

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

26 November 2024

School Attendance in Warwickshire

Recommendation(s)

That the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers and comments on:

1. the changes taking place in Warwickshire to support school attendance and those opting for elective home education; and
2. the latest data published by the Department for Education (DfE), in relation to attendance and the wider education landscape

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an analysis of school attendance in Warwickshire and to outline the approaches and actions that are being taken to support schools and families. In addition, this report provides an overview of the increasing numbers of children that are currently being electively home educated in Warwickshire.
- 1.2 Warwickshire follows the national trend of increased school absence following the wider impact of COVID, although the recent trend data does show some recovery. As of Friday 18th October 2024, the DfE's attendance data system (known as Wonde) showed that Warwickshire's current overall attendance is 94.1% for compulsory school age children. This compared to the national figure of was 94.5%.
- 1.3 The latest published data from the DfE (Autumn 2023/Spring 2024 School Census data) shows that there has been a slight improvement in Warwickshire's school attendance figures, as school absence dropped by 0.3 percentage points from 7.6% to 7.3% (lower is better) compared to the same period in 2022/2023. The national figures also reduced by 0.3 percentage points, from 7.28% to 6.93% between 2022/23 and 2023/24.
- 1.4 In 2024 government introduced new statutory guidance known as 'Working together to improve school attendance 2024'. Following the introduction of the guidance, the Council has considered its approach to attendance and

implemented changes that reflect the revised guidance. Improving attendance is everyone's responsibility and the DfE believes that improving school attendance should be built on the existing offer of Early Help, which is well established in Warwickshire.

- 1.5 There are many and often multiple factors that can impact on school attendance which may include anxiety, ill health, unmet SEND need, unidentified SEND need, lack of reasonable adjustments, pupil/parent mental health, cost of living crisis/financial problems, housing issues, difficult relationships between schools and parents, young carer responsibilities, etc. In recognition of the complex reasons behind school absence, the Council together with partner agencies offers a multi-agency support first approach.
- 1.6 Unauthorised Leave of Absence (holidays in term time) figures are increasing in Warwickshire which reflects the national picture. Generally, the DfE does not consider a need or desire for a holiday or other absence for the purpose of leisure and recreation to be an exceptional circumstance. Although the increase in unauthorised leave of absence is concerning, this is exacerbated by the higher cost of taking holidays during the school holidays. 1694 penalty notices were issued in relation to unauthorised leave of absence during the academic year 2023-24. This compares to 1253 issued in 2022-23.
- 1.7 The numbers of pupils who are being withdrawn for Elective Home Education continues to rise which also reflects the national trend. WCC was notified of 163 pupils being withdrawn in September 2024 alone. The total number of children recorded as being electively home educated for the academic year 2023-24 was 1608. This compares to 1504 for 2022-23.

2. Financial Implications

- 2.1 None arising directly from this report.
- 2.2 In 2024/25 the core budget for delivering the statutory functions relating to school attendance is £877,857. In addition, the service receives revenue from penalty notices (which varies each year) which is used to administer the system, pay for legal costs and fund attendance support.

3. Environmental Implication

- 3.1 None

4. Supporting Information

- 4.1 The DfE recognise that the wider effects of COVID have had a significant impact on school attendance nationally and that this continues to be a challenge. This national impact is reflected in Warwickshire's attendance data

and is a cause for concern in ensuring that young people receive the education that they need and deserve. It also adds to resource and financial pressures for the Council.

4.2 The context to some of the challenges around school attendance post pandemic has been considered by a number of bodies and includes:

- “an increase in children experiencing emotional and mental health issues”. (*The Health Foundation, Covid and the Road Ahead, Feb 22*).
- a “seismic shift in parental attitudes to school attendance that is going to take a monumental, multi-service effort to change”. (*Public First Report, September 2023*)
- “acute rise in numbers of children and young people at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation” (*Children’s Commissioner’s ‘Hidden in Plain Sight report Nov 22*).

4.3 As a result of the national increase in school absence, the DfE developed and published the school attendance reforms 2024. These include:

- **Revised statutory guidance on “working together to improve school attendance”** This guidance was implemented from 19 August 2024 and focuses on managing attendance by:
 - Preventing patterns of absence from developing by promoting good attendance.
 - Intervening early by using data to spot patterns of absence before they become persistent and working with families to remove the barriers to attendance.
 - Targeting support for persistent and severe absentees with all local partners working together to reengage pupils.
- **The Education (Information About Individual Pupils) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2024** to mandate the sharing of attendance data by all schools with the DfE and local authorities.
- **The School Attendance (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2024** to modernise school attendance and admission registers to improve consistency and accuracy of attendance recording.
- **The appointment of a new National Attendance Ambassador**, whose key roles including disseminating effective practice to improve school attendance with schools and trusts and working with the DfE’s regional teams to support strong attendance regionally and nationally.
- **A new National Framework for Penalty Notices for absence**, laying regulations to improve consistency of attendance enforcement across the country from September 2024.

4.4 The new statutory national approach recognises that for many children and families, a support first, solution focussed approach is required to improve

their attendance or to enable them to access suitable provision. In Warwickshire this includes assessing the barriers to attendance, identifying the reasons for absence, and taking steps to remove those barriers to ensure a sustainable improvement.

- 4.5 To meet the new requirements, the Council has launched a new delivery model, based on the DfE specifications, which includes:
- Rigorous tracking of attendance data to support a more strategic approach to attendance that prioritises pupils, pupil cohorts and schools.
 - Providing all Warwickshire Schools with a named attendance worker to advise and support on children who are struggling to attend.
 - Providing all Warwickshire Schools with a ‘targeting support meeting’ to support them not only with pupil level advice, but also whole school and systemic approaches. The frequency depends on the requirements of the school.
 - Facilitating multi-disciplinary support for families including providing 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.
 - Taking legal intervention, using the full range of parental responsibility measures where voluntary support has not been successful or engaged with.
 - Monitoring and improving the attendance of children with a social worker through the Virtual School.
- 4.6 Moving forward and in conjunction with the award of pathfinder status, the Council is developing a Families First approach which will bring closer working between services and stakeholders to provide better targeted support for those families who require additional help.
- 4.7 One example of the new approach to improving attendance is a project being developed in North Warwickshire between the Council, a Secondary School, Early Help teams, Targeted Youth Support, the Emotionally School Based Avoidance project and the Attendance Service. This project, ‘Working Together to Improve School Attendance in North Warwickshire’, will trial a concentrated approach to providing support for the school, parents and pupils, delivered by a range of professionals and based on the needs of each individual situation. This project is being funded by North Warwickshire Borough Council’s UK Shared Prosperity Fund to the value of £42,060.
- 4.8 The new DfE attendance system (known as Wonde), became a requirement for all schools to use from September 2024. This the first time since academisation that local authorities will have access to attendance and absence data for all schools in a timely manner. It represents a considerable opportunity for local authorities to pro-actively identify attendance challenges at a county, area, school, phase, year group and pupil level.

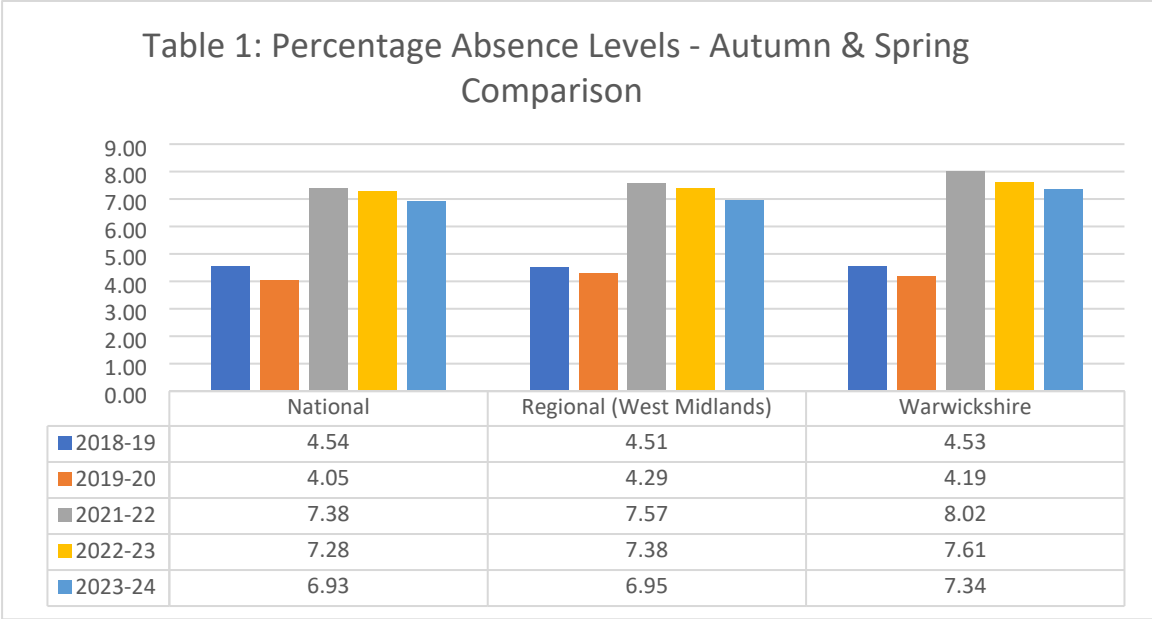
4.9 As of Friday 18th October 2024, the DfE Wonde attendance data system showed that Warwickshire’s overall attendance is 94.1%. Wonde reports that the National figure for that period was 94.5%. Therefore, attendance in Warwickshire is slightly below the national average. It is intended that the revised approach to attendance outlined in this report will increase attendance.

4.10 The DfE is continuing to collect school census data, which provides comparable data. The drawback is that when released the data is five months lagged. The latest census data was released on 17th October 2024 and covers the Autumn and Spring terms, for academic year 2023-24. The next data release is due in March 2025 for the full academic year 2023-24.

4.11 **Table 1** shows the 5-year absence trend, which follows the same pattern nationally, regionally and in Warwickshire. Specifically, it shows:

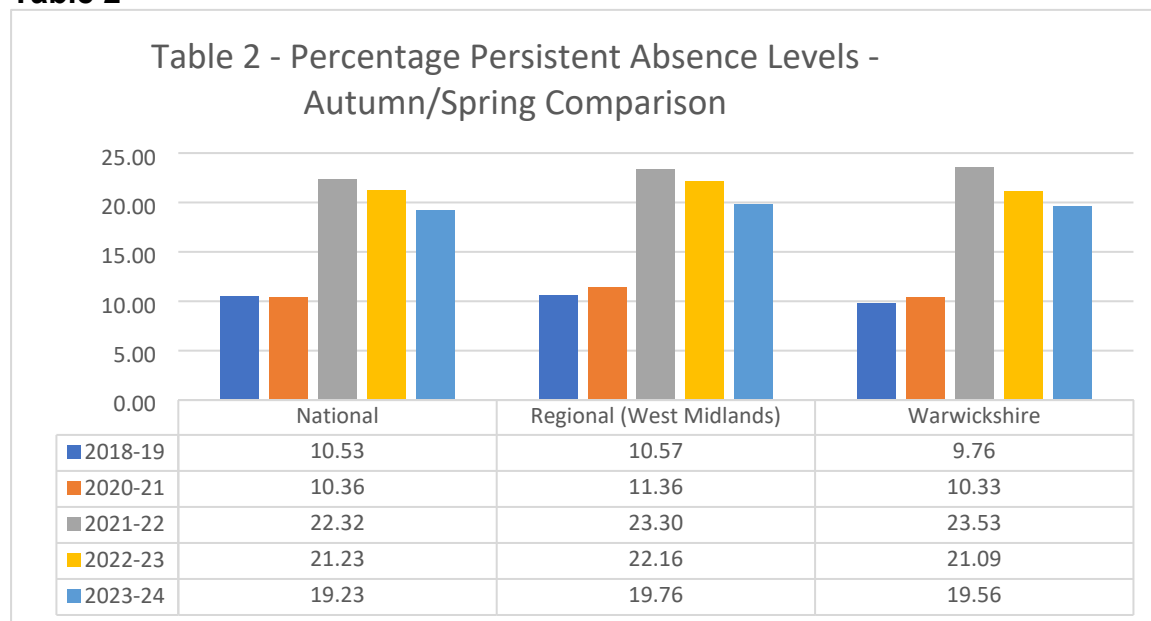
- a) Overall national absence figures reduced nationally by 0.3 percentage points, from 7.28% to 6.93% between 2022/23 and 2023/24 (lower is better).
- b) This trend was also seen in Warwickshire with absence falling by 0.3 percentage points from 7.61% to 7.34% between 2022/23 and 2023/24 (based on 78,103 compulsory school age enrolments).

Table 1



4.12 **Table 2** shows that in 2023/24 Warwickshire had a further decrease in persistent absence (pupils with 10% or more absence) of 1.53 percentage points compared to the previous year, which is in line with the national figure.

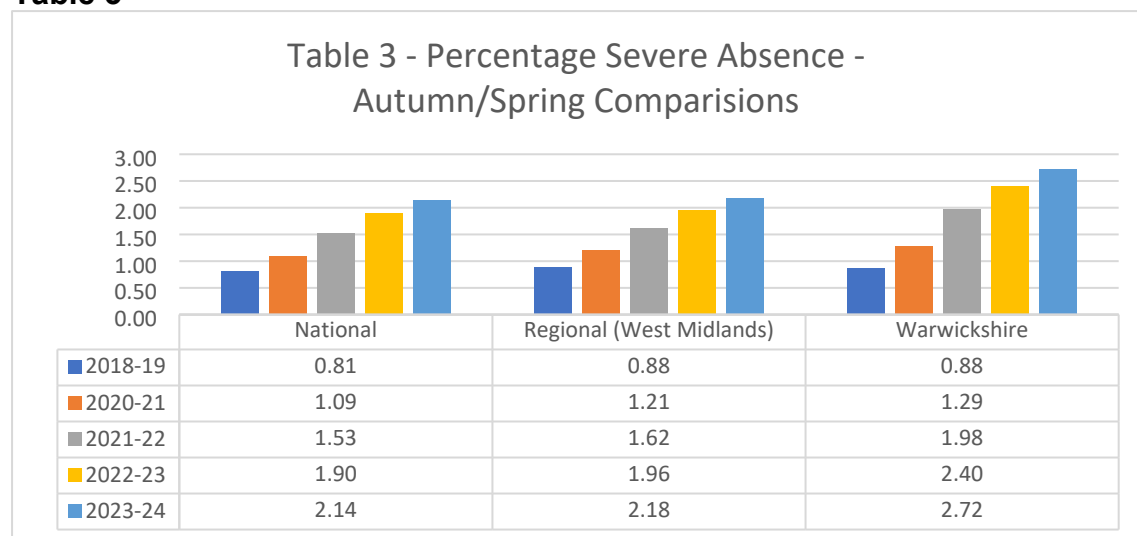
Table 2



4.13 **Table 3** shows severely absent pupils (50% or more absence).

- a) Severely absent pupils are those whom the DfE state need the highest levels of support.
- b) Nationally severe absence increased by 0.2 percentage points to 2.1%, in the last year. Warwickshire saw a similar increase of 0.3 percentage points to 2.7%.

Table 3



4.14 If the severely absent cohort is removed from absence calculations Warwickshire's overall absence would be 5.9%.

4.15 It is acknowledged that there are multiple factors that impact on these figures, including the work of schools and other agencies. As the new positive approach is embedded, it is expected that we will see ongoing improvement.

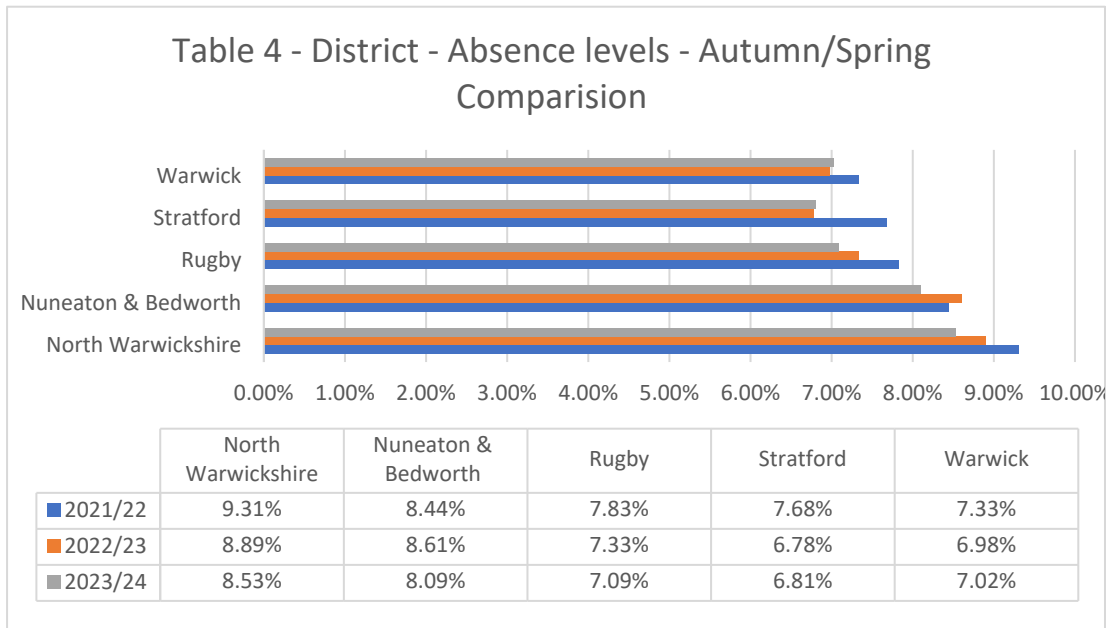
Children who miss 50% or more (severely absent) will continue to be a focus for support moving forward.

- 4.16 By school type, absence rates in the autumn/spring term were:
Primary schools - 5.5%, the national average was 5.4%.
Secondary schools – 9.3%, the national average at 8.5%.
Special schools - 13%, the national average was 13%.
- 4.17 Absence levels were at the lowest in Year Group 3 (5.2%) and Year Group 2 (5.3%).
- 4.18 Absence levels were at the highest in Year 11 (11.1%) compared to only 6.5% in Year 7. This trend of higher absence levels in Year 11 is also seen nationally.
- 4.19 The absence rate for pupils who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) was 12.5% compared to 5.8% for pupils who were not eligible for FSM, which matches the national trend. The national figures are 10.6% absence for eligible pupils, compared to 5.6% non-eligible. This highlights the additional struggles in attendance for those most disadvantaged.
- 4.20 The data for children in care is being collated and will be reported by the virtual school.

District Level Absence Data (Autumn 2023/Spring 2024 data)

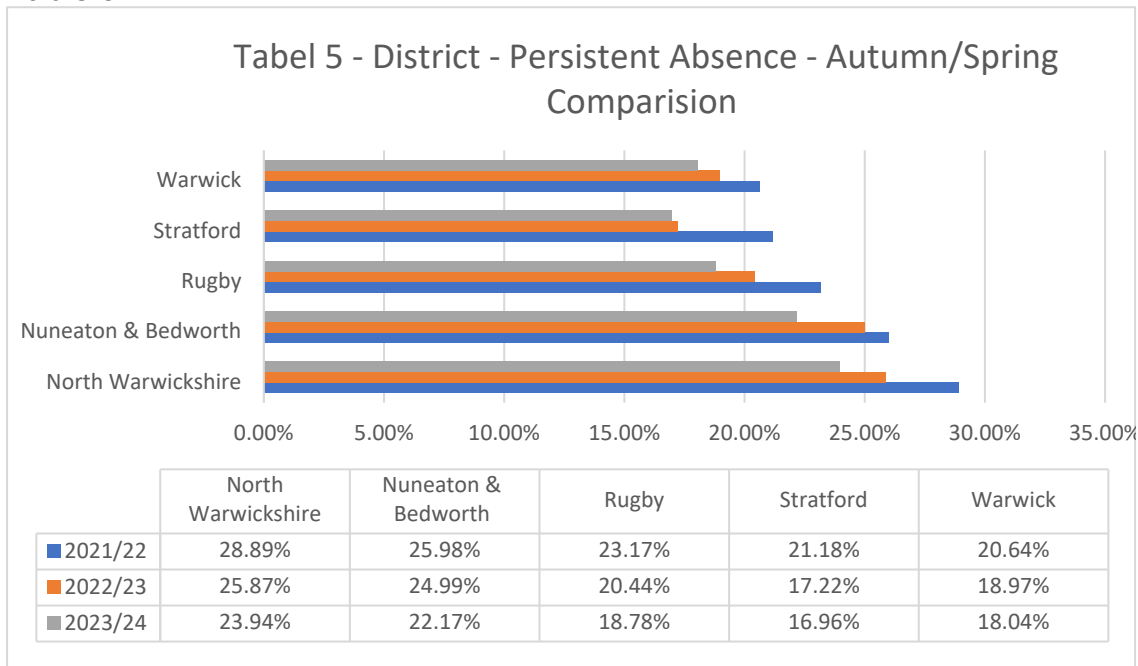
- 4.21 The tables below show a 3-year trend by district broken down by overall absence, persistent absence and severe absence:
- 4.22 Table 4 shows that the general trends are a reduction in school absence, although Warwick and Stratford remained at similar levels between 2022/23 and 2023/4.

Table 4



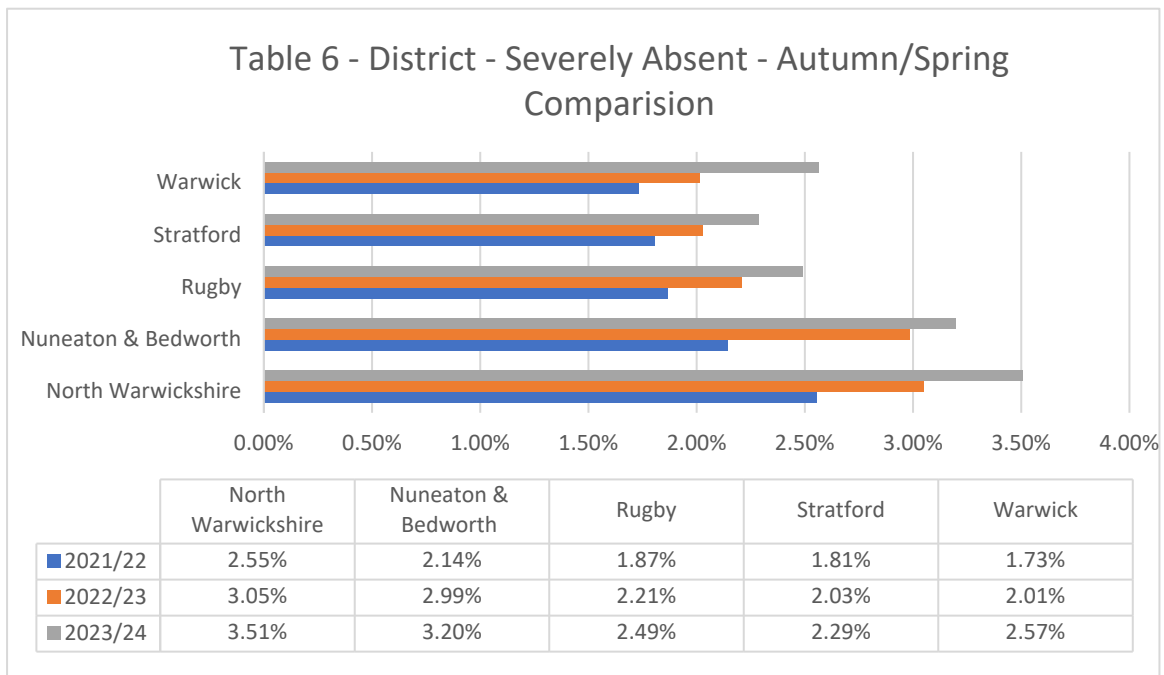
4.23 Table 5 shows persistent absence is reducing each year in each district.

Table 5



4.34 Table 6 shows that the absence of severely absent pupils is increasing. This trend is the focus of the changes to Warwickshire’s multi-agency support approach, in line with DfE statutory requirements.

Table 6

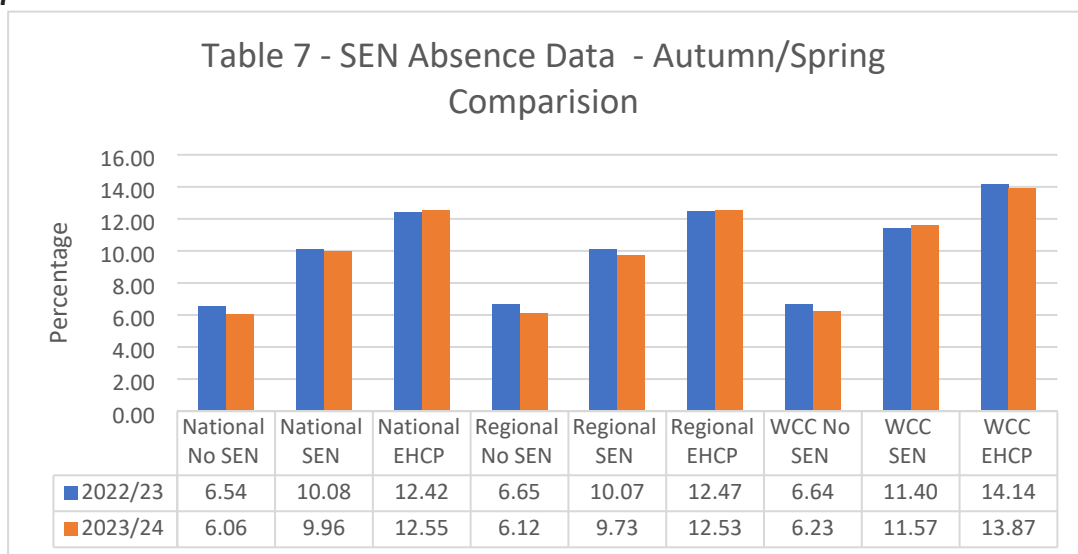


Children with Special Educational Needs (Autumn 2023/Spring 2024 data)

4.35 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.

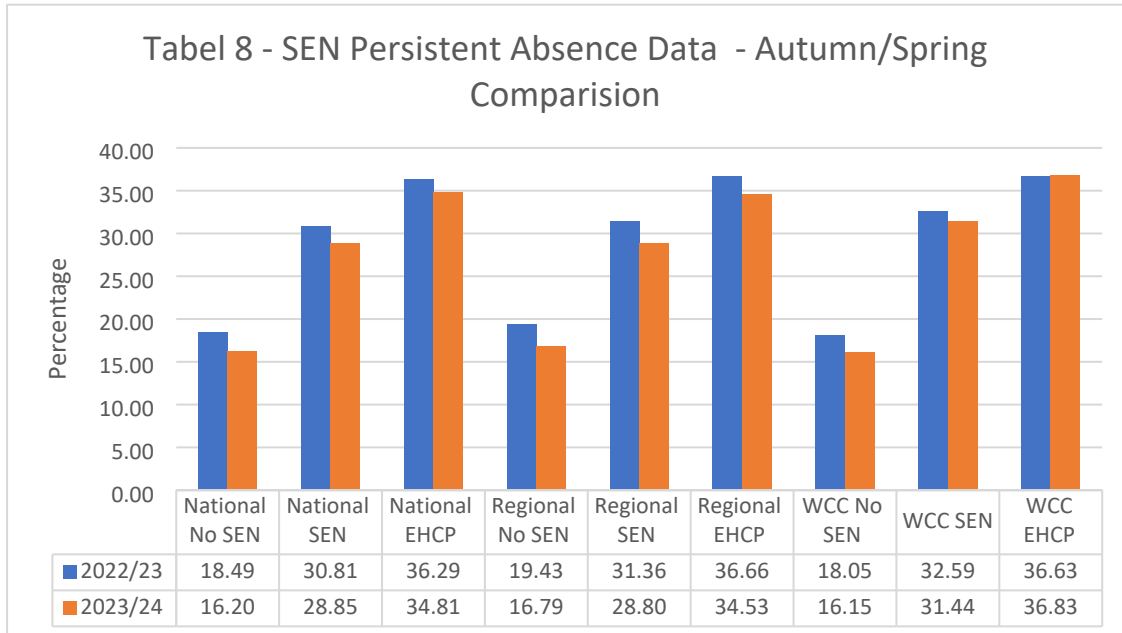
4.36 Table 7 below shows that nationally, the overall absence of children with an EHCP marginally increased in 2023/24 by 0.3 percentage points to 12.6 %. In Warwickshire, the absence reduced by 0.3% to 13.9%.

Table 7



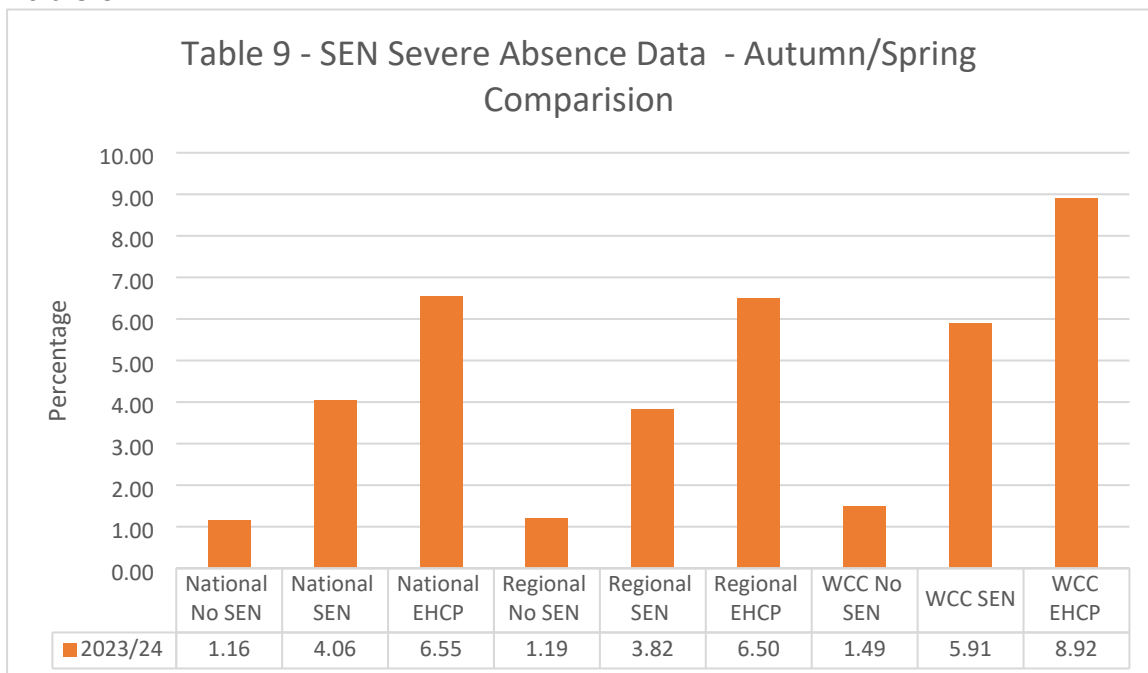
4.37 Table 8 shows there has been a reduction nationally and regionally in pupils who are persistently absent (10% or more absence) however, pupils in Warwickshire with an EHCP showed a fractional increase.

Table 8



4.38 Table 9 shows pupils with an EHCP in Warwickshire had higher rates of absence compared to pupils nationally and regionally with an EHCP. This cohort of pupils will be a focus at the termly targeting meetings with schools to understand the reasons for the absences and to work collaboratively on identifying appropriate support.

Table 9



- 4.39 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 factors and the combined effect of those factors, rather than a single prevailing cause. There are many and often multiple factors that impact on school attendance which may include anxiety, ill health, unmet SEND need, unidentified SEND need, lack of reasonable adjustments, pupil/parent mental health, cost of living crisis/financial problems, housing issues, difficult relationships between schools and parents, young carer responsibilities, etc.
- 4.40 The DfE recognise that there is not a quick fix in many cases of absence and that it will take time to see noticeable and ongoing benefits of the changes. In support of the revised DfE approach, Ofsted are also moving to focus on how schools are supporting improvement in attendance, rather than looking solely at an arbitrary attendance figure.

5. Unauthorised Leave of Absence

- 5.1 Generally, the DfE does not consider a need or desire for a holiday or other absence for the purpose of leisure and recreation to be an exceptional circumstance. Despite this, there is an increasing number of children who are removed for a holiday in term time (known as unauthorised leave of absence).
- 5.2 The main tool the DfE provides to address this is the issuing of penalty notices, the numbers of which are increasing each year. The number of penalty notices issued for the academic year 2023-24 was 1694, which compares to 1253 for 2022-23 and 590 for 2021-22.
- 5.3 The increase in unauthorised leave of absence is again reflected nationally. The DfE attendance reforms 2024 included a new National Framework for Penalty Notices for absence:
- A penalty notice is an out of court settlement which is intended to change behaviour without the need for criminal prosecution.
 - Only two penalty notices can be issued to the same parent in respect of the same child within a three year rolling period and any second notice within that period is charged at a higher rate:
 - The first penalty notice issued to a parent in respect of a particular pupil will be charged at £160 if paid within 28 days. This will be reduced to £80 if paid within 21 days. If the parent does pay within the timescales, the matter dealt with through the magistrates court under section 444 of the Education Act 1996.
 - A second penalty notice issued to the same parent in respect of the same pupil is charged at a flat rate of £160 if paid within 28 days.

- A third penalty notice cannot be issued to the same parent in respect of the same child within 3 years of the date of issue of the first. In a case where the national threshold is met for a third time (or subsequent times) within those 3 years, alternative action should be taken instead. This will often include considering prosecution but may include other tools such as attendance contracts, education supervision orders and parenting orders.

6. Elective Home Education (EHE)

- 6.1 Parents have a legal right to remove their children from school in order to educate them at home. This is known as elective home education. This is currently an area of focus with the numbers opting for this approach increasing both locally and nationally.
- 6.2 In September 2024, WCC received 163 notifications of pupils being withdrawn for elective home education. This averages to approximately 8 cases per school day.
- 6.3 For comparison, the numbers of electively home educated children since 2018/19 are:
- 2018/19 - 494
 - 2021/22 – 1197
 - 2022/23 – 1504
 - April 2023 to end of September 2024 - 1608
- 6.4 It is important to note that the number of children recorded as electively home educated is dynamic as cases are opened and closed regularly. Many parents will elect to home educate whilst waiting for their preferred school and therefore many children do return to school based education once happy with the school place offered to them. Many cases close each year as children reach school leaving age, children return to school and children move out of area.
- 6.5 Elective home education is increasing nationally. This does result in an increased strain on local authorities who retain statutory duties in relation to those children. Statutory requirements for local authorities include ensuring the child is in receipt of a suitable education and the Council aims to work in partnership with families who have taken the decision to home educate.
- 6.6 Warwickshire is increasing the size of the team undertaking this work to meet the increasing demand and have produced booklets for families and professionals providing information to make an informed decision. This material was co-produced with Warwickshire Parent Carer Voice.

6.7 On 29 February 2024, the Department for Education wrote to local authorities to inform them that from Autumn 2024 it will be mandatory for all local authorities to submit termly elective home education and children missing education data return collection under Section 29(1) of the Education Act 1996. The DfE will be providing LAs with £922.53 over 3 years to cover the costs associated with completing the return.

6.8 The provision of the data to the DfE will help the government understand the numbers of EHE and CME nationally and at local authority level, informing policy development aimed at supporting local authorities and future changes to the EHE framework.

7. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

N/A

8. Appendices

None

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

Local Member(s): Not applicable this is a county wide report

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