



# Report to Children's and Education Select Committee

<b>Date:</b>	<b>7 March 2024</b>
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Updated school attendance duties and the implications for Buckinghamshire</b>
<b>Relevant councillor(s):</b>	Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services
<b>Author and/or contact officer:</b>	Gareth Drawmer, Head of Achievement and Learning
<b>Ward(s) affected:</b>	All
<b>Recommendations:</b>	<b>For Select Committee to note the content of the report and the priorities for the next 12 months.</b>

## 1. Executive summary

### 1.1 This paper:

- summarises the new requirements as set out in the DfE school attendance guidance 'Working together to improve school attendance' and the implications for Buckinghamshire given that these are new unfunded burdens. Whilst currently non-statutory, it is anticipated that the guidance will become statutory once the parliamentary calendar allows.
- provides data on pupil absence in Buckinghamshire alongside national comparators.
- describes our key priorities for the next 12 months.

## 2. Background

- 2.1 On 6 May 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) released new non-statutory guidance: [Working together to improve school attendance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) to help schools, trusts, governing bodies, and local authorities maintain high levels of school attendance and improve consistency of support. The policy paper outlines the vision, principles, and actions for enhancing

the collaboration and coordination among different agencies and stakeholders to reduce school absenteeism and improve educational outcomes. The document also aims to provide a clear and consistent framework for all parties involved in supporting children and young people to attend school regularly and achieve their full potential.

- 2.2 The DfE has reaffirmed its expectations that school attendance reforms including the implementation of 'Working together to improve school attendance' remain unaffected by the withdrawal of the previous Schools Bill. It is anticipated that the guidance will become statutory once the parliamentary calendar allows. Under general law principles local authorities are still legally obliged to apply non-statutory guidance when exercising its functions.
- 2.3 Collectively, it is the biggest ever set of changes to the attendance system and the DfE expects local authorities to meet the requirements of the new guidance as far as possible for academic year 2022-2023. The requirement to have in place a School Attendance Support Team (see below for further information) should be available to all schools free of charge no later than September 2023.
- 2.4 There is an increased emphasis on school attendance within the Inspection Local Authorities Children's Services (ILACS) and SEND inspection frameworks, as well as the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan. There is a risk of adverse outcomes from inspections if local authorities are found to not have the adequate resources necessary to implement attendance duties effectively and consistently.
- 2.5 The significant school attendance changes include:
  - Clarity of expectations: Schools, trusts and local authorities will all have clearly defined statutory roles for the first time, set out in a clear table of responsibilities.
  - Earlier intervention: Schools will have legal responsibilities to proactively improve attendance for the first time (beyond existing requirements to record accurately) underpinned by timelier sharing of attendance data – (currently 168 Buckinghamshire Schools are sharing their daily attendance data with DfE as part of voluntary return. We expect this to become mandatory at the point Working Together to Improve School Attendance guidance becomes statutory).
  - Support first: All pupils and parents no matter where they live in the country will have clear expectations from their school, be informed about their child's attendance and have access to early intervention and support first before any legal action if it becomes problematic.
  - Targeted whole family support: Local authority attendance teams will work in tandem with early help to provide a whole-family response with a single assessment, plan, and lead practitioner.
  - Independent schools: Data will be collected for the first time, and will receive the same support from local authorities.

2.6 Local authorities are now expected to rigorously track local attendance data and devise a strategic approach that:

- recognises the importance of attendance and understand how attendance improvement is everyone's business.
- makes attendance a key focus of all frontline council services.
- uses attendance data from all schools in the area to identify the pupil cohorts, schools, and neighbourhoods/towns on which to focus efforts.
- uses this analysis to set a clear vision for improving attendance across the geographical area, underpinned by tangible short and longer term aims and priorities for improving attendance for particular cohorts of pupils identified.
- all appropriate frontline operational staff in attendance, associated teams and local partners (including health and police) must understand their role in delivering this strategy and working together.
- evaluate and review this strategy regularly.

2.7 The DfE has not prescribed what form or delivery model School Attendance teams must follow, but these teams are expected to provide the following 4 core functions free of charge to all schools in their area:

i. Communication and advice

- Provide every school with a named point of contact in the Attendance Support Team (AST) to support with queries and advice.
- Make clear on how schools, the AST and other partners should work together to provide voluntary and/or formal support for pupils and families.
- Offer opportunities for all schools in the area to share effective practice.

ii. Targeting Support Meetings

- Hold a termly Targeting Support Meeting with every school in their area to identify pupils who need support with removing barriers to attendance.
- Assist schools to identify areas to focus on in their school policies through analysing their data.
- If local authorities already have regular meetings with schools (such as 'team around the school' meetings) the school, AST, and other relevant partners may join this meeting as the targeting support meetings rather than having a separate meeting.

iii. Multi-disciplinary support for families

- Work jointly with all local partners to offer multi-agency support to pupils who need it, including acting as lead practitioner where the best placed service is an LA one.
- Build effective data sharing opportunities with different partners as part of the overall data sharing/ governance arrangements to ensure a joined-up approach.

- Ensure staff are appropriately trained to understand the importance of attendance, and foster a collaborative culture across early help services
- An integrated management structure between the local authority's School Attendance Support team and other early help services.

iv. Legal intervention

- Work with schools to formalise support or take forward legal action where voluntary support does not work.
- Understand and make use of the full range of legal intervention measures as appropriate, including parental responsibility measures.

2.8 To build on the progress made by the extension of the role of the virtual school head ([Virtual school head role extension](#)), local authorities are also expected to:

- Set aspirational targets for attendance of pupils with a social worker.
- Secure the regular attendance of pupils looked-after as their corporate parent.
- Provide support and advice to previously looked-after children.
- Monitor and improve the attendance of children with a social worker through their Virtual School

2.9 To facilitate this, schools are expected to inform a pupil's social worker if there are unexplained absences from school.

### **The importance of school attendance and the national context**

2.10 Improving school attendance is everyone's business. Children with poor school attendance are at significant risk of underachieving, being victims of harm, exploitation or radicalisation and becoming NEET (not in education, employment, or training) later in life. Schools and partners should work with pupils and parents to remove any barriers to attendance by building strong and trusting relationships and working together to put the right support in place.

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

2.12 Where parents decide to have their child registered at school, they have an additional legal duty to ensure their child attends that school regularly.

2.13 The COVID pandemic has and continues to impact the attendance of children and young people at school. DfE statistics show that the number of children who missed 50% or more possible education sessions in 2021/22 was almost double pre-pandemic levels at 110,000 compared to 57,000 in 2018/19. The reasons for the increase in non-attendance are varied and wide ranging and include:



- a decline in the emotional wellbeing and resilience of both children and their parent/carers;
- an increase in pupils experiencing social, emotional or mental health issues that are affecting attendance;
- changes in family routines and working patterns;
- attitudes and perceptions of education given that it was deemed acceptable for children and young people to miss out on significant 'in school' time during the pandemic as well as recent school closures due to teacher strike action;
- an increase in families taking holidays in term time, which is exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.

2.14 As before the threshold for Persistent Absence is defined by the Department for Education as 90%. However, as part of the new school attendance framework a new category of severe absence has been defined for those pupils who are absent from school more than they are present (those missing 50% or more of school).

2.15 These severely absent pupils may find it more difficult to be in school or face bigger barriers to their regular attendance and as such are likely to need more intensive support across a range of partners. A concerted effort is therefore needed across all relevant services to prioritise them. Under the requirements of the new guidance all partners should work together to make this group the top priority for support – this 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. According to DfE experimental data (of which 199 Buckinghamshire schools share their attendance data), there were 1,160 pupils with an attendance of 50% or below as at 25th January 2024.

2.16 If all avenues of support have been facilitated by schools, local authorities, and other partners, and the appropriate educational support or placements (e.g., an education, health, and care plan) have been provided but severe absence for unauthorised reasons continues, it is likely to constitute neglect.

2.17 Most recently the DfE has expanded its plans to support pupils to drive up attendance rates in schools. These plans include the expansion of the successful sector-led Attendance Hubs programme with nine new lead hub schools, alongside the expansion of Attendance Mentors in areas of the country with the highest levels of pupil absence.

### **What does the guidance mean for schools?**

2.18 All schools have a continuing responsibility to proactively manage and improve attendance across their school community.

2.19 Attendance is the essential foundation to positive outcomes for all pupils and should therefore be seen as everyone's responsibility in school. The most effective schools consistently promote the benefits of good attendance at school, set high expectations for every pupil, communicate those expectations clearly and consistently to pupils and parents, systematically analyse their data to identify patterns to target their improvement efforts, and work effectively with the local authority and other local partners to overcome barriers to attendance. To manage and improve attendance effectively, all schools are expected to:

- Have robust day to day processes for recording, monitoring and following up attendance.
- Analyse their data regularly and prioritise families to work with to understand and address the reasons for absence, including any in-school barriers to attendance.
- Build strong relationships with families, listen to and understand barriers to attendance and work with families to provide access to support first before any sanctions.
- Work with local partners to remove out of school barriers and act as the lead professional where they are the best placed service.
- Work jointly with the local authority on an agreed approach/ plan for every severely absent pupil <50% attendance.
- Develop strategies for cohorts of pupils with poorer attendance than their peers (including vulnerable groups).
- Inform a pupil's social worker if they have an unexplained absence or leave the school roll.

### **Buckinghamshire Context**

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

2.21 As these new burdens have been introduced without additional funding from central government, the service's ability to fulfil the local authority's statutory duty will be hindered due to the capacity of the current team. Senior officers continue to make representation to the DfE and via the Association of Directors of Children's Services group regarding the lack of funding from central government to deliver additional duties. In the November 2023, [ADCS Policy Paper: A future vision for the education system](#), it recommends that "The DfE should develop a coherent, long-term and appropriately funded vision and strategy for a 21st century education system for schools, early years and FE settings in consultation with key stakeholders, one which

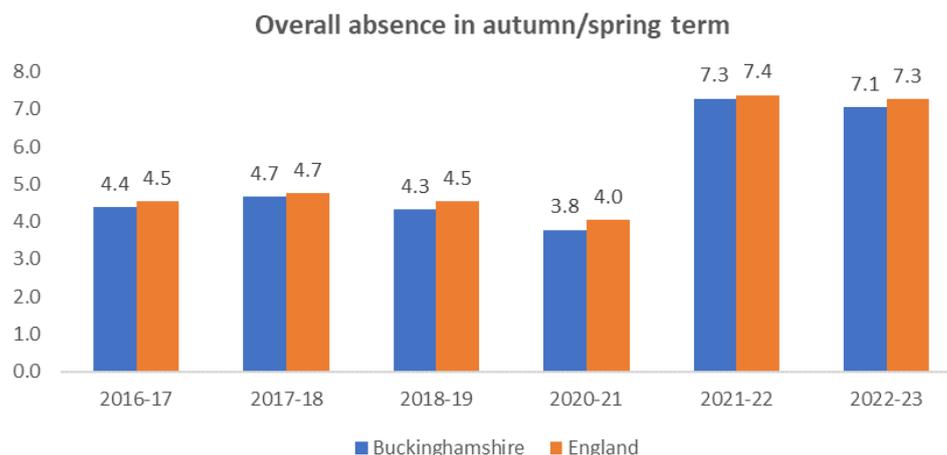
recognises the importance of place, the role of the LA, prioritises equality of access and the interests of vulnerable learners.”

- 2.22 The County Attendance Team advise and provide guidance to schools, families, and other professionals on children with irregular school attendance. The team:
- provides allocated officers supporting schools in addressing irregular school attendance;
  - oversees support for pupils unable to attend school due to medical need;
  - is responsible for issuing penalty notices for irregular school attendance and unauthorised leave of absence;
  - undertakes the Local Authority statutory responsibility to prosecute parents for irregular school attendance.
- 2.23 The Countywide Attendance Team has ceased charging for core attendance support in line with expectations of the new guidance that core functions should be available to all schools free of charge.
- 2.24 The Buckinghamshire schools’ persistent absence rate for the 2022 autumn term was 23.4%, as reported in the DfE publication Pupil absence in schools in England. The figure for the South-East was 24.5% and for England 24.2%.
- 2.25 This shows a 0.3% decrease in the persistent absentee rate in Buckinghamshire from 2021 autumn term when it was 23.7%. (23.4% for the South-East and 23.5% for England).

	State funded primary schools		State funded secondary schools		State funded Special Schools		State funded primary, secondary, and special schools	
	Persistent Absence	Severe Absence	Persistent Absence	Severe Absence	Persistent Absence	Severe Absence	Persistent Absence	Severe Absence
<b>Buckinghamshire</b>	21.3	0.7	25.2	2.3	39.0	4.3	23.4	1.5
<b>South-East</b>	20.9	0.7	28.0	2.8	41.2	5.8	24.5	1.8
<b>England</b>	20.9	0.7	27.4	2.8	40.9	5.8	24.2	1.7

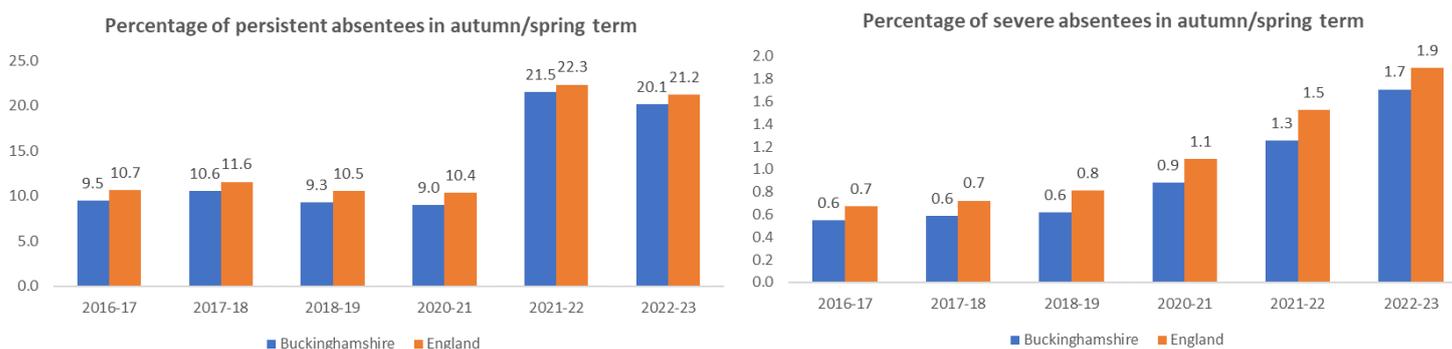
- 2.26 For comparison, the Buckinghamshire schools’ persistent absence figure for the 2021/2022 academic year was 22.9%. The figure for the South-East was 22.0% and for England 22.5%. This shows a 12% increase in the persistent absentee rate in Buckinghamshire from the 2020/2021 academic year when it was 10.9%. (11.4% for the South-East and 12.1% for England).

2.27 The DfE provides three pupil absence releases, autumn term (published in May), combined autumn and spring term release (published in October) and full year (published in March).



2.28 Overall absence in autumn and spring terms in Buckinghamshire is consistently below the national figure. Overall absence decreases from 7.3% in autumn/spring term 2021-22 to 7.1% in the same period in 2022-23.

2.29 Both the percentage of persistent absentees (absent for 10% or more of sessions) and severe absentees (absent for 50% or more of sessions) are below national averages. The percentage of persistent absentees has fallen from 2021-22 to 2022-23, while the percentage of severe absentees has increased.



### 3. Next steps and Priorities for the next 12 months

- A rapid review of school attendance to be undertaken by the Children’s and Education Select Committee, following the presentation of this report at the March Select Committee meeting. Evidence gathering sessions are provisionally planned between March and end of April, which would conclude with recommendations being developed and reported to Cabinet and other key partners.

- To establish a local area school attendance strategy that would involve senior officers and lead members, that makes school attendance a key focus for all frontline services and prioritise pupils, pupil cohorts and schools to provide support to and focus efforts to unblock area wide barriers to attendance.
- Continued participation in the DfE Attendance Advisor support programme including an upcoming multi-agency deep-dive review of school attendance and absence in Buckinghamshire.

