

Written evidence submitted by Ofsted

Introduction

Ofsted has always taken a strong interest in pupil attendance in schools. However strong a curriculum, if pupils are not in school, they cannot learn. Under our Education Inspection Framework, attendance forms an important part of the key judgement 'behaviour and attitudes'.

The behaviour and attitudes judgement considers how leaders and staff create a safe, calm, orderly and positive environment in the school, and the impact this has on the behaviour and attitudes of pupils. This includes having a strong focus on attendance and punctuality so that disruption is minimised, and having clear and effective behaviour and attendance policies with clearly defined consequences that are applied consistently and fairly by all staff.

On inspection, we will collect a range of evidence on attendance including:

- Reviewing records and information about behaviour and attendance (including up-to-date attendance analysis for all pupils, pupils with SEND, pupils who receive free school meals and pupils with English as an additional language; records and analysis of pupils taken off roll; and records and analysis of exclusions and suspensions, incidents of poor behaviour and any use of internal isolation).
- Analysing absence and persistent absence rates for all pupils, and for pupils with SEND, pupils who receive free school meals and pupils with English as an additional language, compared with national averages for all pupils, including the extent to which low attenders are improving their attendance over time and whether attendance is consistently low.
- Visiting any off-site unit that the school runs (on its own or in partnership with other schools) for pupils whose behaviour is poor or who have low attendance. Inspectors will assess safeguarding procedures, the quality of education and how effectively the unit helps to improve pupils' behaviour, learning and attendance.

Inspectors will recognise that the context in which schools operate has changed as a result of the pandemic. However, it is more important now than ever that children are in school and learning. Therefore, while we will always consider context (for example the increase in term-time holidays), we will expect school leaders have taken every reasonable step to ensure the best possible rates of attendance since the school opened to all pupils in March 2021. Some of this is discussed in our report on securing good attendance and tackling persistent absence, published last yearⁱ.

Background Context

COVID-19 continued to affect pupils' attendance in 2021/22, due to anxiety among pupils and parents, and families taking rescheduled holidays during term time. In some cases, attendance was affected directly by illness or pupils self-isolating. However, pupils missed fewer sessions in autumn 2021 than in autumn 2020ⁱⁱ.

Total absence fell from 11.7% in autumn 2020 to 8.5% in autumn 2021. Of the 8.5%, 1.6% is attributed to COVID circumstances. This is down from 7% in autumn 2020ⁱⁱⁱ. However, the absence rate is still much higher than in autumn 2019, when it was 4.9%.

The number of pupils identified as persistent absentees has increased since schools reopened after the lockdowns. In autumn 2021 (to date the only data available following reopening), almost one in four pupils missed at least 10% of sessions, equivalent to around seven days in the autumn term. Persistent absences were highest in Year 11 (31.7%). Fourteen per cent of all pupils missed 10% or more sessions due to illness alone, including positive cases of COVID-19^{iv}.

Question 1: The factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils, in particular disadvantaged pupils, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds, pupils with SEND and those who are clinically vulnerable to COVID-19, and pupils in alternative provision.

Persistent absence is getting worse. It is an issue with many underlying factors. While there may be some groups that have a higher proportion of persistent absence, it is important not to assume that this means all pupils in a group have the same factors at play, that are different from pupils in other groups. Our research has found that there are a number of factors that have caused persistent and severe absence among all groups of pupils.

Attendance since the pandemic has been the subject of much discussion. There were undoubtedly problems getting children back into school. Initial high levels of absenteeism have fallen, but there are still concerns about a smaller number of persistent absentees. For a minority of families, the social contract around schooling – attendance in return for education – has become fractured, perhaps tested by periods of lockdown. It is vital that all parents commit to full attendance for their children.

In autumn 2021, many schools were still working on getting back to pre-pandemic attendance levels. Schools reported that much absence was directly related to COVID-19, including pupils testing positive for COVID-19; COVID-19-related anxiety among parents and pupils; poorer mental health of pupils; rescheduled or re-arranged term-time holidays; and low resilience to setbacks or illness. Commonly cited causes of anxiety included family members being ill or pupils' concern that this might happen; seeing parents under more stress than usual; and experiencing domestic violence or financial hardship.

By summer 2022, leaders in most schools said that attendance had improved following a peak in COVID-19 cases during the spring term. Some leaders said that attendance was back to pre-pandemic levels. However, others were still experiencing higher absence rates than pre-pandemic. Leaders said that persistent absences were often related to COVID-19, for example because of pupils' and parents' anxiety about COVID-19. In special schools, parental anxiety was common when pupils had medical needs that could be exacerbated by COVID-19.

This period also saw a range of new challenges, many of which remain the case. For example, an increase in non-COVID-related illnesses and a propensity to keep children home for any illness, a higher than normal level of term-time holidays (as families who had not had a holiday for a long

time) including families isolating before a family event. Parents also reported finding it hard to move on from the ‘bubble-isolation mentality’ (e.g. keeping children home unnecessarily because of proximity to COVID)⁴. These factors, especially the first, have blurred the boundary of what level of intervention is needed for absence. An important conversation needs to be had, including with the medical profession (especially GPs and pharmacies), about how to help parents get the right perspective and balance, and avoid an overly risk-averse approach to keeping children out of school.

We saw, however, several successful strategies by schools to encourage attendance. These included communicating high expectations for attendance to families; reassuring anxious parents; supporting pupils to return with enhanced pastoral support; providing practical help (e.g. arranging transport).

Pupils with SEND

The pandemic continues to affect the school absence rates of pupils with SEND. Across each of the Department for Education’s core attendance measures, the attendance of pupils with SEND has deteriorated since 2019, and had not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels by the autumn of 2021. COVID-related isolation has decreased following changes in government guidance. However, the overall absence rate (which includes illness of any kind) remains high^v.

Absences are not evenly spread across pupils, and around a third of pupils with education, health and care plans, and of those with SEN support, missed at least 10% of sessions in autumn 2021. This remains substantially higher than before the pandemic and is clearly detrimental to their education^{vi}.

Some schools had more COVID-19-related absences among disadvantaged pupils (often those for whom they received pupil premium funding), pupils with SEND and specific year groups (for example, Year 8, Year 11 and 6th form)^{vii}.

On school inspections, we consider pupils’ attendance as part of our assessment of behaviour and attitudes, including pupils with particular needs. We may also consider local area partnerships’ approaches to improve attendance of children and young people with SEND as part of inspections under our new area SEND framework.

Leaders were tackling this through family support, designated staff members, follow-up phone calls or home visits.

Question Two: How schools and families can be better supported to improve attendance, and how this affects pupils and families who are clinically vulnerable to COVID-19.

Our research shows that schools that are successful in securing good attendance^{viii}:

- set high expectations for attendance from the outset which was communicated clearly and consistently to parents and pupils
- challenged parents if attendance was a concern, but also listened to parents to understand what was preventing their child from attending school
- analysed accurately recorded attendance data to understand patterns and trends, which helped them to target their actions

- adopted a whole-school approach to attendance by making sure attendance was ‘everyone’s business’ in school; understanding the relationship between attendance and the quality of the school’s curriculum, ethos, behaviour and inclusivity and pushing for whole-school improvement once attendance reaches the national average. The curriculum and overall provision for pupils with SEND are important so that they have a positive experience of school.

We also identified weaknesses in schools’ practices. Common factors included:

- Inaccurate recording of attendance
- Using part-time timetables, usually for pupils with SEND or behavioural difficulties, which are not well planned, not tracked and/or not time-limited
- A lack of a coherent strategy to improve attendance
- A lack of analysis leading to a lack of ability to see patterns

In autumn 2020^x, leaders told us about their efforts to maintain or increase attendance by:

- allaying any concerns that parents might have and remove barriers to attendance.
- expanding their pastoral team to provide additional help for families
- created new roles or increasing the hours of the school counsellors and outreach workers.
- building on the relationships that they had developed with families during the first national lockdown to help to improve the attendance of pupils whose attendance had always been problematic.

Question Three: The impact of the Department for Education’s proposed reforms to improve attendance.

It is too early to say if the new guidance introduced in September 2022 has had an impact. In May 2023 the Department will publish termly National Statistics on the attendance in all schools, covering the autumn term 2022. This should show if there has been an improvement in attendance since autumn 2021, including on the key measure of persistent absence (which is not available in their fortnightly data releases).

The Department’s fortnightly ‘indicative’ data release, which contains experimental statistics based on school registers submitted by around 4 in 5 schools, is a very useful tool for national insights, as other data is too out of date currently. The tool suggests attendance has continued to be a challenge since Autumn 2022. Between 12 September 2022 and 9 January 2023 7.7% of sessions were missed, and the main cause (4.5%) was illness^x. In the week of 12 December absences peaked with 14.3% of sessions missed (9.1% due to illness). The Department concluded that this was in line with recent increases in rates of seasonal flu and other seasonal respiratory illnesses. The Office of National Statistics’ infection survey suggests a COVID spike around that time, with 1 in 45 people in England infected on 9 December, rising to 1 in 20 on 28 December.^{xi}

Questions Four and Five: The impact of school breakfast clubs and free school meals on improving attendance for disadvantaged pupils and the role of the Holiday Activities and Food programme

and other after school and holiday clubs, such as sports, in improving attendance and engagement with school.

Ofsted sees the positive impact that these areas may have on removing potential barriers to children attending school. However, we do not have the evidence to be able to provide specific evaluation or comment on these areas.

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- ⁱ Ofsted (2022) [Securing good attendance and tackling persistent absence - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103111/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence-2022.pdf). The report is based on evidence from focus groups with HMI, focus groups with primary school leaders, conversations with secondary leaders, inspection evidence from a sample of schools and surveys of schools HMI about challenges in the autumn term.
- ⁱⁱ Ofsted (2022) Ofsted Annual Report 2021/2022, [Ofsted Annual Report 2021/22 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103111/2021-22-annual-report.pdf); p. 41.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term', Department for Education, May 2022; [https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-england-autumn-term](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term). Total pupil absence combines absence data (including those absent due to a positive COVID-19 case) and data on those not attending due to circumstances related to COVID-19 (primarily those awaiting a COVID-19 test result). A pupil is classified as a persistent absentee if they miss 10% or more of the possible sessions in a given time period.
- ^{iv} Ofsted (2022) Ofsted Annual Report 2021/2022, [Ofsted Annual Report 2021/22 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103111/2021-22-annual-report.pdf), p. 41. Department for Education, May 2022
- ^v Ofsted (2022) Ofsted Annual Report 2021/2022, [Ofsted Annual Report 2021/22 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103111/2021-22-annual-report.pdf), p. 58-59. Based on absence data published by the Department for Education.
- ^{vi} Ofsted (2022) Ofsted Annual Report 2021/2022, [Ofsted Annual Report 2021/22 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103111/2021-22-annual-report.pdf), p. 58-59. Based on absence data published by the Department for Education.
- ^{vii} Ofsted (2021) [Education recovery in schools: autumn 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103111/education-recovery-in-schools-autumn-2021.pdf). The findings in this briefing are based on evidence collected during routine inspections of 98 primary and secondary schools in England between 25 October and 19 November 2021. This is nearly a quarter (22%) of school inspections carried out during that time. However, it is just a selection so the findings illustrate the challenges that some schools are facing and the approaches they are taking to increase attendance.
- ^{viii} Ofsted (2022) [Securing good attendance and tackling persistent absence - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103111/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence-2022.pdf).
- ^{ix} Ofsted (2020) [COVID-19 series: briefing on schools, November 2020 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/93111/covid-19-series-briefing-on-schools-november-2020.pdf)
- ^x Department for Education indicative data: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-attendance-in-schools>
- ^{xi} Office of National Statistics' infection survey: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurveys/pilot/previousReleases>

February 2023