending due to Covid-19 related reasons – which is excluded from the persistent absence rates.

For this reason, the Department for Education does not recommend making comparisons between 2021/22 and 2020/21.

¹³ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

¹⁴ See Box 1 for more information about Covid-19 related absence. Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

Since 2018/19, the proportion of persistently absent pupils has increased in all types of schools.

- In state-funded special schools the proportion of pupils missing 10% or more of possible school sessions increased from 28.8% in 2018/19 to 40.4% in 2021/22
- In state-funded primary schools the rate increased from 8.2% in 2018/19 to 17.7% in 2021/22
- In state-funded secondary schools the rate increased from 13.7% in 2018/19 to 27.7% in 2021/22.¹⁵

Another measure of absenteeism published by the Department for Education is the proportion of pupils missing more than 50% of possible school sessions. This is also known as “severe absence”. In 2021/22, 1.7% of pupils were severely absent, this equates to around 120,000 pupils.¹⁶

The proportion of severely absent pupils has also increased since before the pandemic. In 2018/19, 0.8% of pupils were severely absent. Over this period, the severely absent rate increased in all types of schools (although remained low as a proportion of all pupils).

- In state-funded special schools the proportion of severely absent pupils increased from 4.6% in 2018/19 to 5.8% in 2021/22
- In state-funded primary schools the rate increased from 0.4% in 2018/19 to 0.6% in 2021/22
- In state-funded secondary schools the rate more than doubled from 1.3% in 2018/19 to 2.7% in 2021/22.¹⁷

Pupil characteristics

Some groups of pupils, such as those with special educational needs (SEN), or who are eligible for free school meals (FSM), or those belonging to Travellers of Irish decent or Gypsy/Roma ethnic groups, have higher absence rates on average than their peers.

Absence rates broken down by pupil characteristic summarised in this section exclude absence due to Covid-19 related reasons.

In 2021/22, pupils with complex SEN which means they have an education, health, and care plan (EHC plan) had much higher absence rates than those with no identified SEN (12.1% compared to 6.9%). Pupils with less complex needs (SEN support) recorded absence rates in between these two groups (10.0%).

¹⁵ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

¹⁶ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

¹⁷ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

Pupils with SEN (and in particular those with EHC plans) are more likely than other pupils to attend medical appointments during the school day, or not attend school due to illness.¹⁸

As in previous years, pupils known to be eligible for FSM on average had higher absence rates than those not eligible. In 2021/22 the absence rate for eligible pupils was 10.8% compared with 6.5% for non-eligible pupils.¹⁹

In 2021/22 the ethnic groups with the highest absence rates by far were pupils who were Travellers of Irish descent, or who were Gypsy/Roma (22.1% and 17.8% respectively). Pupils who were of Chinese descent had the lowest absence rates (3.6%).²⁰

Similar trends were recorded for the proportion of pupils missing 10% or more of possible sessions, or pupils missing 50% or more of possible sessions. The table below provides additional detail.

	Absence rate	% of pupils missing at least 10% of sessions	% of pupils missing at least 50% of sessions
National average	7.6%	22.5%	1.7%
Special educational needs (SEN)			
EHC plan	12.1%	36.9%	5.2%
SEN support	10.0%	32.0%	3.0%
No SEN	6.9%	20.0%	1.0%
Free school meals (FSM)			
FSM	10.8%	37.2%	3.0%
Not eligible for FSM	6.5%	17.5%	0.9%
Major ethnic group			
Mixed	7.7%	23.9%	1.7%
Asian	6.7%	21.0%	0.8%
White	7.9%	23.4%	1.8%
Traveller of Irish heritage	22.1%	71.7%	13.6%
Gypsy/Roma	17.8%	64.9%	8.3%
Black	5.1%	13.5%	1.0%
Chinese	3.6%	6.2%	0.4%
Gender			
Male	7.5%	22.2%	1.6%
Female	7.6%	22.8%	1.7%

¹⁸ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

¹⁹ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

²⁰ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

Note: Table ordered by absence rate. Excludes Covid-related absence (see Box 1 for definition). Absence rate expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon). Major ethnic groups as classified by the Department for Education, Traveller of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma ethnic groups are included in the average for the White ethnic group category.

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2021/22](#), 16 March 2023

In May 2023 the Department for Education published a study which investigated [the factors associated with persistent absence for unauthorised reasons for secondary school pupils in academic year 2018/19](#).

The study found that after controlling for other factors, the pupil characteristics that were more likely to be associated with persistent absence for unauthorised reasons were:

- Being in year groups 9-11
- Being eligible for free school meals in the previous year
- Being a child in need or on a child protection plan in the previous year
- Being of Gypsy/Roma or Irish traveller ethnicity
- Being suspended in the previous year
- Attending Alternative Provision (AP) in the previous year (regardless of whether this is for a majority or minority of sessions)²¹

Concerns about school attendance since the pandemic

There have been widespread concerns about the dip in attendance levels since schools returned to usual patterns following lockdowns during the Covid pandemic. Particular concerns have been raised that increased [persistent absence is concentrated among disadvantaged pupils](#), such as those who receive free school meals.²²

Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, has said that, since the pandemic, [some parents have come to see school as optional](#):

I think there's been a very clear social contract ... the clear expectation is that parents should get their children to school every day, unless the child is too ill to go [...]

The pandemic disruption and the expectation that children should be kept at home broke that. [...]

Post-pandemic, a minority of families have just sort of lost sight of the importance of that consistency of getting children to school every day — that

²¹ Department for Education, [Persistent absence for unauthorised other reasons: who is at risk?](#), 18 May 2023

²² London School of Economics, [Rising school absences: the post pandemic education divide](#), 17 October 2022

it's not an optional thing. It's not a 'when you feel like it, and not when you don't'.²³

Ms Spielman was speaking in the context of [Ofsted's annual report](#), published in December 2022, which noted that "initial high levels of absenteeism have fallen, but there are still concerns about a smaller number of persistent absentees."²⁴

The Centre for Social Justice think tank [published a report in January 2022](#) which said that the pandemic had created a generation of 'ghost children' who had not returned to school, and were at significant safeguarding risk as well as educational disadvantage.²⁵

A Financial Times article in October 2022 discussed the [concerns about increased school absence](#), including links to wider problems in children's lives such as poverty or violence at home, or problems with mental illness or disability.²⁶

In June 2023, the Guardian published concerns focusing on [rising numbers of year 11 pupils missing school](#) – using analysis from FFT Education Datalab, the article stated that year 11 pupils missed 4.5% of all sessions for unauthorised reasons up to mid-May in academic year 2022/23, compared with 2.1% in 2018/19.²⁷

In September 2023, Public First published a report on [parental attitudes to school attendance since the pandemic](#), which said that covid had caused a "seismic" shift in attitudes which "is going to take a monumental, multi-service effort to change." Among other issues, Public First highlighted:

- A fundamental breakdown in the relationship between schools and parents across the socioeconomic spectrum
- A mental health crisis as a "huge, compounding issue" around attendance
- Term-time holidays being "entirely socially acceptable across all socioeconomic groups"
- The cost-of-living crisis driving more families into poverty, as an underlying driver of poor attendance in families from lower and no-income groups

²³ Times, [Ofsted chief: Parents think school attendance is optional since pandemic](#), 14 December 2022

²⁴ Ofsted, [The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2021/22](#), December 2022, p11

²⁵ Centre for Social Justice, [Lost but not forgotten: the reality of severe absence in schools post-lockdown](#), January 2022

²⁶ Financial Times, [Thousands of children aren't turning up to school post-lockdown. Why?](#), 26 October 2022

²⁷ Guardian, [One in 10 GCSE-year pupils absent from English schools each day](#), 28 June 2023

- Sanctions being seen as both irrelevant and antagonistic across all parent groups²⁸

The report made a number of recommendations including a review and possible abolition of fines, an urgent need to improve school-level attendance monitoring, and the need for investment in SEND and children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), both seen as significant factors in the attendance crisis.²⁹

Concerns in other countries

School attendance following the pandemic is not exclusively an English issue. Difficulties have been reported across the UK, as well as in other countries.

The following articles highlight similar concerns being raised:

- STV News, [Over 100,000 schoolchildren missing day of lessons every two weeks](#), 21 November 2022
- Wales Online, [Schools in Wales get tough with parents as absence rates fail to come down](#), 8 February 2023
- BBC News, [NI education: Significant rise in post-lockdown school absence rate](#), 27 January 2023
- Brussels Times, [School absenteeism increased by 28% in 2021](#), 10 August 2022
- The Conversation, [School attendance rates are dropping. We need to ask students why](#), 26 February 2023 [discussing Australia]
- Public Policy Institute of California, [Exploring the Spike in Chronic Absenteeism among K-12 Students](#), 29 March 2023

²⁸ Public First, [Public First finds parental support for fulltime schooling has collapsed](#), 21 September 2023

²⁹ As above

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The importance of school attendance

Absence and attainment: 2018/19 academic year

In May 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) published statistics on [the link between absence and attainment at key stage 2 and key stage 4](#) using data from academic year 2018/19. This was an update to [a similar report that used data from the 2013/14 academic year](#).

The DfE found there was a link between absence and attainment and concluded that:³⁰

Generally, the higher the percentage of sessions missed across the key stage at KS2 and KS4, the lower the level of attainment at the end of the key stage.

Absence and key stage 2 attainment

On average, pupils with higher absence over key stage 2 (year three to year six) had lower attainment in their assessments in academic year 2018/19.

Pupils who did not achieve the “expected standard” (see Box 2 for more information) in 2018/19 had an absence rate of 4.7%, this was higher than the rate recorded for pupils who did achieve the expected standard (3.5%). Pupils who achieved the “higher standard” (see Box 2 for more information) had the lowest absence rate on average (2.7%).³¹

Persistently absent pupils (who miss more than 10% of possible school sessions) have much lower than average attainment. 40.2% of persistently absent pupils achieved the expected standard (compared to 67.7% of all pupils) and just 2.5% achieved the higher standard (compared to 11.2% of all pupils).

Box 2: Key stage 2 (KS2) assessments

Key stage 2 (KS2) assessments are taken by pupils at the end of year six (also known as SATs).

Common measures of KS2 attainment are the proportion of pupils achieving the “expected standard” in reading, writing, and maths (this is a scaled score of 100 or above in reading and maths, and at least “working at the expected standard in writing”), and the proportion achieving the “higher standard” in

³⁰ Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

³¹ Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

the same subjects (this is a scaled score of 110 or above in reading and maths, and “working at greater depth” in writing).

Absence and key stage 4 attainment

On average, pupils with higher absence over key stage 4 (year ten to year eleven) had lower attainment in their assessments in academic year 2018/19.

³²

Pupils who did not achieve [9-4 grades](#) in English and Maths GCSE in 2018/19 had an absence rate of 8.8%, this was higher than the rate recorded for pupils who did achieve this (5.2%). Pupils who achieved [9-5 grades](#) in English and Maths GCSE had the lowest absence rate on average (3.7%).³³

“Persistently absent” pupils (who miss more than 10% of possible school sessions) have much lower than average attainment. 35.6% of persistently absent pupils achieved 9-4 grades in English and Maths (compared to 67.6% of all pupils) and 16.8% achieved 9-5 grades in English and Maths (compared to 45.5% of all pupils).

“Severely absent” pupils (who miss more than 50% of possible school sessions) have even lower average attainment. Just 11.3% of severely absent pupils achieved 9-4 grades in English and Maths and 5.0% achieved 9-5 grades in English and Maths.

³² Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

³³ Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

4 Policy proposals on attendance

4.1 Consultation and new guidance on attendance (2022)

In January-February 2022, the Government ran a consultation on [strengthened requirements for schools on attendance](#).

The consultation document highlighted the impact of the pandemic on attendance and argued that this, alongside the wider importance of school attendance, required action from the Government:

We recognise the impact that the pandemic is continuing to have on children's education, and although recent trends in attendance levels have been largely driven by covid, the government is determined to address the wider underlying causes of children not being in school, because it is the best place for their development and wellbeing. To that end it is more important than ever that agencies work together to secure the regular attendance of pupils and minimise unnecessary non-covid absence as much as possible.

The consultation made four central proposals:

- To require schools to have an attendance policy, and regard to statutory guidance on attendance
- Statutory guidance on the expectations of local authorities on school attendance
- Introducing a national framework for penalty notices for school absence
- To bring rules on authorising absence in academies in line with other state-funded schools

The [consultation response](#) was published in May 2022. The Government said it would proceed with all four proposals. The consultation response said that three of the proposals had majority support from respondents. The exception was the proposed national framework for penalty notices for school absence, where the consultation response noted “a small majority of respondents, predominantly parents, did not agree with the proposal, [but] the vast majority of school, trust and local authority employees did agree with it.”³⁴

³⁴ Department for Education, [School attendance: improving the consistency of support Government consultation response](#), May 2022, p25

Alongside the consultation response, the Government published non-statutory guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#).

4.2 The Schools Bill 2022

In May 2022, the Government published a [Schools Bill](#). Alongside a wide range of other changes, the Bill proposed to take forward the four proposals on school attendance made in the January 2022 consultation, including putting the revised guidance on a statutory footing.

In the [factsheet](#) [PDF] published alongside the Bill, the Department for Education stated that legislation was needed:

To create clear expectations for schools, trusts and governing bodies, and local authorities on what attendance support they should be providing, when they should consider issuing fixed penalty notices, and when academies should grant leaves of absence. Legislation is needed to set a consistent standard of attendance support for pupils and parents, regardless of where in the country they live, and to tackle entrenched, long-standing patterns of absence.³⁵

The Bill as introduced would have:

- Required local authorities to try to improve school attendance in their area, and to have regard to any related guidance produced by the Secretary of State
- Required all schools in England to have an attendance policy
- Allowed the Secretary of State to make regulations to set out the circumstances in which authorised officers must consider giving a fixed penalty notice for school absence, and for co-ordination of these processes locally
- Extended the Secretary of State's power to regulate the granting of leaves of absence from school to include all academies

A [consultation on potential national thresholds for fixed penalty notices](#) was open in June -July 2022.

The Government [published its response](#) in August 2023. The response did not make any concrete proposals for national thresholds for triggering fixed penalty notices, but said:

³⁵ Department for Education, [School Attendance: Schools Bill Factsheet](#) [PDF], May 2022

The Department remains committed to improving the consistency of local approaches to enforcement. Respondents' comments will help inform work as it develops, including any future legislative changes.³⁶

The response did, however, say the Government would look to proceed with some changes, including:

- to require all schools to keep their admission and attendance registers electronically
- to legally require schools to provide a sickness return to the local authority for pupils who have missed, or will miss, 15 days of school because of illness
- to simplify recording in the attendance register to a single list of reasons for a pupil 'attending' or being 'absent', and to explore options for further improving consistency in recording, including through mandating use of the national attendance and absence codes.

4.3

Abandonment of the Bill

The Bill began in the House of Lords, and proved controversial, although it was other parts of the Bill, in particular on academies reform and a register of children not in school, that provoked most discussion, rather than the measures on attendance.

The Bill was due to have its Third Reading in the House of Lords in September 2022, but this was delayed after Liz Truss took office as Prime Minister, for the new Government to assess its plans. It was reported shortly prior to Liz Truss's resignation that the Government intended to abandon the Bill, perhaps to return to some of its provisions in smaller Bills in a subsequent parliamentary session.³⁷

The Bill did not proceed any further after Rishi Sunak became Prime Minister, and in December 2022 the Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, confirmed in oral evidence to the Education Committee that [the Bill would not progress](#). She emphasised political pressures outside education, such as the cost of living and the war in Ukraine, as dominating the Government's focus.³⁸

In her evidence to the Committee, Ms Keegan said that:

³⁶ Department for Education, [School registers and national thresholds for legal intervention](#), August 2023, p29

³⁷ Schools Week, [DfE scrambles to save key policies as schools bill set for axe](#), 19 October 2022

³⁸ Education Committee, [Oral evidence: Accountability hearings](#), 7 December 2022, HC 58, Q237

We do know that there has been an impact on attendance for some children post-pandemic and we are focused every day on those who have not returned to school.³⁹

4.4 Attendance Action Alliance

In December 2021, the Government [established the Attendance Action Alliance](#), a group of leading professionals working with children, to support the improvement of school attendance.⁴⁰

The Alliance is chaired by the Education Secretary and the Schools Minister, and includes members such as the Children’s Commissioner, HM Chief Inspector, and school and union leaders.

The [minutes of the meetings](#) of the Alliance are published by the Department for Education.

4.5 Attendance mentors pilot

The Education Secretary also highlighted an “attendance mentors pilot project” in Middlesbrough, [launched in September 2022](#) and funded with £5 million, to address low attendance,⁴¹ which the Department would look to expand elsewhere in 2023:

What it does is provide one-to-one mentoring support to over 1,600 persistently and severely absent pupils over a three-year period. It tackles the factors behind non-attendance such as bullying or mental health issues, as well as that feeling of just being too far behind, and that is the actual tutoring aspect of it.⁴²

In May 2023, the Department for Education announced that the programme, delivered by the children’s charity Barnardo’s, [would be expanded](#) to work with persistently and severely absent children and their families across Knowsley, Doncaster, Stoke-on-Trent and Salford.⁴³

³⁹ Education Committee, [Oral evidence: Accountability hearings](#), 7 December 2022, HC 58, Q246

⁴⁰ Department for Education, [Education Secretary launches new attendance alliance](#), 9 December 2021

⁴¹ Department for Education, [Attendance drive steps up as new term starts for millions of pupils](#), 2 September 2022

⁴² Education Committee, [Oral evidence: Accountability hearings](#), 7 December 2022, HC 58, Q268

⁴³ Department for Education, [Government to tackle post pandemic absence rates with new support](#), 18 May 2023

4.6

Attendance hubs

The May 2023 announcement also included plans to extend an Attendance Hubs programme with nine new lead hub schools. This followed a pilot project run by Northern Education Trust, which involved around 60 schools working together to tackle absence.⁴⁴

[The announcement said](#) that nine new attendance hub leads would support up to 600 primary, secondary and alternative provision schools in England to improve their attendance by sharing effective practice and practical resources.⁴⁵

A later announcement, in September 2023, [added a further four hubs](#), bringing the total to fourteen, aimed at supporting around 800 schools.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ TES, [10 MATs lined up to run attendance hubs](#), 10 March 2023

⁴⁵ Department for Education, [Government to tackle post pandemic absence rates with new support](#), 18 May 2023

⁴⁶ Department for Education, [Thousands more pupils to receive support to improve attendance](#), 28 September 2023

5

Education Committee report on persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils (2023)

In January 2023, the Education Committee [announced an inquiry](#) into “causes and possible solutions to the growing issue of children’s absence from school.”

The inquiry planned to examine links between pupil absence and related factors such as economic disadvantage, special educational needs and disabilities, ethnic background, and whether a child or a family member is clinically vulnerable to Covid-19. It also intends to examine the impact on attendance of support for pupils and their families both inside and beyond the school system, such as breakfast clubs, free meals, and after-school or holiday activities.

The [report was published in September 2023](#). The announcement said that:

growing demand for mental health services and special educational needs (SEND) support, as well as cost-of-living pressures and other issues, have compounded a problem that worsened following the covid lockdowns but remains present.⁴⁷

The committee said it was of “great concern” that absence rates had not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and made a number of recommendations including for the government to:

- Make use of the daily attendance dashboard for schools mandatory, subject to an ongoing pilot being successful
- Legislate to introduce a register of children not in school to be fully operational for the 2024/25 academic year
- Legislate statutory attendance guidance to be applicable from September 2024, with funding for local authorities to meet the requirements
- Make an assessment of the eligibility criteria for Free School Meals and adjust if necessary, ensuring all children in poverty are in receipt

⁴⁷ Education Committee, [Tackle school absence crisis with better mental health and SEND support and urgent legislation, says Education Committee](#), 27 September 2023

- Implement an enrichment guarantee for pupils in school including the use of sport, music, drama and art, looking to the youth sector for best practice
- Prioritise resource for inclusion and assessment in mainstream schools, to ensure they are adequately set up to support SEND pupils and address the current level of unmet need, and therefore improve their attendance rates
- Launch a targeted public information campaign to guide parents on when and when not children who are unwell should attend school
- For the Department for Education to review its framework for supporting low-income families in meeting the costs of school attendance⁴⁸

The report in particular highlighted concerns about mental health difficulties among pupils and problems in accessing support. It said:

The Department [for Education] should also lead a cross-government assessment of the scale of mental health difficulties amongst pupils, and review the current provision of support available in schools and outside of them. The Government should conclude this review and report its findings by Summer 2024. There then needs to be significant joint working across the Government to ensure CAMHS provision is adequate to meet the needs of school age children, in line with the Department's previous commitment to a 4-week waiting time.⁴⁹

The committee also said that, as part of reforms to the guidance on attendance, the Department should introduce a mental health absence code, and set clear thresholds for its use.⁵⁰

The government has not yet responded to this report.

⁴⁸ Education Committee, [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), Seventh Report of Session 2022-23, HC 970, 27 September 2023, p62-67

⁴⁹ Education Committee, [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), Seventh Report of Session 2022-23, HC 970, 27 September 2023, p66

⁵⁰ As above

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