

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

26 April 2023

School Attendance Performance Report Academic Year 2021-2022

Recommendation

That the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee Considers and comments on the report on school attendance levels in Warwickshire for the academic year 2021-2022 and the actions being taken to support improvements in school attendance.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The Department for Education (DfE) published pupil attendance and absence rates for academic year 2021/22 on March 16th, 2023.
- 1.2. This report provides the Scrutiny Committee with an overview of Warwickshire's pupil attendance and absence data for academic year 2021/22.
- 1.3. Following the disruption to education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic there has been a significant increase in pupil absence at both a national and local level. Part of this increase is due to a rise in authorised absences caused by illnesses and positive coronavirus cases. There has also been a reported rise in mental health issues, resulting in a growth in emotionally based school avoidance or anxiety (EBSA). This has also been reflected nationally by an increase in the numbers of parents choosing to withdraw their children from school to electively home educate with the main reason given for the decision being emotional/mental health issues.
- 1.4. In 2021/22 Warwickshire's overall absence rate increased to 8.1% from 4.7% in 2020/21, which was higher than the national average at 7.6%. Both Warwickshire's and the national average overall absence rates are higher than the previous academic year (2020/21).
- 1.5. Warwickshire's persistent absence rate, the percentage of pupils who missed 10% or more sessions, doubled from 11.9% in 2020/21 to 23.7% in 2021/22, which was slightly higher than the national persistent absence rate of 22.5%.
- 1.6. Due to the increases in absence levels, school attendance is now a high priority both nationally and locally. The DfE issued new guidance in May 2022; 'Working together to improve school attendance' for maintained schools, academies, independent schools, and local authorities. The guidance emphasises that improving school attendance is not a single agency responsibility and that many barriers to attendance can be removed with the right support.

- 1.7. In-line with the new DfE guidance, Warwickshire County Council's approach to improving pupil attendance is changing. The new attendance focused multi-agency approach builds on Warwickshire's Early Help pathway to change, working together with schools and local partners to help maintain high levels of attendance, identify the root cause of absence, and help to remove any barriers to attendance.

2. Background

- 2.1 The law entitles every child of compulsory school age (aged 5-16) to an efficient, full-time education suitable to their age, aptitude, ability and any special educational need they may have.
- 2.2 It is the legal responsibility of every parent/carer to make sure their child receives an education either by attendance at a school or by education otherwise, such as elective home education.
- 2.3 Where parents/carers decide to register their child at a school, they have a legal duty to ensure their regular attendance.
- 2.4 It is a schools' responsibility to accurately complete the admission and attendance registers, promote and support good attendance, reduce absences, and have effective day to day processes in place to follow up any absences.
- 2.5 Schools can offer families support via 'Early Help' to help address the barriers to attendance.
- 2.6 In recognition of the increase in the number of young people who are experiencing mental health difficulties, there are a number of local and national initiatives that schools can access, such as the Mental Health in Schools Teams that are based in many schools in Warwickshire offering support to children and young people.
- 2.7 Where support is not working, being engaged with, or appropriate, local authorities work with schools to provide formal options, including parenting contracts, education supervision orders or enforce attendance through legal intervention.
- 2.8 Local Authority duties also include issuing sanctions, including fixed penalty notices to parents/carers who fail to ensure their child's regular attendance at school in line with the local authorities' non-school attendance code of conduct¹. Parents can also be prosecuted under s444 of the Education Act 1996.

¹ ['Non-school Attendance and Penalty Notices Code of Conduct'](#).

2.9 The DfE release fixed point pupil absence statistical data three times a year:

- Autumn term data (released May),
- Autumn and Spring term data (released October)
- Full school year data (released March)

This data is open to public view at a national, regional, Local Authority and school level. Ofsted utilise this data in their visits to a school.

2.10 Attendance data is presented and published nationally as non-attendance (absence) rather than total attendance.

2.11 School attendance data is not available for academic year 2019/20, as the DfE did not collate a full data set due to COVID-19

2.12 The DfE published the full academic year 2021/22 data on 16 March 2023², as outlined below and in more detail in Appendix 1.

2.13 Attendance data is lagged which presents many challenges. To overcome some of these challenges the DfE have introduced a new attendance data system, this will enable all schools to share their live attendance data with the DfE and their respective local authority. Using the new system is not yet a statutory requirement, however, 78% of schools nationally and 82% in Warwickshire have already signed up (as of March 2023).

Changes to Local Authority and other agencies responsibilities.

2.14 In May 2022, the DfE published 'Working together to improve school attendance'³, which replaced all previous guidance on school attendance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools, and local authorities with the exception of the existing statutory guidance on parental responsibility measures. This guidance is currently non-statutory; however, the Secretary of State for Education has committed to the guidance becoming statutory (no earlier than September 2023).

2.15 The guidance sets out expectations about how local authorities should work with others to maximise school attendance. The guidance reinforces that to successfully treat the root cause of absence and to remove barriers to attendance, it requires schools, trusts, governing bodies, local authorities and local partners to work together. Securing good attendance cannot therefore be seen in isolation, and effective practices for improvement will involve close interaction with schools on curriculum, behaviour, prevention of bullying, special educational needs support, pastoral and mental health and wellbeing, and effective use of resources, including pupil premium.

² [Statistics: pupil attendance and absence - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-attendance-and-absence)

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance>

2.16 The expectation on local authorities includes:

- rigorously track local attendance data,
- have a School Attendance Support Team,
- communication and advice,
- targeting Support Meetings,
- multi-disciplinary support for families,
- legal intervention,
- monitor and improve the attendance of children with a social worker through their Virtual School.

2.17 Warwickshire's new approach to supporting schools and families to maintain high levels of school attendance builds on the existing multi-agency 'Early Help Pathway to Change' and is in the process of being rolled out to all schools and academies in Warwickshire.

2.18 The guidance also places new expectations on schools, trusts, governing bodies, and parents/carers.

2.19 The expectation on schools includes:

- to develop and maintain a whole school culture that promotes the benefits of high attendance,
- have a clear school attendance policy which all staff, pupils and parents understand,
- accurately complete admissions and attendance registers and have effective day to day processes in place to follow-up absence,
- regularly monitor and analyse attendance and absence data to identify pupils or cohorts that require support with their attendance and put effective strategies in place,
- build strong relationships with families, listen to, and understand barriers to attendance and work with families to remove them,
- share information and work together with other schools in the area, the local authority and other partners when absence is at risk of becoming persistent or severe.

2.20 The expectation on parents/carers includes:

- to ensure their child attends every day unless a statutory reason applies,
- only request leave of absence in exceptional circumstances, book medical appointments around the school day, if possible,
- work with their child's school and local authority to help understand their child's barriers to attendance,
- proactively engage in support offered to prevent the need for more formal support or legal intervention.

- 2.21 To support the transition to meet the new expectations, The DfE have appointed Attendance Advisers to enable every local authority access to at least three days of free support over the next two academic years. Warwickshire has been allocated an adviser and had an introductory meeting in December 2022.

3. 2021/22 Data- Key Headlines.

- 3.1 In 2021/22, 75,735 compulsory school age pupils (aged 5 to 16) were enrolled in Warwickshire schools (not including independent schools).
- 3.2 The overall pupil absence rate in Warwickshire has increased from 4.7% in 2020/21 to 8.1% in 2021/22 and is higher than national average rate at 7.6%. Absence levels were in-line with national and other comparators prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, since COVID-19, the gap in attendance rates in Warwickshire and those nationally has increased (Appendix 1, table 1).
- 3.3 Throughout the academic year pupil absence in Warwickshire fluctuated, absence was lower in the Autumn term at 7.6%, it increased across the Spring term to 8.6% and then slightly reduced across the Summer term to 8.4%.
- 3.4 Warwickshire is now ranked 128th out of 152 LAs for its overall absence, compared with 91st in 2020/21 and 73rd in 2018/2019.
- 3.5 Pupil absence levels vary across the five districts in Warwickshire. North Warwickshire reported the highest level of overall absence at 9.6%, compared to 7.4% in Warwick district (Appendix 1, table 3).
- 3.6 Absence levels in Warwickshire secondary schools was 10% which was one percentage point higher than the national average at 9.0%. Absence rates in primary schools was 6.5% which is in-line with the national average at 6.3% and absence rates in special schools was 13.8% which is in-line with the national average of 13.2%.
- 3.7 Children with Special Educational Needs, including those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and those identified as SEN Support had a higher rate of absence than their peers who do not have SEND. Absence rates for this group have increased both nationally and in Warwickshire, however, the gap for both groups has widened (Appendix 1 table 5).
- 3.8 The absence levels of Children in Care are not published as part of this data set.
- 3.9 Persistent absence (the percentage of pupils who missed 10% or more sessions) also increased to 23.7% from 11.9% the previous year. This trend was also mirrored nationally, increasing from 12.1% to 22.6% in 2021/22.
- 3.10 Warwickshire's reporting of authorised absence for illness has doubled from 2.4% in 2020/21 to 5.1% in 2021/22 and is higher than the national average of 4.4%.

- 3.11 Warwickshire’s reporting of absence without authorisation has increased from 0.7% in 2018/19 to 1.4% in 2021/22, which suggests schools are increasing their challenge to absence.
- 3.12 Further analysis is taking place to fully understand why Warwickshire’s absence levels have been impacted more than national and why recovery from Covid in Warwickshire has been slower. A number of local targeted initiatives have been implemented to support with improving attendance, for example, the development of an Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) pathway, the Lost in School⁴ project and targeted work with WCC’s School Improvement team to help support schools with recovery from COVID. Whilst there have been some reported improvements in reducing absences the full impact of these initiatives will not be available until the end of the 2022/23 academic year.

4. Environmental Implications

None.

5. Financial Implications

The County Council has agreed an additional allocation of £335k from April 2023 to support the delivery of the new attendance model.

6. Supporting Information

None.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1: - Warwickshire’s School Attendance data – academic year 2021/22

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⁴ <https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/news/article/2860/new-pilot-set-to-improve-outcomes-for-children-with-special-educational-needs-in-warwickshire>

The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Local Member(s): N/A as the report covers the whole county.

Other members: Councillor Kaur, Councillor Dahmash, Councillor Roodhouse, Councillor Brown.