

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

10 JANUARY 2024

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Summary

1. The Panel will consider an update on school attendance including current guidance expectations, approaches to improving attendance, practice and experiences of children and young people and their families and schools. The report also includes the context of children missing from education (CME) and those who have been permanently excluded.
2. Worcestershire County Council's (the Council), Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and the Director of Education, Early Years, Inclusion and Pupil Place Planning, Worcestershire Children First (WCF) have been invited to attend the meeting to respond to the Panel's questions.

Background

3. It is widely understood that access to education and regular attendance is key to the holistic development of children and young people. The barriers to accessing education can be varied and complex, both within and beyond the school setting, and are often specific to individual pupils and families. The foundation of securing good attendance is that school is a supportive environment where all pupils want to be and are keen and ready to learn and where partnership with parents and carers is strong and in the best interests of pupils. Additionally, partners, particularly health services are key to understanding attendance issues, providing the right services at the right time and supporting schools to promote attendance.
4. The Covid-19 pandemic severely disrupted children's access to education and whilst schools were fully open from March 2021, the group of children not attending school regularly increased significantly. Whilst national absence levels are falling again since the highest post pandemic peaks, the majority of schools report that they have still not seen a return to the high levels of attendance they had sustained prior to the pandemic. The challenges for all schools to build strong partnerships and continue the drive to prioritise and support regular attendance remains.
5. The Children's Commissioner, the Department for Education (DfE), schools and education settings, Local Authorities and partners all consider attendance at school to be a priority to focus on and to act to remove barriers. Since 2021, attendance guidance has been revised, and the profile of attendance including research findings and best practice have been widely published.
6. For the majority of children and young people, school is the environment chosen by them and their parents as the preferred means to enable learning. Schools

are entrusted by parents to ensure their child is supported, kept safe and afforded opportunities to learn, make positive peer relationships, socialise, and experience a sense of belonging.

7. The Education Act (1996) states that parents must ensure their child of compulsory school age receives appropriate full-time education according to their age, ability and aptitude. This can be through regular attendance at school, an alternative provision, or otherwise (eg parents can choose to educate their child at home).
8. In 2022/23, there were more than 82,000 children of compulsory school age (5 – 16 years) in Worcestershire.
9. Education attendance is recorded by schools and reported at child level by attendance at the available number of sessions in a week. This approach uses the morning and afternoon periods to number 10 available sessions a week and involves a complex system of coding records, types of attendance and absence. The expectation of statutory guidance in the interest of accessing a full-time education is that children attend all sessions available each week and are absent only for illness that prevents them attending school or exceptional circumstances authorised by the school.

How has school attendance changed?

10. Prior to the pandemic attendance in schools was improving year on year. In 2019 combined overall attendance in Worcestershire was 95.6%. The national figure for combined overall attendance for 2019 was 95.3%.
11. During the Covid-19 Pandemic, central government placed restrictions on attendance at school from March 2020 to March 2021.
12. As schools fully reopened in March 2021, increased levels of school attendance in the primary and secondary phases were initially evident. Some children with health vulnerabilities experienced further periods of shielding along with instances of common illnesses rising and having an impact on attendance. Other factors impacting on attendance included a reported increase in children taking holidays during term time, the cost-of-living changes impacting on attendance for some families, a perceived cultural shift for families in attitudes to attendance and anxiety-based absence. The greatest reason cited for absence is related to illness.
13. Efforts and approaches have been concerted from the DfE, WCF, partners and Ofsted in promoting attendance and understanding and removing barriers to absence. At the point of this report being written we have seen an improvement across the school system in making attendance at child and school level a priority and overall, we are seeing improvements being experienced and a much greater understanding of the challenges and actions that can be taken to improve attendance.
14. Table 1 below shows the decline in overall attendance experienced in Worcestershire post pandemic and the comparative trends. However, improvements are evident at this point in the current academic year and currently showing attendance in line with national data.

Table 1**Pupil Attendance in Schools (Percentage of Available Sessions attended)**

Overall Attendance % Academic Year	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24 to Nov end
Worcestershire	95.4	91.9	91.7	93.4
West Midlands Local Authorities	95.1	92.2	92.5	Not available
Statistical Neighbours	95.6	92.2	92.6	Not available
All England Local Authorities (National)	95.4	92.4	92.5	93.4 to 4 th Dec

15. Table 2 below shows the positive impact made over the first term of attendance by school phase with improvements on last year being seen across all phases. It should be noted that this is still early in the academic year to determine the level of confidence in sustained improvement but comparisons with the same data point last year and school level feedback are showing improved attendance.

Table 2

Worcestershire by School Phase	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
Primary	96.5	93.3	94.1	95.6
Middle	94.8	92.9	93.2	94.2
Secondary	94.9	90.7	88.8	91.9
Special	80.2	84.8	82.3	90.0

16. Table 3 below shows in more detail, experiences and outcomes for children and young people that have additional vulnerabilities that may impact on attendance. It is important to understand for those who may be most impacted by poor attendance how the concerted efforts for change are making a difference for these children. We have seen some gradual improvements and to this point of the current academic year all groups have made an improvement. There is no direct correlation between attendance performance and whether a school is a local authority-maintained school or an academy school. There are many factors that influence and impact on attendance. There is a greater understanding of the impact of whole school culture on attendance. Currently actions to improve attendance are being tackled across both maintained and academy schools.

Table 3

Worcestershire attendance by Vulnerable Group	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
Children with an EHCP	79.5	84.4	85.3	89.8
Children receiving SEND Support	87.8	89.1	89.4	91.2
Children on a Child Protection Plan	80.4	80.2	78.0	81.1
Children Looked After	86.8	88.6	89.0	92.2
Children in Need	74.2	77.7	76.6	84.7

17. Since the introduction of revised DfE Guidance in 2022 “Working Together to improve school attendance” a particular expectation has been on the focus for children who are missing more than 10% of school across a school year, this is equivalent to missing a day a fortnight and is termed Persistent Absence. Where a child or young person misses 50% or more school across a year, and so absent more than they are present at school there is an expectation that schools should be working with other partners to understand and address the barriers. This level of absence is termed Severe Absence.

18. In 2021/22, 27% of all children attending Worcestershire schools experienced persistent absence across the whole year. This reduced in 2022/23 to 22%. Severe absence remained at 2% overall across both 2021/22 and 2022/23. We have seen a greater focus of analysis of cohort at school level including Ofsted inspections looking closely at schools understanding and strategies to address persistent absence. We have seen a slight improvement in severe absence for children with EHCP’s within this data but an increase in severe absence for children with a social worker. WCF 2023 Business Plan priorities include as a priority joint effort to improve attendance for these vulnerable groups.

Strategies and actions to improve attendance

19. The DfE published new guidance for school attendance in 2022, ‘Working together to improve school attendance’. This new guidance was part of the new policy objectives set out by government as part of the Schools Bill. The guidance sets out responsibilities for parents, schools, academy trusts/governing bodies and local authorities to understand and address attendance difficulties with the intention of having clarity and consistency of approach across the education system. Whilst Local Authorities and schools are tending to work to this guidance it is not yet statutory as the legislative changes have been delayed.

20. In 2022, the DfE introduced a national attendance data collection system provided by a company called Wonde. Using this daily automatic collection system is intended to give schools, academy trusts and local authorities access to up to date information at a pupil level, enable better analysis of those who need support and provide local, regional and national trends and meet the expectations of the DfE attendance guidance. Furthermore, the consistent collection and access to pupil level data nationally is an opportunity for the legislative changes planned to improve the tracking of children in a more timely

and consistent manner, improving our understanding of children missing education. Currently the use of the collection tool is not mandatory, nationally the take up is around 85% of all schools. In Worcestershire, this is 95%. WCF regularly promote the use of the tool and expect take up to continue to increase.

21. Nationally, health professionals have also supported the attendance message. The recently published NHS information “Is my child too ill to go to school”, aims to assist and reassure parents when making decisions as to whether their child can still attend school. The Royal College of General Practitioners has also outlined principles for GPs making clear the need for the continued drive to encourage school attendance by being alert to school absence, encouraging liaising between parents, schools, other support services and enabling appointments to be scheduled outside of school hours.
22. In September 2023, a further response to parents’ heightened anxieties about children attending school when ill was given via a letter to schools from the Chief Medical Officer. This reinforced that whilst a degree of caution may be appropriate in some instances, expectations to encourage regular attendance through repeated, positively framed messaging to parents remains key.
23. Locally, the Council and WCF has been working across the Children and Young People’s Partnership with schools, academy trusts and at a locality level to deploy limited resources collaboratively and to best effect. WCF has championed attendance through public communications and specifically the education professional networks including independent schools as is expected in the DfE guidance.
24. The introduction and year on year development of Holiday and Food Activities (HAF) has a beneficial impact on promoting attendance for return to school and retaining the link with school relationships particularly during the summer break. Feedback from those schools who directly deliver or provide access to HAF are positive about the impact of this programme and positive attitudes to attendance.
25. A small number of local authority areas and academy trusts have or are considering changes to term dates to reduce the length of the summer break and manage long terms without reducing the school year. This is in part seen as a way of sustaining improved attendance during term times.
26. The WCF attendance and CME team (approx. 10 fte staff including team lead and administrator) has developed the information and tools for schools, parents, carers and professionals to use to promote attendance. This has been brought together under the WCF website platform for Inclusion in Educational Settings. To supplement this information resource, the team operate a daily helpline for advice and guidance for public and professional use.
27. Two case study examples are included in **Appendix 1** to provide detail of the impact of the attendance helpline. As per the DfE guidance, the attendance team have introduced a termly schedule of targeted support meetings with schools where attendance remains a challenge. A menu of training is offered by the team for staff and governors. The lead for the attendance team also liaises closely with regional network and action learning groups for attendance and the named DfE adviser for attendance. Worcestershire schools and academy trusts have been collaborating across the County and in localities on a number of

projects including, sharing and pooling resources, sharing successful practice and linking with local health partners to address absence. The Wyre Forest secondary schools group (student population approx. 4000) formed the Re-Engage project in 2022, pooling resources with WCF to improve consistent analysis and action planning for attendance and importantly improving knowledge, understanding and access to community early help support. Schools taking part in the project have reported improved attendance however some persistent absence issues persist including absence linked to anxiety. This year Re-Engage has developed a leading project, the Wyre Forest Health Partnership and GP lead are working with 5 secondary schools to pilot an approach to:

- Improve communication between GP's and schools.
- Take a collaborative and agreed approach for specific cases and support families together.
- Ensure GP's have helpful information about available support in schools including mental health support (eg mental health leads and Well Being Support Teams)
- Ensure schools understand the GP resource and how it works.

28. The impact and learning from this pilot will be evaluated during the early Spring Term and findings used for wider application across Primary Care Networks and the school system.

29. In Redditch, local academy trusts (school population approx. 5,500) have collaborated to share practice, local knowledge and link with health resources including wider family support services to address absence difficulties. Evesham area academy trusts are in the early stages of forming a similar approach. The Worcestershire Academy Trust network has made attendance the key shared theme for 2023/24. As a direct result of this commitment Haybridge Teaching School (Four Stones Academy Trust) has collaborated with WCF to offer two training events for primary and secondary schools across the County "Empowering Schools to Build an Attendance Culture". This was led by a distinguished and proven attendance leader being employed across the West Midlands education intervention areas. The sessions were well attended by schools and as a result we are seeing growing collaborations and improved approaches to tackling absence.

30. Attendance for children with SEN needs or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) has been improving on recent years and the trends are overseen by the Worcestershire SEND and All Age Disability Partnership Board. Nationally, in 2021/22 attendance rates for these children were around 90% and 88% respectively. Worcestershire rates now exceed these and whilst improvements are encouraging, the complexity of barriers and issues that face children and families where special educational needs are experienced must not be underestimated. It is key that barriers are understood with reasonable adjustments being a priority and needs and provision being met.

31. The role of the Virtual School was extended through non statutory guidance from 2021 to improve educational outcomes for children with a social worker. Promoting and improving school attendance is key to improving children's experiences and assisting parents in engaging with support for their children.

Children on a Child Protection Plan and those with a Child in Need plan as a cohort experience the highest levels of absence of vulnerable children. Information and support is available for social workers via the attendance team and virtual school contacts. WCF safeguarding teams have made concerted efforts to focus on attendance including leading on a Back to School project along with a greater emphasis included on attendance actions as part of plans for children. Improvements are being seen for this group however there is further work to be achieved in securing change where this is needed for children.

32. Children who cannot attend school due to ill health including mental health are notified to WCF via the school notification process. WCF have reorganised its services in 2023 to have a focused oversight of these children, their circumstances and how suitable education is being provided as a joint endeavour between the home school and the local authority. A weekly meeting started in September 2023 that provides an opportunity for schools to join WCF and representation from Hereford and Worcestershire Health and Care Trust to provide advice and guidance and jointly plan and support children. Those schools that have used this facility this term have reported very positively on the impact of their own knowledge and support for children.

Children Missing Education

33. When a child of statutory school age is not registered and on a school roll, they are referred to as a child missing from education (CME). Schools have a duty to notify local authorities as children leave and join school registers. The local authority then has a duty to establish the child’s whereabouts and support them back to suitable education as appropriate. These duties play an important part of wider duties including safeguarding children and duties for children who are electively home educated.
34. The Inspection of Worcestershire local authority children’s service (ILACS) in May 2023 found “there are appropriate systems in place to locate and monitor children who are missing education or who are electively home educated. Suitable education placements are identified for those children who are missing education.”
35. Identification and reporting of children missing from education has been improving since before 2020. This has led to an increase in the number of investigations year on year needed to understand a child’s whereabouts and actions being taken to return them to education. Reports of children missing education are also made from partner agencies and the public.

End of Year Snapshot

Number of CME confirmed	2021 (Aug 21)	21/22 (Aug 22)	22/23 (Aug 23)
Total CME all children	131	118	185
Children with an EHCP	8	10	10
Children Looked After	1	0	1
Children on a Child Protection Plan	1	0	2
Children in Need	0	2	9

Monthly Snapshot for 2023/24

Number of CME confirmed	Sep 23	Oct 23	Nov 23	Dec 23
Total CME all children	195	196	159	109
Children with a EHCP	10	8	8	9
Children Looked After	0	1	1	1
Children on a Child Protection Plan	1	7	2	2
Children in Need	2	2	2	2

36. Casework for investigation and then appropriate action is carried out by the WCF attendance and CME team as described earlier in this report. The officers have a joint caseload of working with schools on attendance and directly working with children and families to establish and address CME issues.
37. If a child missing from education is open to a social work plan the CME officer will always liaise with the relevant social worker. The numbers of Children Looked After (CLA) who become CME are very few and can be impacted by changes in care placements, however a school place will be sourced as a priority, and the days missed from education for a CLA are kept to a minimum through focused work by the Virtual School, Education Engagement Team and Social Workers.
38. A weekly coordinated multidisciplinary meeting called Missing Mondays is chaired by the Virtual School Headteacher, this brings together priority actions for the most vulnerable children missing education. With regard to the children who are Child Protection or Child in Need who become CME, they are prioritised by the CME officers working with social workers to identify and prioritise appropriate education provision.
39. The numbers of children who are missing education and have a social work plan or are looked after, remain consistently low. In October 2023 we saw a small but noticeable increase in children with a child protection plan who were missing education. This was due to children moving school placements connected to home moves and one child who returned from elective home education.
40. In examining the specific children currently identified as CME, all circumstances appear specific to the child, with no evident contextual trends relating to previous schools, year groups or geographical areas.
41. Children with an EHCP whose whereabouts are known and are not on a school roll and awaiting a school place with alternative education provision in place are overseen by SEND services. At December 2023 this number was 62 (including 21 young people from Year 12 and above). The trends of these children are monitored and reported via the SEND Accelerated Progress Plan and the 0-25 SEND and All Age Disability Partnership Board.

Children who have been Permanently Excluded

42. A permanent exclusion is when a pupil is no longer allowed to attend a school (unless the pupil is reinstated). Permanent exclusions rose considerably during 2021 and 2022. This was an experience common to the region and nationally.

Most exclusions are seen from the secondary/high school phase. The most common reasons cited are persistent disruptive behaviour and assault against an adult or a pupil. The level of exclusions has been impacted by the growing complexity of children's need, access to the right services at the right time, school constraints on trying to meet and balance the needs of all children whilst keeping them and staff safe.

43. Following an incident of this level of significance there is a formal process and set of responsibilities for both the school and governing body/trust and local authority to follow including the provision of suitable education. A child who has been permanently excluded is subject to the same needs as a child missing from education as until placed, they are not on a school roll.

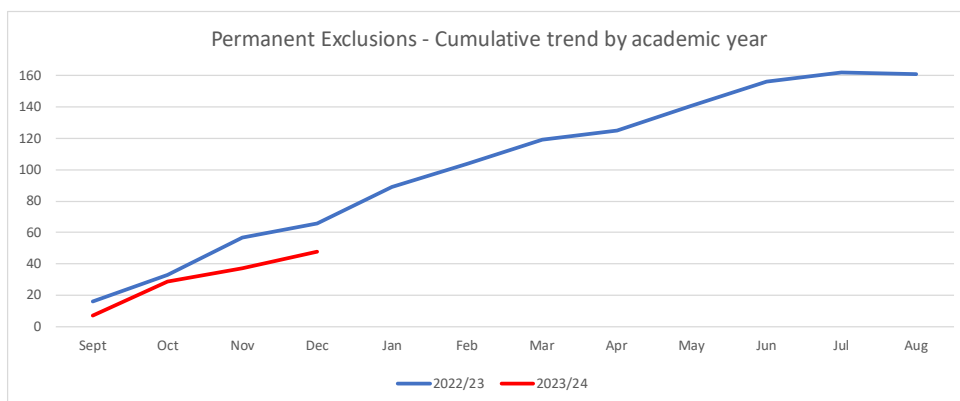
Worcestershire			
Number of Exclusions	Full Year 20/21	Full Year 21/22	Full Year 22/23
Total Exclusions all children	75	146	161
Children with an EHCP	10	14	13
Children Looked After	1	3	1
Children on a Child Protection Plan	5	5	12
Children in Need	5	6	16

44. The impact of permanent exclusion is significant for children, young people and their families and for schools. This year WCF along with the school community have made a concerted effort and approach to reducing exclusion wherever possible and this appears to be making a positive impact so far this academic year. Schools have improved earlier identification and involvement of other services to avoid exclusion including working more closely with Alternative Provision providers.

Permanent Exclusions - monthly trend

2022/23	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug
Cumulative	16	33	57	66	89	104	119	125	141	156	162	161
Monthly	16	17	24	9	23	15	15	6	16	15	6	-1

2023/24	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug
Cumulative	7	29	37	48								
Monthly	7	22	12	12								



45. WCF have reorganised staffing to be more responsive to earlier intervention and increased staff capacity for this support. We have also developed the information available to Fair Access Panels – the regular meetings of head teachers and

WCF to agree placements for children who are harder to place. A greater understanding of permanent exclusion at a local level and between schools is positive for sharing effective practice and developing an inclusive culture across schools.

Purpose of the Meeting

46. The Panel is asked to review and comment on the information, experiences and outcomes for Worcestershire children and families and to advise of any topics related to this report that would benefit from further scrutiny.

Supporting Information

Appendix 1 – Case study examples

Contact Points

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Alyson Grice/Alison Spall, Overview and Scrutiny Officers Tel: 01905 844962/846607

Email: scrutiny@worcestershire.gov.uk

Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director of Children's Services) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

DfE Guidance for schools, academy trusts, governing bodies and local authorities

[Working together to improve school attendance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Principles for GP's to work to

[The role of the GP in maximising school attendance – BJGP Life](#)

Information for parents and carers [Is my child too ill for school? - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)

Letter from chief medical officer to schools

[Health Letter to Schools re mild illness and school attendance](#)

WCF Inclusion in Educational Settings website

[Attendance and CME | Worcestershire County Council](#)

DfE Statutory Guidance Children missing education

[Stat guidance template \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

[Agendas and Minutes for Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel are available on the Council's website here](#)

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