

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

19 September 2023

School Attendance Update Report

Recommendation

That the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers and comments on the information provided in the report.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Based on a request at April's committee meeting, the purpose of this report is to provide the Scrutiny Committee with further analysis of pupil absences in Warwickshire and identify what actions are being taken to support improvements in school attendance.
- 1.2 This report is based on Warwickshire's pupil attendance and absence data for Autumn term, academic year 2022/23 (published by the Department for Education on 18 May 2023). Absence data for the full academic year will not be published until March 2024. A further report will be presented to this committee in April 2024 reporting on last academic years attendance data.
- 1.3 The landscape around school attendance data is transforming, schools are being asked to share their daily attendance data via the Department for Education (DfE's) attendance data system, known as Wonde. As of June 2023, 82% nationally and 87% of Warwickshire's schools are using Wonde. For the first time since academisation, local authorities will have access to all school's attendance and absence data in a timely manner. It introduces a considerable opportunity for local authorities to pro-actively identify attendance challenges at a county, area, school, phase, year group and pupil level.
- 1.4 School absence levels post pandemic nationally and across Warwickshire are still high, schools are reporting a change in societal/parental behaviours and attitudes to school attendance post Covid.
- 1.5 This report highlights some of the challenges and barriers children, young people and their families are facing with regards to securing regular school attendance. It also identifies some of the factors contributing to high levels of pupil absence in Warwickshire. However, this is a complex landscape that is specific to individual pupils and families. There is no one reason why children and young people do not attend school, it varies by individual, and is usually caused by a combination of various factors and their interaction, rather than a single cause.

2. Background

- 2.1 School attendance is not only important for academic achievement and wellbeing but to support the holistic development of young people as citizens within their community.
- 2.2 Due to the increases in absence levels across the country, school attendance is a high priority both nationally and locally. The Department for Education (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 from the most appropriate agencies. Following this, several other key pieces of guidance have been published that reference improving school attendance.
- 2.3 The 'Working together to improve school attendance' guidance has not yet been made statutory, as planned. It is understood it remains a priority for the Department for Education and will be pursued at the next available opportunity.
- 2.4 In-line with the DfE's guidance 'Working together to improve school attendance', Warwickshire County Council's approach to improving pupil attendance has changed. 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.
- 2.5 Since January 2022, schools have been asked to share their daily attendance data via the Department for Education (DfE's) attendance data system, known as Wonde. Although it is not yet a statutory requirement for schools to share their data via Wonde, as of June 2023, 82% nationally and 87% in Warwickshire are doing so.
- 2.6 With the introduction of Wonde, for the first time since academisation, local authorities will have access to all school's attendance and absence data in a timely manner (albeit with a 2-week lag). It introduces a considerable opportunity for local authorities to pro-actively identify attendance challenges at a county, area, school, phase, year group and pupil level.

3. Deep Dive into Absence Data (Autumn Term in academic year 2022-2023).

- 3.1 The data used in this report is based on Warwickshire's pupil attendance and absence data for Autumn term, academic year 2022/23 (published by the Department for Education on 18 May 2023), as this is the most recent data set local authorities currently have access to.
- 3.2 In addition, information gathered as part of the new multi-agency approach to improving attendance has informed this report.

- 3.3 During Autumn term 2022, Warwickshire's overall absence rate slightly increased by 0.24 percentage points to 7.78%. However, nationally absence rates also increased by 0.63 percentage points to 7.53%. Therefore, the gap between Warwickshire and the national overall absence rate during Autumn term 2022, has started to reduce (Appendix 1, table 1).
- 3.4 Warwickshire's persistent absence (PA) rate, (the percentage of pupils who missed 10% or more sessions), has reduced from 26.24% in Autumn 2021, to 23.55% in Autumn 2022. As a result, Warwickshire PA levels are now 0.92 percentage points below the National Average. (Appendix 1, table 2)
- 3.5 Warwickshire's severe absence (SA) rate, (the percentage of pupils who missed 50% or more sessions) was 2.15%, which is 0.41 percentage points above the 'National Average'. (Appendix 1, table 3). This group is the primary focus of the new DfE guidance, as it indicates there is likely to be considerable barriers to attendance which will require multi-agency and specialist support to improve. As part of WCC's new attendance delivery model, all SA pupils have been identified, barriers to attendance assessed and additional support identified. Where support is not in place or there are additional barriers, work will be undertaken to engage appropriate agencies.
- 3.6 By school type, the absence rates across the Autumn term were:
- Primary schools - 6.1%, the national average was 6.3%.
 - Secondary schools - 9.5%, the national average at 8.8%.
 - Special schools - 13.8%, the national average was 13.4%.
 - Absence levels were at the lowest in Year Groups 3 (5.70%) and 4 (4.91%).
 - Absence levels were at the highest in Year 11 (11.09%) compared to only 6.78% in Year 7. This trend of higher absence levels in Year 11 is also seen nationally.
- 3.7 Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), including those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and those identified as 'SEN Support' had a higher rate of absence, persistent absence and severe absence than their peers who do not have SEND. The absence rates for children with SEND have increased both nationally and in Warwickshire, (Appendix 1 table 6, 7 & 8). The reasons behind this can often be complex, but it is important that children and young people with SEND are not unnecessarily disadvantaged by irregular attendance. A supportive, proactive engagement with parents/carers to find out what the issues are can create the opportunity for a co-produced solution.
- 3.8 The absence rate for pupils who were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) was 12.70% compared to 6.41% for pupils who were not eligible for FSM, which matches the National trend. However, in Warwickshire pupils eligible for FSM absence levels are 1.70 percentage points higher compared to the national figure. There is currently no clear evidence to explain why this cohort have higher absence levels, but this will be explored at the new targeting support meetings with schools.

- 3.9 There was no significant difference in the overall absence rate of boys (7.87%) compared to girls (7.69%).
- 3.10 There are multiple reasons for non-attendance, the main reasons identified (using absence codes) in Autumn term 2022 was: illness, other unauthorised absence, leave of absence and medical appointments.
- 3.11 Warwickshire's reporting of authorised absence for illness during the Autumn term 2022 decreased from 5.14% in 2021 to 4.98%. This remains slightly above the national average of 4.46%. It is not clear from the data why Warwickshire's authorised absence levels were higher than national; this will continue to be explored at the termly conversations with schools.
- 3.12 Since the COVID pandemic there has been a reported rise in mental health issues resulting in a growth in emotionally based school avoidance. The prime reason provided by parents who are withdrawing their children for elective home education is currently emotional/mental health reasons.
- 3.13 Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA, a term referring to reduced or non-attendance at school) recognises that this avoidance has its root in emotional, mental health or well-being issues. It doesn't just mean not attending school entirely, school staff have also observed pupils not going to their classroom, not staying in class, not attending some lessons, and avoiding some spaces. EBSA is a complex issue and may require more targeted interventions to support attendance. From September 2023, WCC as part of the SEND & Inclusion Change Programme, continues to develop an EBSA pathway of support for schools and settings. This is being developed by services across Education, Health and Care, with input from parent/carers and young people.
- 3.14 Warwickshire's reporting of unauthorised absence, has increased from 1.1% in Autumn 2021 to 1.37% in Autumn 2022, and remains lower than the national figure of 1.43%. (Appendix 1 table 8 & 9), which suggests schools are continuing to challenge absences.
- 3.15 Pupil absence levels varied across the five districts in Warwickshire during Autumn 2022, North Warwickshire reported the highest level of overall absence at 8.92%, followed by Nuneaton and Bedworth at 8.70%, compared to 7.02% in Stratford district (Appendix 1, table 4 & 5).
- 3.16 There are various challenges across the county and as such targeted initiatives have been introduced for example: Levelling Up, Nuneaton Education Strategy, Social Workers in Schools, Mental Health in Schools Support Team, and the Lost at School project.
- 3.17 Schools in Warwickshire continue to support families and tackle the issues that might cause some children to miss school. 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 relationship between the school and family is key to both understanding and resolving attendance issues. The local authority provides additional support and escalation where appropriate.

4. Strategies to support reducing absence.

4.1 Schools and families are being supported by different teams and services across the local authority to understand the challenges and to help to remove the barriers to raising attendance.

4.2 During the summer term the following activities have been undertaken:

- All schools in Warwickshire were RAG rated based on four criteria (overall absence data, persistent absence data, severely absence data and overall Ofsted judgement this has been compared to national and phase level data). This has enabled the Attendance team to prioritise support.
- All maintained schools in Warwickshire were invited to complete and return an 'Attendance Self-Evaluation' framework. This will be extended to all Academy schools from September 2023.
- Academy schools in Nuneaton & Bedworth and North Warwickshire districts with higher pupil absence rates were also invited to complete the 'Attendance Self-Evaluation' framework.
- In line with the 'Working together' guidance, commenced 'Targeting Support Meetings' for maintained schools across the county in April 2023. Meetings for academy schools will begin from September 2023, and meetings will be prioritised based on available data.
- Placed an Attendance Casework Officer with the Virtual School for children with a social worker, to support raising the profile and improving outcomes for vulnerable children.
- Have mapped Attendance Caseworkers to the locality areas of the Targeted Support Officers, to enable greater collaboration and opportunities to meet jointly with schools.
- Links have been established with the Social Workers in Schools project who work with school leaders and families to support and identify the issues leading to non-attendance.
- The Attendance Service Team have supported the Headteacher Coach and Designated Safeguarding Leads network to ensure joined up messaging.
- Key collaborative working partnerships have been established across multiple agencies and teams including Education, Attendance Service, Youth Justice Service, Children's Social Care, Educational Psychologists, SEND & Inclusion, Early Help, Parent/Carer forums.
- Part of the national plan to expand mental health services for children, young people and their families, includes support offered by the 'Mental in Schools Support Team'. 32 schools across Nuneaton/ Bedworth and North Warwickshire are part of the project supporting mental health in education settings including anxiety.
- Offering the right support, at the right time, including the offer of Early Help Pathway to Change and interventions from Family Support Workers.

5. Environmental Implications

5.1 None.

6. Financial Implications

6.1 The County Council has agreed an additional allocation of £335k from April 2023 and £54k from April 2024 to support the delivery of the new attendance model.

7. Supporting Information

7.1 None

8. Background papers

8.1 Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Report, 26/04/2022, School Attendance Performance Report Academic Year 2021-2022

9. Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1 -School Attendance Update

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

Local Member(s): This is a County wide report

Other members: Chairs and spokes of Children and Young People OSC