Guide for Attendance Officers

September 2022

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza

As Children's Commissioner it is my responsibility to listen to children, and ensure their views are heard at the heart of Government.

If children are to get the full benefits of school, including the aspects that they value the most, such as face to face learning with teachers, any additional support they need, time with their friends and access to their favourite extra-curricular activities, then they need to attend school regularly.

However, even before the pandemic hundreds of thousands of pupils struggled to attend school regularly, or were dropping out of school altogether, being home educated (often not out of choice) or receiving no education at all. Coming out of the pandemic, this group has only gotten bigger. In autumn 2021, the number of children persistently absent was more than double that before the pandemic. Almost 1 in 4 children were persistently absent in Autumn 2021 compared to around 1 in 9 in Autumn 2018 and 1 in 8 in Autumn 2019[1].

As part of my Attendance Audit, which aims to get to the root of school absence, my team has conducted ground-breaking new analysis of session level attendance data for the autumn 2021 term. The data, from three Multi-Academy Trusts allowed us to look at patterns of attendance and identify the early warning signs for persistent absence.

As attendance officers, you play a crucial role in understanding the barriers to attendance, identifying the children who need more support, and coordinating that support around a child. This report shares some of the insights from the Attendance Audit and top tips to help you in your work. I want to thank you for the important work you do, and I hope that the findings of this research will be useful to you. We all need to work together to get children back into school so that they can achieve their dreams.

Latest Government data on autumn school attendance

In autumn 2021, pupils missed 6.9% of their sessions on average and 1.6% of their sessions for unauthorised reasons. However, 23.5% were persistently absent and 1.4% of pupils were severely absent. Absence was higher for particular groups, as shown in the tables below. For example, in secondary schools, 46% of pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs were persistently absent, compared to 28% of pupils overall. While children with a social worker are not captured in the below tables, DfE daily attendance data shows that, 24% of children with a social worker were absent from school on average in each week between March 2020 and July 2022[2].

Table 1: Autumn 2021 absence rates in primary schools by pupil group with higher than average overall absence[3]

	Overall absence (%)	Unauthorised absence (%)	Persistently absent (%)	Severely absent (%)
All pupils	**5.7**	**1.2**	**19.5**	**0.6**
FSM Eligible	7.7	2.2	28.2	0.8
First language is English	5.8	1.1	20.0	0.5
Male	5.8	1.2	19.7	0.7
Any Other Mixed Background	5.8	1.3	19.5	0.8
Any Other White Background	5.9	1.3	20.1	0.9
Bangladeshi	5.9	1.3	19.8	0.6
Black Caribbean	6.0	1.8	20.5	0.9
Gypsy Roma	14.8	7.0	52.8	5.6
Irish	7.0	1.7	23.3	1.3
Pakistani	6.2	1.9	20.1	0.9
Traveller of Irish Heritage	20.9	9.5	64.8	11.8
White British	5.8	1.0	20.0	0.5
White and Black Caribbean	6.8	1.8	24.4	0.9
Autistic spectrum disorder	8.5	1.7	28.3	2.0
Hearing impairment	6.6	1.2	22.8	0.5
Moderate learning difficulty	7.5	1.9	27.5	0.6
Multi-sensory impairment	8.1	1.4	27.5	1.7
No specialist assessment	7.1	1.6	25.4	0.6
Other difficulty/disability	8.3	1.5	29.4	1.2
Physical disability	9.9	1.4	35.9	1.6
Profound and multiple learning difficulty	12.0	1.6	41.1	3.8

Severe learning difficulty	9.6	1.8	33.7	2.2
Social emotional and mental health	8.4	2.0	28.6	1.9
Specific learning difficulty	6.8	1.4	24.2	0.5
Speech language & communications needs	6.8	1.5	24.1	0.6
Unclassified	8.6	2.7	27.5	4.1
Visual impairment	7.2	1.3	26.0	0.6

Table 2: Autumn 2021 absence rates in secondary schools by pupil group with higher than average overall absence[4]

	Overall absence (%)	Unauthorised absence (%)	Persistently absent (%)	Severely absent (%)
All pupils	**8.2**	**2.1**	**27.7**	**2.1**
FSM Eligible	12.1	4.8	40.0	4.3
First language is English	8.6	2.1	29.4	2.3
Female	8.4	2.2	28.5	2.3
Gypsy Roma	19.4	11.9	60.5	10.3
Irish	9.2	2.4	31.4	2.8
Traveller of Irish Heritage	19.9	10.5	58.2	13.0
White British	9.0	2.2	31.0	2.4
White and Black Caribbean	10.3	3.5	35.0	3.3
Autistic spectrum disorder	11.5	3.3	34.5	5.1
Hearing impairment	8.8	2.1	30.3	1.9
Moderate learning difficulty	10.6	3.7	35.9	3.1
Multi-sensory impairment	11.3	2.8	36.3	4.0
No specialist assessment	10.1	3.1	34.7	2.9
Other difficulty/disability	11.2	3.1	36.5	3.9
Physical disability	13.2	2.5	42.2	5.0
Profound and multiple learning difficulty	10.8	2.6	31.1	3.7
Severe learning difficulty	10.3	3.6	33.0	3.5
Social emotional and mental health	15.8	6.0	45.7	8.7
Specific learning difficulty	9.7	2.5	33.4	2.4
Speech language and communications needs	9.0	2.8	29.6	2.5
Unclassified	14.2	5.7	41.3	10.2

Key findings from the Attendance Audit

In January 2022, the Children's Commissioner's team conducted a survey of all local authorities in England, to understand more about the cohort of children who were not attending school regularly, and those who were missing from education altogether.

In March, the Commissioner published the interim findings which showed that we do not have an accurate real time figure of how many children there are in England, nor where they are – let alone the number of children not receiving education[5].

The office then conducted a deep dive audit of 10 local authorities, which confirmed this hypothesis. To find out more about these groups of children, and to understand the barriers that stop children from attending school regularly, the team spoke to nearly 500 people, including Directors of Children's Services, family support workers, parents, and health workers, across 10 LAs throughout February and March 2022. This work has provided a national picture, which didn't exist before, of where the children missing from education are and the barriers they face[6].

The Children's Commissioner has set out six key ambitions to ensure that every child supported to be in school every day, ready to learn, is receiving a fantastic education, and, critically, that we know where they are and that they are safe.

Children told us that they often feel that things are done *to* them rather than *with* them, which can lead to a breakdown of trust and disengagement from their education. Decisions about children's education need to be made with children, their families and other adults in their lives. When you have identified a child at risk of becoming persistently absent think about how you might communicate with the family to understand the causes of absence, what might help to support the child to attend school, and to encourage trusted and supportive relationships between children, their families and the school and wider services.

Children want to receive support in school, be it for mental health, SEND, bullying and safeguarding needs. It is our responsibility to provide appropriate support quickly and effectively to prevent children becoming persistently absent or dropping out of education altogether.

All too often we heard stories of exclusions without any intervention to address the causes of poor behaviour. Any exclusion, regardless of whether it is an internal exclusion, a fixed term suspension or

permanent exclusion, should be seen as a moment for intervention – including the provision of individual support from school or from wider services. The reason behind exclusion decisions must be clearly explained to a young person and their parents or carers. This will enable them to engage with the right support and an opportunity for them to reflect on their behaviour and reengage with their education.

Children with additional responsibilities at home, such as young carers, can find it particularly difficult to attend school regularly. We need to let our children be children. Make sure that you have a system to identify all young carers in your school and consider having a young carers champion, if you haven't already. The CCo has compiled information on how to best support young carers in school which is available as part of the Back Into School resources for schools: https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/back-into-school/resources-for-schools/

For more information about this research see: https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/school/

Learning from daily attendance data

The Children's Commissioner's office has published ground-breaking new analysis of attendance data for the autumn 2021 term, from 3 Multi Academy Trusts. The results of this analysis are set out below.

In primary schools, 18% of pupils were persistently absent and in secondary schools 31% of pupils were persistently absent. This means that in an average primary classroom of 30 pupils, five pupils were persistently absent and in an average secondary school classroom, nine pupils were persistently absent.

Absence also increases with age. Being in year 9,10 or 11 is associated with an additional two days of absence compared to being in year 1.

Attending the first week of the school term is a strong indicator that a child will go on to attend school regularly throughout the term:

- Children who had an unauthorised absence on any day in the first week of term experienced an overall unauthorised absence rate of 25% compared to an overall unauthorised absence rate of 2% for pupils who didn't miss any sessions in the first week.

- Missing the second, third or fourth day of the new term is associated with an overall absence of around 43%, or 30 days of school, compared to missing days near the end of term, which were

associated with an overall absence of 20-30%.

Children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and children receiving pupil premium were more likely to have higher levels of absence than their peers:

- A child with an EHCP will have on average four additional days of absence compared to a child without any SEND support.

- A child on pupil premium will have on average three additional days of absence compared to a child not receiving pupil premium.

Children who miss school with unauthorised absence have distinct patterns of absence:

- 13% only missed a single day or half a day for unauthorised absence

- 9% had a pattern of multiple one-off unauthorised absences

- 3% had one period of unauthorised absence spanning over several days

- 14% had a more worrying pattern of both a multi-day period of unauthorised absence and several one-off days. This group had an average of nine different periods of absence.

Department for Education collection of daily attendance data

The DfE are collecting automatic daily attendance data from schools and over 65% of schools in England are now sharing their daily attendance data with DfE. Sharing data means you, your local authority and trust (if applicable) get access to daily attendance reports.

These reports can be used to help with earlier identification of pupils who need support, save you time building attendance reports and offer trend insights for different groups, helping you meet new guidance expectations around working together to improve school attendance.

Later in September, you'll also be able to compare attendance data from the previous academic year, for a school or an individual.

Tips for school attendance officers

The Children's Commissioner's office analysis of individual attendance data shows that the first week of term is crucial for establishing the routine of school and that non-attendance in the first few days is a strong predictor of later absence.

1. Use your school attendance data to look for patterns in absence. See if they match what the analysis in this report shows – that children are more likely to be absent on Fridays and that children who miss some of the first week of term are much more likely to be persistently absent.

2. Use the data right from the start of term to identify those missing the first few days and target your support work on these individual pupils. This can help target stretched resources on the children who need it most.

3. Talk to form tutors in your school – ask them to keep an eye out for students that are missing days mid-week - particularly Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. Ask if they are concerned about these pupils? Do these children need more support? If you can identify children at risk of persistent absence early, you can intervene quickly and prevent them from missing any more school.

4. If you haven't already, we encourage you to sign your school up to share daily attendance data with DfE and make use of the daily attendance reports to support your identification of pupils who need support.

5. Work with pastoral teams to identify and target the children who miss one of the first days of term and children who are starting to show a pattern of missing days in the middle of the week, which are the most indicative of a move towards low attendance.

6. Intervene quickly. Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation found that targeted pupil interventions were one of the most effective means of improving that pupil's attendance[1]. They should receive an intervention as soon as possible, with the school starting a dialogue with the child and their family as to the underlying reasons for absences and implementing bespoke

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[1] Education Endowment Foundation, *Attendance interventions rapid evidence assessment,* 2022. Available at: *Attendance interventions rapid evidence assessment | EEF (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)*. Accessed on 22/08/2022

solutions to support that child back into attending full time.

7. Use the evidence from the Attendance Audit outlined above to understand the reasons a child may miss education – alongside conversations with their families and knowledge of their local community to implement the right plan of support for each individual child. The deep dives found that children and families feel the key is to listen to them and work with them to address the barriers to attendance.

8. Make sure that you are particularly looking out for children in your school with SEND, pupil premium and those with a social worker – ensure they have all the support they need to regularly attend school.

9. Friday is the most common day for absence – we need to work to highlight the importance of attending school every day. The message should be clear that whilst one day may not feel like much, it can make it harder to keep up in classes, as each lesson builds on the previous one. Consider making Fridays more appealing to children by holding popular clubs or extra-curricular activities at Friday lunch times or after school.

10. Explore the resources for children, schools and families to help support children's school attendance which the CCo has collated on our Back into School web pages.

11. Explore the DfE case studies on good practice for improving attendance.

Tips for the summer holidays

1. Encourage your school to produce a video tour of the school, introducing new pupils to their new teachers and classrooms so they know what to expect on their first day.

2. Send regular communications to parents over the summer with information for children on what to look forward to in the new term.

3. Make sure communications go beyond practical information about uniform and behaviour policies and concentrate on preparing children to start school excited and ready to learn.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Does your school have an example of what works to support children to attend school regularly? Share it with us by contacting research.network@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk. Case studies will be added to the Back into School resources pages to share best practice and inspire others.

References

[1] DfE, Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term, 01 - Absence rates by school and geographic level, 2022. Available at https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/1ae5ca8a-0170-4e62-a4ea-f085d51df0fa

[2] DfE, Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, 2022. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak

[3] DfE, Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term, 06 - Absence rates by pupil characteristic, 2022. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/d16cae4f-27bf-4526-a103-b94ca81a3d8e

[4] DfE, Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term, 06 - Absence rates by pupil characteristic, 2022. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/d16cae4f-27bf-4526-a103-b94ca81a3d8e

[5] Children's Commissioner, Where are England's Children? Interim findings from the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit, 2022. Available at: https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/where-are-englands-children-interim-findings-from-the-childrens-commissioners-attendance-audit/

[6] Children's Commissioner, Voices of England's Missing Children, 2022. Available at: https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/voices-of-englands-missing-children/