

Inquiry/Rapid Review Group Proposed Scope

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| Title | Review of School Attendance in Buckinghamshire |
| Select Committee Chairman | CLlr Julie Ward, Children’s and Education Select Committee |
| Scope reviewed and signed-off by | Kelly Sutherland, Scrutiny Manager |
| Author | Katie Dover, Senior Scrutiny Officer |
| Date | January 2024 |
| What is the problem that is trying to be solved? | <p>Good school attendance rates have been shown to be key to children’s success at school. Evidence from the gov.uk website shows that primary school children who do <i>not</i> reach the expected standard in reading, writing and maths miss on average an extra 4 days of school compared to those who did attend at better levels.</p> <p>Non-attendance has increased significantly following the covid pandemic from between 4 to 5% nationally pre pandemic to 7.6% in the academic year 2021-2022 and 7.3 % in the 2022-2023 academic year. The 2022-2023 figures include 1.56 million children who were persistently absent i.e. they missed at least 10% of their lessons. The statistics for children with SEND tend to be higher.</p> <p>The government guidance “Working Together to Improve School Attendance” published in May 2022 and applied from September 2022 gave details of the importance of high levels of school attendance, and the expectations now placed on both schools and local authorities to address the issue of low attendance. Research has shown that attendance clearly impacts on levels of attainment at key stages 2 and 4 with highest achievement levels found in the highest attendance groups. Dame Rachel De Souza, Children’s Commissioner for England has called for urgent action to address absenteeism.</p> <p>The Commission for Social Reform October 2023 noted that 1 in 3 children were absent from school in England each day during the 2022-2023 academic year.</p> <p>A House of Commons Inquiry noted that absence rates were higher for children with SEND.</p> <p>Statutory guidance documents are available on parental responsibility measures, children missing education, supporting pupils with medical conditions at school, suspensions and exclusions and alternative provision which all support the Government guidance regarding attendance.</p> |

The guidance says that “the barriers to accessing education are wide and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individual pupils and families. The foundation of securing good attendance is that school is a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils want to be and are keen and ready to learn.”

Securing good attendance is not an isolated issue, and effective practices for improvement will involve close interaction with schools’ efforts on curriculum, behaviour, bullying, special educational needs support, pastoral and mental health and wellbeing, and effective use of resources, including pupil premium.

Impact of Covid-19

There were many challenges for pupils following the covid pandemic which contributed to school absences, and contributing factors included anxiety issues, parents or pupils with specific health needs and the challenge of some pupils becoming disengaged from education during the pandemic. Views of parents of school sometimes played a role also. (Guardian article September 2023)

Impact of Increased child poverty

The Child Poverty Action Group gave evidence to the House of Commons Inquiry stating that often school policies made it too expensive for children of low-income families to attend classes due to issues such as cost of uniform, transport issues, punctuality policies not taking account of caring responsibilities and cost of special days e.g. dressing up.

The group noted that adverse childhood experiences such as mental illness, domestic violence, neglect, parental separation and verbal abuse could also contribute to poor school attendance as this may lead to poor self-esteem and lack of confidence in children and young people.

Local Context in Buckinghamshire

Buckinghamshire Council’s school attendance function is delivered through the County Attendance Team, part of the Education Entitlement Team. The team is a small countywide service established to meet the minimum duties required of local authorities under the previous school attendance framework.

Prior to the release of ‘Working together to improve school attendance’ the school attendance team in Buckinghamshire was already the smallest when comparing establishment FTE per 10,000 pupils across other local authorities in the south-east, resulting in a deficit starting position when responding to

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| | <p>the new burdens. Based on staffing estimates provided by local authorities in the south-east in July 2023 Buckinghamshire continues to have the smallest school attendance team in comparison with other areas.</p> <p>The DfE estimates in its new burdens assessment: School attendance, improving the consistency of support: new burdens assessment – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) that the average number of attendance staff required to resource the new local authority school attendance delivery model is 8 FTE or 1 FTE per 5,490 pupils. In Buckinghamshire we have 1 FTE County Attendance Officer per 39,432 pupils.</p> <p>These new burdens come unfunded. Senior officers continue to make representation to the DfE on behalf of Buckinghamshire and via the ADCS (Association of Directors of Childrens Services) group regarding the lack of funding from central government to deliver these additional duties.</p> <p>The DfE publishes national pupil absence statistics that come from the termly school census. There are 3 pupil absence releases: autumn term (published in May), combined autumn and spring term release (published in October) and full year (published in March).</p> <p>The Buckinghamshire schools' persistent absence rate (attendance 90% or below) for the 2022 autumn term was 23.4%. The figure for the South-East was 24.5% and for England 24.2%.</p> <p>The Buckinghamshire schools' persistent absence figure for the 2021/2022 academic year was 22.9%. The figure for the South-East was 22.0% and for England 22.5%.</p> <p>This shows a 12% increase in the persistent absentee rate in Buckinghamshire from the 2020/2021 academic year when it was 10.9%. (11.4% for the South-East and 12.1% for England). This is reflective of the increase nationally in non-attendance post-pandemic.</p> |
| <p>What might the Inquiry Achieve?</p> | <p>It is proposed to hold evidence gathering sessions between March and end of April which would conclude with recommendations being developed and reported to Cabinet and other key partners. The Select Committee will be receiving a report on Attendance Duties in March and evidence gathering for this review will commence thereafter.</p> <p>The in-depth review/ rapid review group would look to achieve the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An understanding of the current picture of school attendance across Buckinghamshire including an analysis of school attendance data and trends for non-attendance in Buckinghamshire schools. |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To understand the impact of the Covid pandemic and other factors impacting on non-attendance in Buckinghamshire schools. • An independent and “critical friend” review of the issues surrounding the increase in non-attendance in Buckinghamshire • Explore the current school practices in Buckinghamshire (including interventions outlined in Working Together to Improve School Attendance), looking at variations in attendance across the county and how schools are employing different approaches to raise attendance levels • An understanding of the resources available in the Council’s school attendance team and how effectively they are drawing on other front line service teams to meet the requirements for local authorities in the government guidance • Collate examples of good practice from particular schools where attendance levels have increased above the national average since the pandemic and how these schools are applying the key areas of setting high expectations, communicating those expectations, challenging and supporting, having the appropriate staff in place and recording and analysing data accurately. • Overall aim – to Identify areas for development |
| Is the issue of significance to Buckinghamshire as a whole? | Yes – as outlined above |
| Is this topic within the remit of the Select Committee? | Yes – the Select Committee’s remit covers issues relating to Children’s Services. |
| What work is underway already on this issue? | <p>Enrolled in recent DfE facilitated peer-to-peer (other similar local authorities) action learning sets.</p> <p>Signed up to DfE Attendance Adviser support sessions which provide access to at least 3 days of free support over the next academic year. This includes a local authority self-assessment to review progress made in meeting the requirements of the new attendance guidance.</p> <p>A countywide communication campaign on the importance of good school attendance is at development stage.</p> |
| Are there any key changes that might impact on this issue? | <p>The COVID pandemic has and continues to impact the attendance of children and young people at school.</p> <p>An increase in pupils experiencing social, emotional or mental health issues that impact their attendance at school, also referred to as Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA).</p> <p>SEND and Alternative Provision Green Paper.</p> |
| What are the key timing considerations? | Review to commence after the presentation of the report on new attendance duties at the March committee meeting. |
| Who are the key stakeholders & decision-makers? | <p>Cabinet Member for Education and Children’s Services</p> <p>Corporate Director for Children’s Services</p> <p>Service Director Education</p> |

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| | Schools School age-pupils and their parents/ carers County Attendance Team Other Education Teams relevant to CME, EHE, EBSA, SEND |
| What is outside the scope? | School exclusions, NEET, EHE |

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