

Research Briefing

14 January 2025

By Robert Long,
Nerys Roberts

School attendance in England



Summary

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

Image Credits

Attributed to: Official Opening of St Paul's Catholic School in Leicester by Catholic Church England. Licensed under CC BY 2.0 / image cropped.

Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing '[Legal help: where to go and how to pay](#)' for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

Sources and subscriptions for MPs and staff

We try to use sources in our research that everyone can access, but sometimes only information that exists behind a paywall or via a subscription is available. We provide access to many online subscriptions to MPs and parliamentary staff, please contact hoclibraryonline@parliament.uk or visit commonslibrary.parliament.uk/resources for more information.

Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at commonslibrary.parliament.uk. If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

Contents

Summary	5
1 School attendance rules and guidance	7
1.1 Parental duties to ensure attendance	7
1.2 Statutory guidance	7
Data dashboard for schools	7
1.3 When a child is not regularly attending school	8
Holidays during term time	8
Evidence for illness	9
Persistent and severe absence	9
2 School absence rates data	11
2.1 Estimated attendance and absence rates for the 2024/25 academic year to date	11
2.2 Data for the autumn 2023 and spring 2024 terms	12
2.3 Data from previous academic years	13
Geographical variations	14
Persistent absence	15
Pupil characteristics	15
2.4 Concerns about school attendance since the pandemic	18
Concerns outside of England	20
3 The importance of school attendance	22
Absence and attainment: 2018/19 academic year	22
4 Policy proposals on attendance	24
4.1 Guidance on attendance (2022-24)	24
Consultation and non-statutory guidance (2022-24)	24
Statutory guidance (2024)	25
4.2 The Schools Bill 2022	25

Abandonment of the Schools Bill	26
4.3 Attendance Action Alliance	27
4.4 Attendance mentors pilot	27
4.5 Attendance hubs	28
4.6 Other measures	29
4.7 School breakfast clubs	29
5 Education Committee report on persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils (2023)	31
5.1 Report	31
5.2 Government response	32

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 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 2023/24 academic year](#) to date was 7.2%. 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 2022/23](#), when the absence rate for any reason was 7.4%. This is slightly lower than the previous academic year, 2021/22, when it was 7.6%. However, it is higher than in the six years prior to the pandemic (when absence ranged between 4.5% and 4.8%).

[In 2022/23, 21.2% 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 2022/23, 36.5% of free school meal-eligible pupils

were persistently absent compared with 15.6% of pupils that were not eligible.

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 DfE data on the link between absence and attainment.

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 Statutory guidance

The Department for Education (DfE) has published statutory guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#). This guidance has been statutory since August 2024.

In May 2023, the DfE 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

Data dashboard for schools

The Department for Education has created a new [data dashboard](#) to enable schools to identify absence trends across different year groups and pupil characteristics, to help them target their support.³

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

³ Department for Education, [England's World Leading Attendance Drive Continues](#), 10 May 2024

1.3

When a child is not regularly attending school

The DfE 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.⁴

Parents may also be issued with a penalty notice – a fine – of £80 which rises to £160 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. A fine of £160 will also apply where a fine has previously been issued relating to the same child within a three-year period.⁵

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](#), amended the [Education \(Pupil Registration\) \(England\) Regulations 2006](#), to remove references to family holiday and extended leave as well as the statutory threshold of ten school days.⁶

Under the 2013 regulations, head teachers may not grant leave of absence during term-time unless there are exceptional circumstances. The new

⁴ GOV.UK, [School Attendance and Absence](#)

⁵ [The Education \(Penalty Notices\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2024](#)

⁶ 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.

regulations took effect from 1 September 2013. Background on the change is contained in the [DFE's Explanatory Memorandum on the 2013 regulations](#) (PDF).

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

Generally, a need or desire for a holiday or other absence for the purpose of leisure and recreation would not constitute an exceptional circumstance.⁷

Evidence for illness

The statutory guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#) includes guidance for schools on the evidence required to authorise absence for illness.

The guidance says schools should “only request reasonable medical evidence in cases where they need clarification to accurately record absence”:

Schools are not expected to routinely request that parents provide medical evidence to support illness absences... In the majority of cases a parent’s notification that their child is too ill to attend school will be that evidence and can be accepted without question or concern. Only where the school has genuine and reasonable doubt about the authenticity of the illness should medical evidence be requested to support the absence.

Where medical evidence is deemed necessary, schools should not be rigid about the form of evidence requested and should speak to the family about what evidence is available.⁸

Persistent and severe absence

The DfE’s statutory guidance on [Working together to improve 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

⁷ Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#), August 2024, p84

⁸ Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#), August 2024, p87

alternative form of educational provision where necessary to overcome the barriers to being in school.⁹

⁹ Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#), August 2024, p45

2

School absence rates data

School absence rates in England post-pandemic remain much higher than pre-pandemic. The proportion of pupils who miss 10% or more of their possible sessions ('persistently absent') or 50% or more of their possible sessions ('severely absent') has doubled since pre-pandemic.

There are geographical differences in absence rates, and rates also vary by pupil characteristic and school phase. They are higher for pupils eligible for free school meals, pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and pupils from certain ethnic groups.

2.1

Estimated attendance and absence rates for the 2024/25 academic year to date

The DfE has [published estimated attendance and absence rates in state-funded schools for the 2024/25 academic year to date](#) (1 September to 20 December 2024). This data is based on data submitted daily by schools to the DfE. Originally these returns were voluntary but are now compulsory. The figures remain provisional. They are not accredited national statistics, and schools may amend their attendance registers at a later date.

They are not directly comparable with final data published for previous academic years or terms, and care should also be taken comparing estimates for partial school years, with estimates for full school years.

At the time of writing:

- The estimated overall absence rate was 6.5%
- The absence rate was higher in state-funded secondary schools (8.0%) than in primary schools (5.2%). It was highest in state-funded special schools, at 12.7%.¹⁰

¹⁰ Department for Education, [Week 49 2024, Pupil attendance in schools](#), 9 January 2024, main text

2.2

Data for the autumn 2023 and spring 2024 terms

At the time of writing the most recent final absence rate data that has been published is for the [autumn 2023 and spring 2024 terms combined](#), when the overall absence rate was 6.9%. This is slightly lower than across the same terms in 2022/23 (when it was 7.3%), but remains higher than pre-pandemic. In the autumn 2019 and spring 2019 term, the overall absence rate was 4.5%.¹¹ The proportion of persistently and severely absent pupils has doubled since pre-pandemic.

The tables below provide additional information.

Absence rates remain higher than pre-pandemic

Autumn & spring terms, 2016/17 to 2023/24

	Overall	Covid-related
2016/17	4.5%	..
2017/18	4.7%	..
2018/19	4.5%	..
2019/20
2020/21	4.0%	29.4%
2021/22	7.4%	1.3%
2022/23	7.3%	..
2023/24	6.9%	..

Around a fifth of pupils are persistent absentees

Autumn & spring terms, 2016/17 to 2023/24

	Persistent absentees	Severe absentees
2016/17	10.7%	0.7%
2017/18	11.6%	0.7%
2018/19	10.5%	0.8%
2019/20
2020/21	10.4%	1.1%
2021/22	22.3%	1.5%
2022/23	21.2%	1.9%
2023/24	19.2%	2.1%

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 absence rates. “..” indicates data not collected or reported in this year

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring terms 2023/24, custom table](#)

¹¹ Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2023/24](#), 17 October 2024, main text, and [custom table](#)

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 at 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

2.3

Data from previous academic years

[The most recent Department for Education attendance statistics for a complete academic year is for 2022/23.](#)

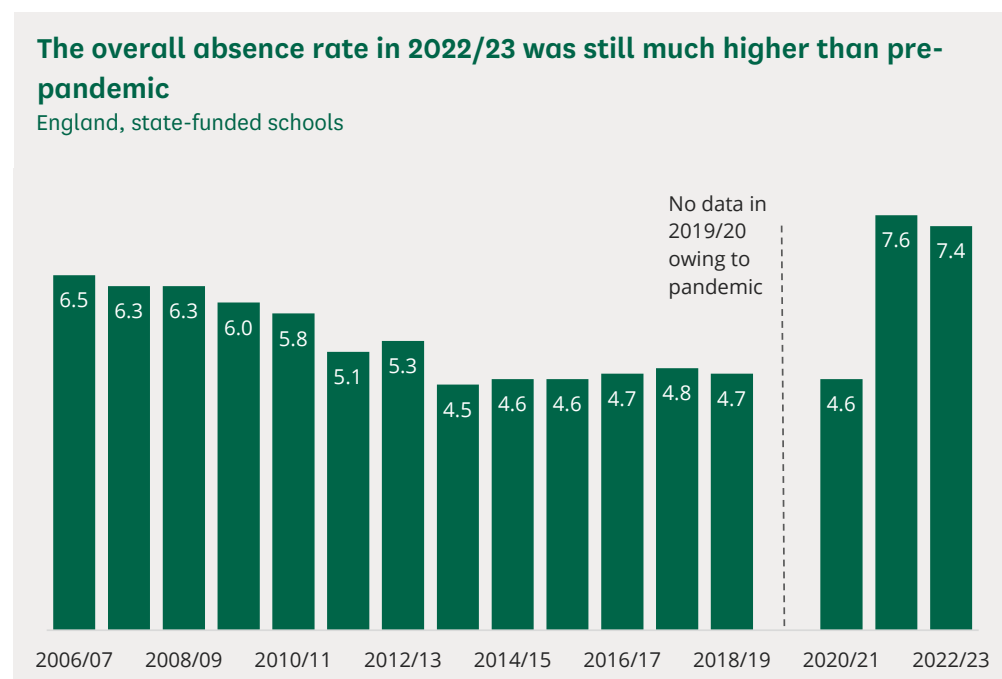
In 2022/23, 7.4% of state-funded school sessions were missed in England - a slightly lower figure than the previous academic year, 2021/22, where the overall absence rate was 7.6%.¹² However, the absence rate remained higher than in the years prior to the pandemic.¹³

The chart below shows that 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% absence rate (excluding absence for covid-related reasons) recorded in 2021/22 was the highest rate recorded since the series began in 2006/07.¹⁴

¹² Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2022/23](#), 10 May 2024, main text

¹³ As above

¹⁴ As above, [custom table](#)



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: 2022/23](#), 10 May 2024, [custom table](#)

Geographical variations

At the regional level, overall absence rates in 2022/23 were lowest in outer London, at 6.9%, and highest in the North East, at 7.8%. There was greater variation between local authority areas – with absence rates ranging from 5.9% in Trafford to 9.1% in Bradford.¹⁵

Overall absence rates vary by local authority

2022/23, state-funded schools

Highest absence rates		Lowest absence rates	
Bradford	9.1%	Trafford	5.9%
Middlesbrough	8.8%	Richmond upon Thames	5.9%
Newcastle upon Tyne	8.7%	Rutland	6.1%
Knowsley	8.6%	Kingston upon Thames	6.2%
City of Bristol	8.6%	Warrington	6.4%

Note: Absence expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon)

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2022/23](#), 10 May 2024, [custom table](#). Figures exclude City of London, which has only one state-funded school

¹⁵ As above, [custom table](#). Figures exclude City of London, which has only one state-funded school

Persistent absence

In 2022/23, 21.2% 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 over the course of a year). This equates to around 1.6 million pupils.¹⁶

The proportion of persistent absentees decreased slightly from the previous year (2021/22, when it stood at 22.5%) but remains much higher than pre-pandemic. It was 10.9% of pupils in 2018/19.

The proportion of persistently absent pupils is higher in 2022/23 than in 2018/19, across all types of school:

- 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 38.3% in 2022/23
- In state-funded primary schools the rate increased from 8.2% in 2018/19 to 16.2% in 2022/23
- In state-funded secondary schools the rate increased from 13.7% in 2018/19 to 26.5% in 2022/23.¹⁷

As noted above, pupils are defined as “severely absent” when they miss 50% or more of possible school sessions. In 2022/23, 2.0% of pupils were severely absent, which equates to around 150,000 pupils.¹⁸

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 proportion of pupils severely absent 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 6.2% in 2022/23
- In state-funded primary schools the rate increased from 0.4% in 2018/19 to 0.7% in 2021/22
- In state-funded secondary schools the rate more than doubled from 1.3% in 2018/19 to 3.4% in 2022/23.¹⁹

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 Traveller of

¹⁶ See Box 1 for more information about Covid-19 related absence. Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2022/23](#), 10 May 2024, main text

¹⁷ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2022/23](#), 10 May 2024, [custom table](#)

¹⁸ As above, [custom table](#)

¹⁹ As above, main text

Irish Heritage or Gypsy/Roma ethnic groups, have higher absence rates on average than their peers.

In 2022/23, pupils with complex SEN and who have an education, health, and care (EHC) plan had much higher absence rates than those with no identified SEN (12.3% compared to 6.6%). Pupils with less complex needs (receiving SEN support) had absence rates in between these two groups (10.2%).

As in previous years, pupils known to be eligible for FSM on average had higher absence rates than those not eligible. In 2022/23 the absence rate for eligible pupils was 11.1% compared with 6.1% for non-eligible pupils.²⁰

In 2022/23 the ethnic groups with the highest absence rates by far were pupils identified as Travellers of Irish Heritage, or who were Gypsy/Roma (22.9% and 18.2% respectively). Pupils identified as Chinese had the lowest absence rates (3.4%).²¹

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.

²⁰ As above, main text

²¹ As above, [custom table](#)

On average, pupils eligible for FSM or with SEN have higher absence rates

England, state-funded schools, 2022/23

	Absence rate	% persistent absentees	% severe absentees
England	7.4	21.2	2.0
Special educational needs			
EHC plan	12.3	36.0	5.9
SEN support	10.2	31.1	3.8
No identified SEN	6.6	18.4	1.2
Free school meals (FSM)			
Eligible	11.1	36.5	3.8
Not eligible	6.1	15.6	1.1
Major ethnic group			
Mixed	7.8	23.4	2.1
Asian	7.1	22.6	0.9
White	7.5	21.3	2.2
Traveller of Irish Heritage	22.9	72.0	15.0
Gypsy/ Roma	18.2	64.9	8.9
Black	5.4	14.5	1.2
Chinese	3.4	6.1	0.5
Any other ethnic group	7.2	22.2	1.5

Note: 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: 2022/23](#), updated 10 May 2024, [custom table](#)

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).²²

2.4 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.²³

Ofsted's then Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman said, 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 it's not an optional thing. It's not a 'when you feel like it, and not when you don't'.²⁴

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."²⁵

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'

²² Department for Education, [Persistent absence for unauthorised other reasons: who is at risk?](#), 18 May 2023

²³ London School of Economics, [Rising school absences: the post pandemic education divide](#), 17 October 2022

²⁴ Times, [Ofsted chief: Parents think school attendance is optional since pandemic](#), 14 December 2022

²⁵ Ofsted, [The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2021/22](#), December 2022, p11

who had not returned to school, and were at significant safeguarding risk as well as educational disadvantage.²⁶

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.²⁷

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 2018/19.²⁸

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
- Sanctions being seen as both irrelevant and antagonistic across all parent groups²⁹

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.³⁰

²⁶ Centre for Social Justice, [Lost but not forgotten: the reality of severe absence in schools post-lockdown](#), January 2022

²⁷ Financial Times, [Thousands of children aren’t turning up to school post-lockdown. Why?](#), 26 October 2022

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

²⁹ Public First, [Public First finds parental support for fulltime schooling has collapsed](#), 21 September 2023

³⁰ As above

In November 2023, the Youth Endowment Fund published a [report on young people's experiences of violence](#), which included survey findings that 20% of pupils said they'd skipped school due to feeling unsafe.³¹

The Institute of Education at UCL published a blog in January 2024, [Rising school absence: what do we know and what can we do?](#), which looked at different drivers of the problem, such as the cost of living crisis, mental health concerns, and parental attitudes.³²

Concerns outside of England

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

In November 2024, the Senedd research service noted that the percentage of Welsh pupils missing school is still [nearly double the level](#) it was before the Covid-19 pandemic.³³

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
- Education Scotland, [Improving Attendance in Scotland: Understanding the Issues](#), 28 November 2023
- STV, [Unauthorised holidays 'biggest contributor' to Scotland's falling school attendance rates](#), 19 March 2024

³¹ Youth Endowment Fund, [Children, violence and vulnerability 2023](#), November 2023

³² Institute of Education, [Rising school absence: what do we know and what can we do?](#), 16 January 2024

³³ Senedd research, [Not in school: pupil absence](#), 1 November 2024

- OECD, [Evaluating post-pandemic education policies and combatting student absenteeism beyond COVID-19](#), 1 May 2024 [discusses actions in countries including the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Canada]
- UTV, [View From Stormont: Fixing Northern Ireland's chronic school absence problem](#), 8 October 2024

3

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:³⁴

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%).³⁵

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

³⁴ Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

³⁵ 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 2018/19.³⁶

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%).³⁷

“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.

³⁶ Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

³⁷ Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

4 Policy proposals on attendance

4.1 Guidance on attendance (2022-24)

Consultation and non-statutory guidance (2022-24)

In January to February 2022, the then Conservative 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:

- Require schools to have an attendance policy, and have regard to statutory guidance on attendance
- Publish statutory guidance on the expectations of local authorities on school attendance
- Introduce a national framework for penalty notices for school absence
- 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.”³⁸

³⁸ 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](#).

Statutory guidance (2024)

A revised edition of the [Working together to improve school attendance](#) guidance came into force in August 2024. This guidance is now statutory.³⁹

The revised guidance reflects changed regulations to, for example, increase fines for school absence. It also updated expectations on schools and local authorities, such as on data sharing for schools and local authority responsibilities for cross-border pupils.⁴⁰

The guidance also introduces a national threshold for when schools should consider issuing a penalty notice, of 10 sessions of unauthorised absence in a rolling period of 10 school weeks.⁴¹ FFT Education Datalab has [estimated that around one in five pupils](#) might meet this threshold, with numbers higher in secondary school than primary.⁴²

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.⁴³

The Bill as introduced would have:

³⁹ Department for Education, [New regulations for schools in next stage of attendance drive](#), 29 February 2024

⁴⁰ Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#), February 2024 [applies from 19 August 2024]

⁴¹ As above, p56-57

⁴² FFT Datalab, [How many pupils are at risk of falling below the proposed new thresholds for attendance?](#), 4 March 2024

⁴³ Department for Education, [School Attendance: Schools Bill Factsheet](#) [PDF], May 2022

- 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 from June to 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:

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.⁴⁴

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.

Abandonment of the Schools 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.

⁴⁴ Department for Education, [School registers and national thresholds for legal intervention](#), August 2023, p29

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.⁴⁵

The bill did not proceed any further after Rishi Sunak became Prime Minister, and in December 2022 the then 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.⁴⁶

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

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.⁴⁷

4.3 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.⁴⁸

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.

4.4 Attendance mentors pilot

In September 2022, the then Conservative government launched an [attendance mentoring pilot project in Middlesbrough](#), funded with £5 million, to address low attendance.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Schools Week, [DfE scrambles to save key policies as schools bill set for axe](#), 19 October 2022

⁴⁶ Education Committee, [Oral evidence: Accountability hearings](#), 7 December 2022, HC 58, Q237

⁴⁷ Education Committee, [Oral evidence: Accountability hearings](#), 7 December 2022, HC 58, Q246

⁴⁸ Department for Education, [Education Secretary launches new attendance alliance](#), 9 December 2021

⁴⁹ Department for Education, [Attendance drive steps up as new term starts for millions of pupils](#), 2 September 2022

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.⁵⁰

In January 2024, a [further expansion was announced](#), with up to £15 million provided over three years for mentors to be trained in 10 further areas and working from September 2024.⁵¹

An [evaluation of year 1 of the pilot](#) in Middlesbrough was published in March 2024.⁵²

In October 2024, the new Labour government announced another [expansion of the scheme](#), with another £15 million in place to support pupils in ten areas.⁵³ It has been reported, however, that the programme will [cease in the existing pilot areas](#) later in 2024.⁵⁴

4.5 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.⁵⁵

[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.⁵⁶ A later announcement, in September 2023, [added a further four hubs](#), bringing the total to fourteen, aimed at supporting around 800 schools.⁵⁷

In January 2024, the [programme was expanded further](#). The Department for Education announced “18 new attendance hubs across 6 regions, bringing the total to 32 and... nearly 2,000 schools [to be] helped to tackle persistent absence.”⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Department for Education, [Government to tackle post pandemic absence rates with new support](#), 18 May 2023

⁵¹ Department for Education, [Major national drive to improve school attendance](#), 8 January 2024

⁵² Department for Education, [Evaluation of the attendance mentors pilot](#), 21 March 2024

⁵³ Department for Education, [Thousands of pupils receive support to boost school attendance](#), 11 October 2024

⁵⁴ Schools Week, [Attendance mentors move into ten new areas](#), 11 October 2024

⁵⁵ TES, [10 MATs lined up to run attendance hubs](#), 10 March 2023

⁵⁶ Department for Education, [Government to tackle post pandemic absence rates with new support](#), 18 May 2023

⁵⁷ Department for Education, [Thousands more pupils to receive support to improve attendance](#), 28 September 2023

⁵⁸ Department for Education, [Major national drive to improve school attendance](#), 8 January 2024

4.6 Other measures

A Department for Education blog (January 2024) on [How to improve your child's school attendance and where to get support](#) provides a useful summary of the government's approach, including:

- Introducing a new daily data tool which now makes it easier for school leaders and teachers to analyse attendance [...]
- Collecting evidence to inform future policy on children who are not registered at school or receiving suitable home education, to help us identify best practice to make sure all children are receiving an appropriate education
- Publishing a toolkit for schools, which provides tips and templates for communicating with parents and carers about attendance⁵⁹

In September 2023, the Chief Medical Officer published a [letter to school leaders on mild illness and school attendance](#) to highlight the circumstances in which children should or should not attend school.⁶⁰ A NHS webpage, [Is My Child too Ill for School?](#) is also available.⁶¹

4.7 School breakfast clubs

In January 2024, the then shadow Education Secretary, [Bridget Phillipson](#), [gave a speech to the Centre for Social Justice](#) think tank where she described reduced attendance levels as “the single biggest barrier to success for our children.”⁶²

Bridget Phillipson said that, if elected, Labour would use a range of measures to improve attendance, including breakfast clubs in all primary schools, and that the party would “bring counsellors into our secondary schools, and resource new community hubs outside them.”⁶³

The [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) currently before parliament would provide for breakfast clubs to be available before school begins at all state-funded primary schools in England, and ensure that the existing school food standards apply to all state-funded schools, including at breakfast.

⁵⁹ Department for Education, [How to improve your child's school attendance and where to get support](#), 3 January 2024

⁶⁰ Department for Education, [Letter to school leaders on mild illness and school attendance](#), 5 September 2023

⁶¹ Department of Health and Social Care, [Is My Child Too Ill for School?](#), April 2021

⁶² Bridget Phillipson, [Bridget Phillipson speaks at the Centre for Social Justice](#), 9 January 2024

⁶³ As above

The Library briefing on the [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-25](#) provides more detailed information on the bill's provisions.

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

5.1 Report

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.⁶⁴

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

⁶⁴ Education Committee, [Tackle school absence crisis with better mental health and SEND support and urgent legislation, says Education Committee](#), 27 September 2023

- Make an assessment of the eligibility criteria for Free School Meals and adjust if necessary, ensuring all children in poverty are in receipt
- 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 attendance⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷

5.2

Government response

The [government responded to the report](#) in December 2023.⁶⁸ The response included that:

- The government planned to introduce regulations to mandate participation in the attendance dashboard by September 2024

⁶⁵ Education Committee, [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), Seventh Report of Session 2022-23, HC 970, 27 September 2023, p62-67

⁶⁶ Education Committee, [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), Seventh Report of Session 2022-23, HC 970, 27 September 2023, p66

⁶⁷ As above

⁶⁸ Education Committee, [School absence crisis: Education Committee publishes Govt's response to report](#), 7 December 2023

- That it “remained committed” to introducing a register of children not in school
- That it agreed attendance guidance should become statutory
- That it did not plan to change the eligibility criteria to receive free school meals
- The government did not commit to the ‘enrichment guarantee’ the committee recommended, but highlighted its National Youth Guarantee that “by 2025, every young person in England will have access to regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home, and volunteering opportunities, supported by a three year investment of over £500 million”
- The government highlighted reforms in its [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan](#) to strengthen inclusion⁶⁹
- The government said it was working with the Department of Health and Social Care to provide information on when children should attend school, including a published [letter to school leaders on mild illness and school attendance](#)⁷⁰
- The response highlighted the government’s programmes to support low-income families, such as the Pupil Premium⁷¹

⁶⁹ See House of Commons Library, [The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan](#), 23 March 2023, for an overview of the reforms

⁷⁰ Department for Education, [Letter to school leaders on mild illness and school attendance](#), 5 September 2023

⁷¹ Education Committee, [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils: Government response to the Committee’s Seventh Report](#), First Special Report of Session 2023–24, HC 368, 6 December 2023

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe or scan the code below:



 commonslibrary.parliament.uk

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)