

Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

Date: 12th January 2023

Agenda No:

Title of Report:	School Attendance – GCC Duties
Purpose of Report:	<p>To provide members of the committee with a picture of school attendance across Gloucestershire and how it compares to the national picture.</p> <p>To provide a summary of the proposed changes to national attendance policy, the impact that we expect them to have locally and the next steps in implementing them.</p>
Recommendations:	For information and discussion
Officer(s) Contact:	Philip Haslett, Head of Education Strategy and Inclusion
Key Risks	Delays or failure to implement proposed changes to the national guidance could result in a breach of our statutory responsibilities to monitor and support school attendance.

1. Context

Why is attendance important?

- 1.1. It goes without saying that consistent attendance at school is essential for children and young people to achieve the best outcomes, both in terms of their educational achievement and their wider social and emotional development.
- 1.2. However, it is also a protective factor. Persistent absenteeism from school is often an indicator of wider concerns for the child or young person. This could be related to family issues, mental health concerns or other external factors or risks including exploitation.
- 1.3. It is the school's responsibility to tackle attendance issues and in the main they do so very well. However, there are circumstances where tackling persistent absence requires specialist support from services such as Early Help, Inclusion or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.
- 1.4. As such the local authority monitors attendance data closely and use persistent absenteeism as a key indicator in identifying potentially vulnerable children and young people. However, it has been challenging to gain a full, real-time, picture of attendance across the county, as it has required all schools to share their attendance data with us through daily data share.

How is data captured and reported?

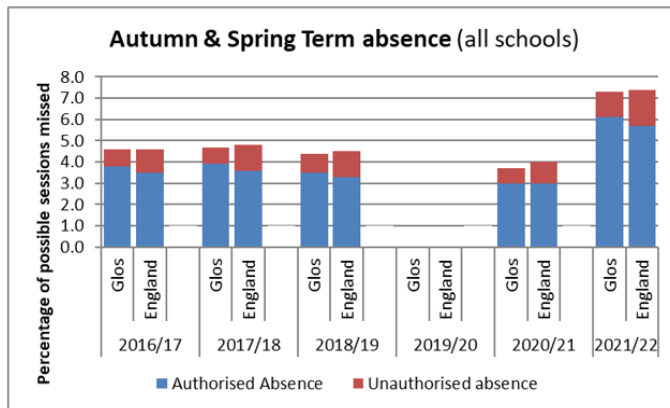
- 1.5. The Local Authority has always aimed to have a real time view of attendance across the county by capturing data through a daily upload from schools. This was more straightforward when all schools were LA maintained. Since the introduction of the academy programme, it has become more challenging with different systems being used by schools and the need for more complex data sharing agreements to be in place to manage the transfer of data, which has not always been achieved.
- 1.6. National data has historically been captured three times a year at the January, May and October census points. This meant that national reporting on attendance has operated a term in arrears. Whilst this is useful to monitor trends, real time reporting enables us to identify any concerns across the system much earlier.
- 1.7. This issue was exposed during the global pandemic, which highlighted that the existing systems were not effective in enabling local authorities and the DfE, at a time of emergency, to capture a real time local and national picture of attendance for specific cohorts and groups in schools.
- 1.8. Of course, the pandemic would always have required some additional reporting that wasn't tracked in existing systems, including children whose parents were key workers, or deemed vulnerable or extremely clinically vulnerable etc. However, rather than being in a position to adapt existing reporting systems, a whole new system had to be implemented to require schools to report attendance data directly to the DfE.
- 1.9. Consequently, the DfE have launched a [new system](#) for all schools to sign up to. This ensures school attendance data is available using pupil attendance data received twice a day from school management information systems from that are sharing their data with DfE. This is currently being run on a trial basis, but all schools, including independent schools, are expected to sign up to the data sharing system.

1.10. Currently, data is available for 236 Gloucestershire schools, with overall attendance and persistent and severe absence indicators.

What does attendance look like in Gloucestershire?

1.11. Levels of attendance in Gloucestershire are very good. They have historically been better than the national picture, as shown in fig.1 below.

Fig.1



1.12. Rates of persistent absence in Gloucestershire (percentage of pupils missing ten per cent or more of their possible sessions) have also been consistently lower than the national data. However, following the pandemic, both national and local data unsurprisingly, saw steep increases in Autumn & Spring terms 2021/22. During this period 2021/22 21.0% of pupils in Gloucestershire were classified as persistently absent (compared to 22.3% in England), see fig.2 below.

Fig.2 (based on data from the trial outlined above)

End of month snapshot of school attendance in Gloucestershire for Academic Year to date (2022/23)				
	No. schools signed up	% of schools	Overall attendance %	% Persistently absent pupils
Primary	184	75.41%	92.90%	22.50%
Secondary	36	87.80%	91.80%	20.71%
Special	9	81.82%	88.60%	33.94%
APS	1	25.00%	46.70%	84.42%
TOTAL	230	76.67%	92.30%	21.83%

source: View Your Education Data portal, data from schools sharing their data with DfE via WONDE as at 06/12/2022

2. National Policy: The White Paper and The Schools Bill

2.1. In addition to the changes to reporting outlined above the DfE launched the White Paper '[Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#)'. The paper outlines a successful period, prior to the pandemic, where we saw significantly improving levels of attendance nationally. However, rates of attendance have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. As such, improving attendance was a key element of both the Education White paper and the subsequent School's Bill.

2.2. Whilst the Schools' Bill has recently been withdrawn following its third reading at the House of Lords, the Secretary of State has made it clear that they remain committed to the key tenets of the White Paper and in particular those that focus on attendance. The following is an extract from a letter received from the School Attendance Division on the 16th December 2022:

“Safeguarding children and young people remains of the highest priority for the Department and for education and childcare settings. The Schools Bill contained some important measures to strengthen this system, and we remain committed to

progressing the attendance measures, alongside other measures, when parliamentary time allows. The government therefore still intends to make the new attendance guidance 'working together to improve school attendance' statutory. This will happen as soon as possible, but no earlier than September 2023.

We expect local authorities to continue to implement the changes introduced through the new school attendance guidance. As with all government guidance, local authorities are legally obliged to take the new school attendance guidance into account in exercising their functions (such as when making decisions about their attendance service and on school attendance matters)”

- 2.3. It is clear that the DfE had been considering changes to attendance regulations for quite some time, as a consultation outlining proposed changes was released before the White paper, running from the 25th January 2022 to the 28th January 2022. The consultation can be viewed [here](#) and the subsequent response published in May 2022 [here](#).

What are the proposed changes?

- 2.4. The objective of the changes outlined in the White Paper, and consultation is to reduce pupil absence rates by improving the consistency of attendance support and management provided by schools, trusts, governing bodies and local authorities to families across England by focussing better, more targeted multi-agency support on pupils who need it most before poor attendance becomes deep-rooted.
- 2.5. Being in school and ready to learn is crucial to pupils' attainment, wellbeing, and wider life chances. 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. Yet considerable variation in attendance support and management exists between schools and between local authorities across England.
- 2.6. In short, the DfE is looking for; more consistency in the approach that schools and local authorities take to managing and improving attendance; greater emphasis on early identification and intervention; and a stronger focus on providing support to children and young people and their families, rather than immediate recourse to a punitive fine based system. To achieve this the DfE have outlined the following key actions/priorities:
- **Clarity of expectation:** 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 and the publication of an attendance policy.
 - **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:** Attendance teams in LAs 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 LAs.

What is the expectation of Local Authorities?

- 2.7. Even though we already have good oversight of attendance, with the majority of schools sharing attendance data on a daily basis, and the existing strong levels of attendance in Gloucestershire, we welcome the policy focus on this area. However, it does present some challenges that will need to be addressed. A key focus of the changes is the development of a minimum attendance support offer that local authorities are required to provide. Key elements of this are:
- Track local attendance data to devise a strategic approach to attendance that prioritises the pupils, pupil cohorts and schools on which to focus improvement efforts
 - Have an attendance support team which provides the following core functions free of charge to all schools (regardless of school type):
 - Communication and advice: regularly bring schools together to communicate messages, provide advice and share best practice between schools and trusts within the area
 - Targeting support meetings: hold regular conversations with schools, using their attendance data to identify pupils and cohorts at risk of poor attendance and agreeing target actions and access to services for those pupils - where they are in place, this could be achieved through existing team around the school meetings to avoid duplication
 - Multi-disciplinary support for families: provide access to early help support workers to work intensively with families to provide practical whole-family support where needed to tackle the causes of absenteeism and unblock the barriers to attendance
 - Legal intervention: take forward attendance legal intervention (using the full range of parental responsibility measures) where voluntary support has not been successful or engaged with
 - Monitor and improve the attendance of children with a social worker through their Virtual School
- 2.8. In the main GCC Education are well placed to respond to the expectations set out above. However, the requirements of the school attendance support team are a change to our existing practice, which can't be delivered without a repurposing of existing resource, or additional resourcing. The addition of independent schools to this requirement is also a significant extension of our role.
- 2.9. The DfE have undertaken a [burdens assessment](#) to identify whether additional resources are required to deliver the proposed changes. The assessment suggested that nationally the changes would generate savings of £274,743. They also say that *“we know that local authorities that are currently running a service which meets the expectations in the new statutory guidance use a portion of their supporting families funding allocation to support their attendance service”*.
- 2.10. The system has been operating with local autonomy for some years, so whilst this might be the case in some local authorities, it is not the case in all of them. As stated above a key focus of this work is to create national consistency, local

variation in practice should not be a surprise. It is disappointing and challenging to fund the changes required without any additional or transitional funding. This is an issue that the ADCS are in discussion with the DfE about.

3. Conclusion and next steps

- 3.1. The proposed move to a national data and reporting system will strengthen local data reporting, as even with best endeavours, we still do not have all schools reporting through LA systems.
- 3.2. The focus on earlier intervention and less punitive (more restorative) approaches to managing persistent and severe attendance issues is a really positive refocussing of national policy. It recognises that persistent absence from school is often an indicator of broader issues for the child or young person which will not be addressed by punitive action, and which can often make issues worse. This reflects and will help reinforce the approach that we already take as a local authority and the [guidance](#) we provide to schools.
- 3.3. In relation to the statutory and non-statutory expectations placed on the local authority as part of the new guidance, we are developing plans to implement them from September 2023. With regard specifically to the statutory requirements, even though the Schools' Bill has been withdrawn, the DfE and Secretary of State remain committed to them and, as noted above we need to progress our plans to deliver them.
- 3.4. Therefore, the Inclusion Service will develop proposals on how we might adapt our existing practice to align with the proposals. This will need to be done alongside the Early Help team, who also have responsibilities associated to attendance and manage the Supporting Families Funding, outlined in the burdens' assessment.
- 3.5. We will also be supported by the DfE who are providing an Attendance Advisor in the new year. We are working with other Local Authorities, through the peer-to-peer network set up by the DfE, and through three targeted LA network groups that have a particular focus on specific challenges for; large rural authorities; authorities that provide statutory only services; and developing and implementing an LA wide strategy. The three groups will continue to meet throughout the next 18 months, working together with DfE advisors to share good practice, develop provision and feedback to the DfE.
- 3.6. Overall, we are well placed to respond to the expectations set out in the new guidance, but, without additional funding or resource, it will require adjustments to the way that both the Inclusion and Early Help services monitor and support attendance.