



Committee Report

PURPOSE: Final Decision Report

KEY OR NON-KEY DECISION: Non-key decision

COMMITTEE: Children and Young People Committee

DATE: 29 August 2024

TITLE: Increasing School Attendance and Reducing Exclusions

Ward(s): All wards

Officer presenting the report: Su Coombes **Job title:** Head of Service, School Partnerships

Committee Chair: Cllr Christine Townsend

Executive Director lead: Hannah Woodhouse: Executive Director for Childrens and Education

Proposal origin: Committee Chair

Purpose of Report: This report will provide information on the key challenges of attendance, risks for consideration, and areas of progress, updates on the delivery of support and interventions in line with the statutory expectations.

Background:

Schools must be a place of belonging, learning and community for every child and we know from research that a good education is a key driver of social mobility.

All evidence points to attendance at school as a key contributor of good outcomes for children and young people as well as a safeguarding prerequisite. Good school attendance is essential for pupils to get the most out of their school experience, including their attainment, wellbeing, building strong social relationships and wider life chances into independence.

In Bristol, compared to other local authorities, we have statistically lower levels of attendance on average, more children who are persistently and severely absent (i.e. up to 50% of the time or more missed) but also a high number of children who are not attending school 10-15% of the time, especially those on free school meals, Children in Care and children from some of our most deprived wards of the city.

The national average attendance at secondary schools before covid was 94%. Bristol is presently at 87% at secondary. This means large numbers of children are missing significant portions of school which is having an adverse impact, not only on the children and their outcomes but on their visibility and engagement more broadly.

Benefits of school attendance based on research and evidence

- National data shows pupils with the highest attainment at the end of key stage 2 and key stage 4 have higher rates of attendance compared to those with the lowest attainment.
- Nationally at KS2, pupils not meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths had an overall absence rate of 4.7%, compared to 3.5% of those meeting the expected standard.
- The overall national absence rate of pupils not meeting the expected standard was higher than among those meeting the higher standard (4.7% compared to 2.7%).
- Nationally at KS4, pupils not achieving grade 9 to 4 in English and maths had an overall absence rate of 8.8%, compared to 5.2% among those achieving grade 4.
- The overall national absence rate of pupils not achieving grade 9 to 4 was over twice as high as those achieving grade 9 to 5 (8.8% compared to 3.7%).

For most children, school provides a safe environment when home or the wider environment might not, for the most vulnerable pupils, regular attendance is also an important protective factor and the best opportunity for needs to be identified and support provided.

National research has shown associations between regular absence from school and a number of extra familial harms, including crime (the proportion of children that had been cautioned or sentenced for any offence that had ever been persistently absent was 81% and for serious violence offence was 85%).

1. BCC Local authority school attendance support offer provided by the Education Welfare Service

1.1 Core Universal Offer

Bristol City Council provides a core service which is free of charge to all schools in the area. This offer includes:

- **Communication and advice:** regularly bring schools together to communicate messages, provide advice and share best practice between schools and trusts within the area. This includes a termly attendance newsletter for schools, weekly attendance drop-ins for schools, September Attendance Briefings, School Attendance Network meetings, link Education Welfare Officer/Single Point of contact meetings and the Education Welfare Service duty helpline/email.
- **Targeted Support Meetings:** the service holds regular (between 1-3 per academic year) conversations with schools, using their attendance data to identify pupils and cohorts at risk of poor attendance and agree targeted actions and access to services for those pupils.
- **Other attendance support functions provided by the team include:** Children Missing Education processes, Elective Home Education oversight, Attendance & Belonging and Child Employment, Licensing and Chaperones.
- **Multi-disciplinary support for families:** provide signposting 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.

- **Legal interventions:** take forward attendance legal interventions (using the full range of parental responsibility measures) where voluntary support has not been successful or engaged with.

1.2 Traded Offer

Schools can commission the Local Authority to act on behalf of the school to fulfil attendance expectations. We have had a well embedded traded attendance offer for many years. This is because schools can make autonomous decisions about how they resource their attendance functions.

1.3 National attendance regulation changes

The Department for Education have implemented statutory guidance for local authorities on new attendance duties which will take effect on 19th August 2024, and include new national legislation (rules and laws) for school attendance.

The revised school attendance guidance for all schools nationally will be statutory. They focus on a 'support first approach'. The regulations are to mandate attendance data-sharing by all state schools, to help schools and local authorities put better, more targeted support in place as early as possible. The regulations aim to modernise school attendance and admission registers, including updating the national attendance codes and rules for granting leave of absence. The new National Framework for Penalty Notices for absence is aimed at tackling national inconsistencies with Penalty Notices and increasing the deterrent impact.

1.4 Readiness for the national attendance regulation changes

We have reviewed and revised our attendance operating processes and procedures, including Penalty Notices, which includes a fully revised Local Code of Conduct.

We have supported our schools through communication and explanation about the changes, providing comms, a suite of templates to assist schools and delivered training.

Delivering attendance Targeting Support Meetings (TSMs) with individual schools, we have been piloting these since 2022/23 and rolling them out more fully throughout the academic year 2023/24.

2. Trends in our attendance data

2.1 Absence benchmarking

- Absence rates have increased significantly since the pandemic both in Bristol and nationally.

Overall absence rate

● Bristol, City of ● England

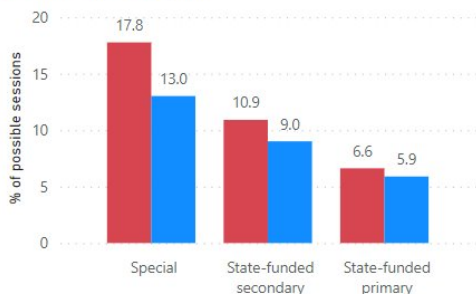


- 26% of pupils were persistently absent in 2022/23 (missed 10% or more sessions). This is above the national average of 21.2% and the gap between Bristol and England has increased between 2021/22 and 2022/23. There is disproportionality in outcomes in attendance for children on Free School Meals, Children in Care, children from global majority communities and the most deprived Wards.
- 3% of pupils in Bristol were severely absent (missed 50% or more of sessions). This is above the national average (2%) and an increase on the previous year (+0.6ppts).
- 5.7% of absences are authorised and 2.9% are unauthorised. The unauthorised absence rate has been increasing since 2020.

(Persistently absent – missing 10% or more of school equivalent to one day or more a fortnight across a full school year, severely absent – missing 50% or more of school)

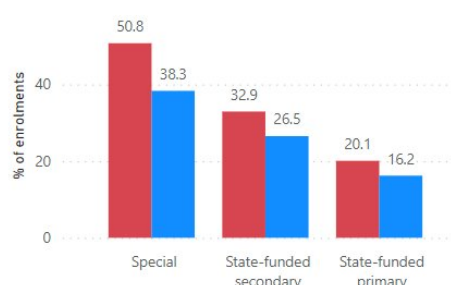
Overall absence rate by school type

● Bristol, City of ● England



Persistent absence rate by school type

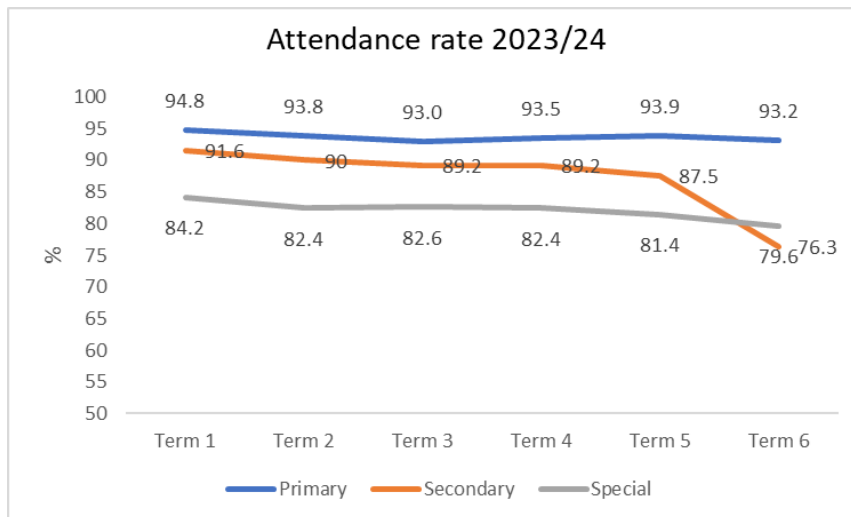
● Bristol, City of ● England



Bristol is in percentile 88 for absence for the autumn term 23/24, when compared to other local authorities nationally. This is an increase of 2 percentile rankings between 22/23 and 23/24.

2.2 Overall attendance rates

The overall attendance rate for the 2023/24 academic year in Bristol was 90.5%. This is the same as the previous year. Terms 1 and 2 in 2023/24 saw higher attendance rates than the previous year but rates fell below the State rates for 2022/23 from term 3 to 6.



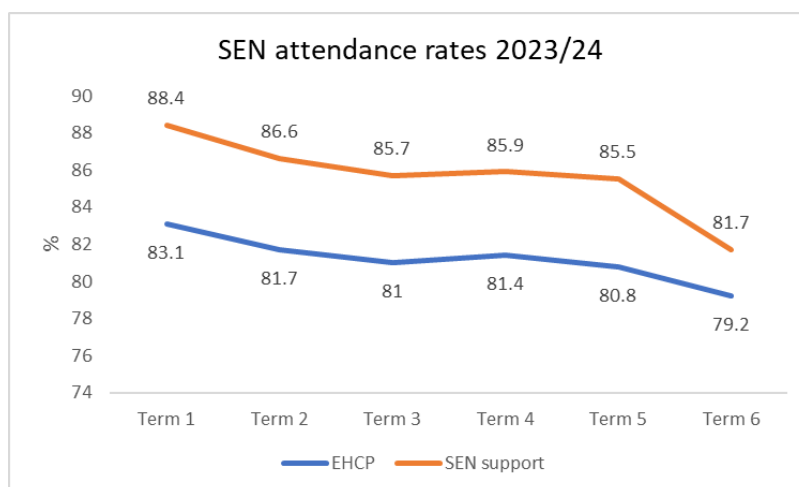
The national average attendance rate for 2023/24 was 92.8%, above the Bristol average of 90.5% (different data sources). Attendance rates in Bristol are lower at each school phase, and particularly at special schools.

Attendance rates are highest in primary schools and lowest in secondary schools. Overall attendance at the end of the academic year by phase is as below the national average:

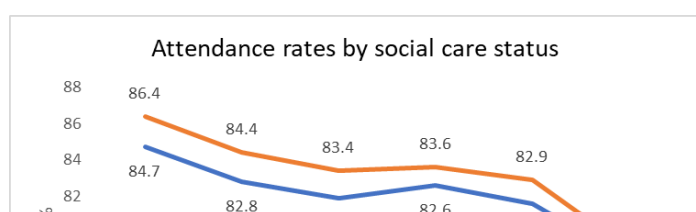
- Primary: 93.7%
- Secondary: 87.7%
- Special Schools: 82.2%

2.3 Disproportionality in attendance

Attendance rates for pupils with SEN are statistically lower than the national average. The overall rate at the end of 2023/24 for pupils with an EHC plan was 81.3% and for pupils with SEN support it was 85.9%. Nationally attendance rates are slightly higher at 86.7% for pupils with an EHC plan and 89.1% for pupils with SEN support (DfE data).



Pupils eligible for free school meals also have lower than average attendance rates with the average for the latest school year being 85.8%. There is a gap in attendance rates for pupils who are and are not eligible for free school meals both locally and nationally. Nationally the



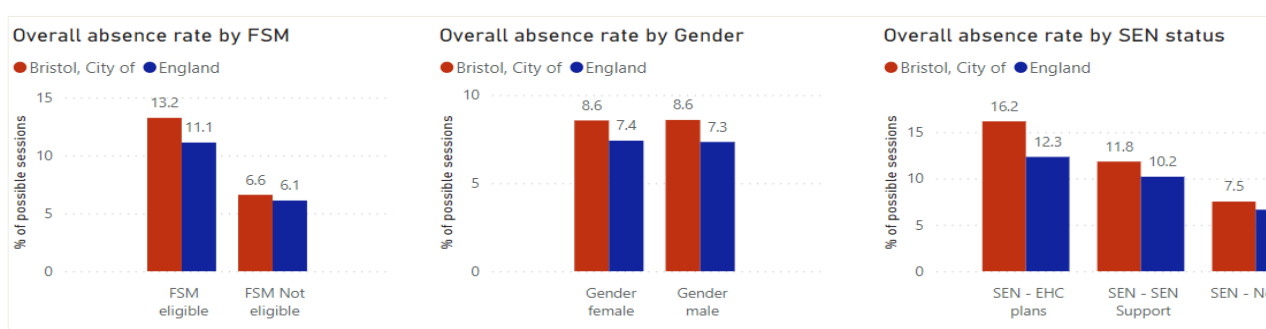
attendance rate for pupils eligible for free school meals was 88.9% (DfE data).

For 2022/23 the average attendance rate for children in care was 82.2% and for children in need it was 83.5%.

Attendance by ethnicity varies with the lowest rates consistently being for Travellers of Irish Heritage, Gypsy/Roma, White & Black Caribbean and Black Caribbean pupils.

2.4 Disproportionality in absence

Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) have the highest absence rates, particularly those supported by an EHC plan. Absence rates for pupils with SEN have increased at a quicker rate in Bristol than seen nationally. Pupils eligible for free school meals also have higher absence rates. Absence rates for FSM pupils have been increasing year on year both locally and nationally but the gap between Bristol and England has increased in the last year.



Source: DfE pupil absence data

Absence rates are higher for Irish Traveller and Gypsy Roma pupils. The Bristol rates are slightly below the national average.

The absence rate for pupils in the most deprived areas has been increasing since 2017/18. A similar trend is seen nationally, but the Bristol rates are above the national average with an 11.1% absence rate for pupils living in the most deprived areas in Bristol compared to 9.3% nationally.

The nationally agreed school attendance and absence codes are determined by the Government/Department for Education and are set out in law via legislation – The School Attendance (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2024

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2024/208/contents/made>. Statutory school attendance guidance – Working together to improve school attendance 2024

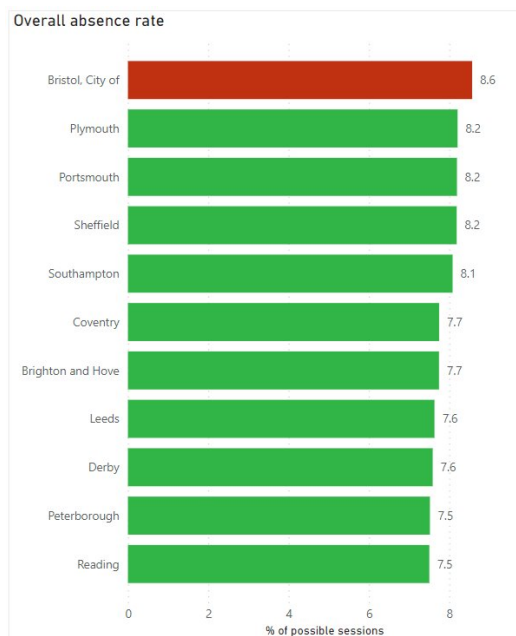
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65f1b048133c22b8eecd38f7/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance_applies_from_19_August_2024_.pdf helps schools and local authorities to interpret and apply the legislation, including application of the standardised nationally agreed absence codes.

There is only 1 nationally agreed absence code for illness – Code I (illness). Its use is broad and covers everything from minor short-term illnesses like coughs & colds to serious long term

physical and mental health conditions. Through the aggregated absence data collections, it is not possible to distinguish between the varying different reasons for illness.

2.5 Statistical neighbours

- Bristol has the highest overall absence rate of our statistical neighbours and has been in the top 2 since 2015/16.
- For special schools, Bristol has the second highest absence rate when compared with stat. neighbours, just below Plymouth which has a rate of 20.4% compared to 17.8% in Bristol.
- Bristol's secondary school absence rate is the highest of stat. neighbours in 2023 at 10.9%
- The persistently absent rate in Bristol is also higher than all statistical neighbours. Brighton is lowest at 21.6%. All are above the national average (21.2%).



2.6 Children Missing Education (CME)

Children missing education are children of compulsory school age who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school. (DfE Children Missing Education Guidance 2016).

CME referrals cover children in the city who are without an educational offer but require one, and also children who are being tracked because they were on a Bristol school roll but have been lawfully taken off roll because they have moved out of the area including moved abroad.

The oversight of the list of CME and delivery of case work is coordinated by the Education Welfare Service.

2.7 Active CME children as of 1st Aug 2024

The local authority reporting that is available for CME is aligned to the Department for Education CME census reporting requirements. This has been voluntary for local authorities since the start of academic year 2022/23 and becomes mandatory for academic year 2024/25 onwards.

Children missing education can act as a vital warning sign to a range of safeguarding issues including neglect, sexual abuse and child sexual and criminal exploitation (Working Together to Improve School Attendance 2024).

Over the course of an academic year, the Education Welfare Service supports more than 2,000 CME children, many of whom successfully return to education, however at present there are 477 children identified as CME as at August 2024.

2.8 Elective Home Education (EHE)

Elective home education is a term used to describe a choice by parents to provide education for their children at home - or at home and in some other way which they choose. This is different to education provided by a local authority otherwise than at a school - for example, tuition for children who are too ill to attend school. (DfE Elective Home Education Guidance 2019).

EHE is where the parent assumes all responsibility for the child's education including the planning, financing and delivering of the education. It includes compulsory school age children only.

Active EHE Cases as at 1st Aug 2024

The local authority reporting that is available for EHE is aligned to the Department for Education EHE census reporting requirements. This has been voluntary for Local Authority's since the start of academic year 2022/23 but becomes mandatory for academic year 2024/25 onwards. Data returns are collected by the DfE from each local authority three times per academic year. Please note, Bristol does not presently report EHE data on a locality or ward basis.

The number of active EHE cases averages a cohort size of approximately 700 children and young people. The cohort size has grown exponentially over the past 7 years. This has been happening nationally and Bristol's data has followed the national trends. The cohort size was increasing pre-pandemic, but this exacerbated the growth further. The numbers of new EHE starters and leavers throughout the academic year ('churn') is significant and means that a proportion of the cohort is also in a state of 'flux' with EHE only being a short to medium term option for some. Bristol's EHE cohort has increased by 190% over the past 7 years.

3 Priority work areas for the service

Increasing attendance and reducing the amount of time children are out of school, particularly for our most vulnerable and priority group children is at the core of priorities for the education service. We recognise that improving attendance is not just an activity the local authority can do alone which is why our approach will be about working with our partners as a city-wide approach.

We have a programme of work as a service to improve the attendance of our children and young people which includes:

- Completion of our attendance self-assessment, working alongside our DfE attendance adviser.
- A city-wide press campaign aimed at promoting good attendance, 'attending school every day is vital for your future', is being developed ready to launch in the Autumn term. We will be working with schools, parents, trusts, key partners to ensure this is impactful.
- We will be launching an Inclusion Board which will be Chaired by the new Director of Education to oversee all aspects of children missing out on education from low attendance to suspensions and with a key focus on priority groups. This Board will also include school and trust representation and initiate in September 2023. This will be an action-oriented

group focusing on designing and delivering the interventions to promote good inclusion and attendance across the city.

- The service is exploring the development of an inclusion index to inform its strategic work with schools and to map key priority areas and priority pupil groups in Bristol.
- We are investing resource to improve the quality of data and reporting on attendance and children missing out on education. Not all schools presently provide attendance data to the local authority or Department for Education as this is not a statutory requirement until the new regulations take effect, however we continue to work with schools to encourage this practice.

Officer Recommendations:

1. That the Children and Young People Policy Committee note this report.

Corporate Strategy alignment: Children and Education Services play a critical role in delivering corporate strategy commitments across all its themes. The majority of key activity referred to in this report falls within key corporate strategy themes: children and young people: A city where every child belongs and every child gets the best start in life, whatever circumstances they were born into; and Economy and skills: Economic growth that builds inclusive and resilient communities, decarbonises the city and offers equity of opportunity.

City Benefits: This report supports the committee's understanding of challenges related to Attendance of children across education settings to improve outcomes for children in Bristol.

Consultation Details: The content of this report has been discussed with the Director of Education.

Background Documents: [Working together to improve school attendance](#)

1. Finance Advice: No direct financial implications arising from this specific report, this report does highlight very significant issues that are directly influencing expenditure within the directorate.

Finance Business Partner: Travis Young Finance Business Partner, Children & Education 7 August 2024

2. Legal Advice: This report is for noting and will assist the Committee in ensuring the Council is complying with its statutory duty.

Legal Team Leader:

3. Implications on IT:

IT Team Leader:

4. HR Advice: There are no significant HR implications for Bristol City Council employees arising from this report.

HR Partner: Lorna Laing, HR Business Partner, Children and Education Directorate 7 August 2024

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Further essential background / detail on the proposal	NO
Appendix B – Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)	NO
Appendix C – Environmental Impact Assessment (Environmental Impact Assessment	NO
Appendix D – Decision Risk Assessment	NO
Appendix E – Exempt Information	NO
Appendix F – Details of consultation carried out - internal and external	NO
Appendix G – Options appraisal matrix	NO
Appendix H – Business case / financial analysis	NO