

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 24 November 2022

SUBJECT: Absence and Exclusion Report for Bury Schools

REPORT FROM: Councillor Lucy Smith, Cabinet member for Children and Education Services

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1.0 BACKGROUND – PART ONE - ABSENCE

1.1 The latest published data for absence which includes all Bury schools and enables comparison with national averages covers the Autumn Term 2021 and Spring Term 2022.

The data includes children and young people in Year 1 through to Year 11. The data does not include figures for Bury's Pupil Referral Unit, Spring lane School, as these settings are not included in the national data set.

1.2 The 2021/2022 academic year was the first full year without school 'closures' due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During 'closures' schools remained open for vulnerable children and children of key workers.

1.3 This report makes comparisons between absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022 and Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019 which was the last full year pre-pandemic.

1.4 During the pandemic and following the full re-opening of schools, the Department for Education (DfE) introduced new coding, the X code, this was neither an absence or a present mark. The 'X' code included 'bubble' closures. As the rules on isolation changed a new sub-code for Illness (I02) was introduced for children and young people who were absent due to having COVID-19.

1.5 Sessions missed due to COVID-19 were not included in the absence for individual children and young people.

1.6 The changing nature of absence coding and school 'closures' means that meaningful comparisons in the period between 2018/19 and 2021/22 at LA level cannot be made. At individual school level the figures give an indication of the impact of the pandemic which has been disproportionate across Bury schools and across classes within individual schools.

1.7 This report includes absence, persistent absence and severe absence.

Absence	Number of sessions missed/ Total number of possible sessions
Persistent absence (PA)	Absent for 10% or more sessions
Severe absence (SA)	Absent for 50% or more sessions – <i>this is a relatively new definition introduced by the Department of Education</i>

There are two sessions each day, one morning session and one afternoon session.

1.8 Schools have a statutory duty to take registers twice a day and record attendance/absence using national codes in accordance with regulation 6 of the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006 as amended. These codes are grouped as authorised absence, unauthorised absence, attending an approved educational activity and unable to attend due to exceptional circumstances.

1.9 Following consultation the DfE issued new guidance [‘Working together to improve school attendance’](#) in May 2022 which applied since September 2022. The expectation is that this guidance will become statutory for September 2023.

1.10 We are grateful to our schools, as the majority are sharing their data with us regularly. However there have been challenges in processing and cleaning the data in addition to the changes in coding for COVID-19 which have limited the effectiveness of analysis. From this September, we expect coding to be consistent across the academic year.

1.11 The DfE has made clear in its guidance that collection of data from schools should be automatic which links to changes in IT systems at the LA. Alongside this the DfE introduced a voluntary collection of attendance data from schools which is automated. Over 80% of Bury schools have signed up and we are encouraging the remaining schools to do so. It is our understanding that the DfE intends to make sign-up compulsory and that the secure access website will continue to evolve.

2.0 ABSENCE DATA

2.1 Overall Absence

Phase	Bury			National		
	% absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference	% absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference
Primary	3.8	5.6	1.8	3.9	6.2	2.3
Secondary	5.4	8.4	3.0	5.2	8.6	3.4
Special	8.2	12.5	4.3	10.1	13.2	3.1
All schools	4.5	6.9	2.4	4.5	7.4	2.9

Absence in all phases increased between Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019 and Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022 with primary schools seeing the lowest increase and special school the highest. Overall, the increase in absence was 2.4% which equates to an additional 6.5 sessions missed per pupil in the two terms i.e. just over 3 school days.

Absence in Bury primary schools remains below national figures, which is positive, and saw a smaller increase between Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019 and Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022. Absence in Bury secondary schools was slightly higher than national in Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019 however it was below national in Autumn 2021/Spring 2022 having increased by a smaller percentage than national in that period. Absence in Bury's special schools remains below national however the increase between the two periods was 1.2% higher than the national increase.

Our priority is to improve attendance, initially, to at least pre-pandemic levels.

2.2 Persistent Absence

Phase	Bury			National		
	% persistent absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% persistent absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference	% persistent absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% persistent absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference
Primary	8.0	15.4	7.4	8.4	18.2	9.8
Secondary	13.5	25.9	12.4	12.7	26.7	14.0
Special	26.7	41.5	14.8	28.5	40.2	11.7
All schools	10.6	20.4	9.8	10.5	22.3	11.8

All phases saw a significant increase in the percentage of pupils classed as persistently absent between Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019 and Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022. For all schools, the figure almost doubled however this was a lower increase than national. All increases were lower than national with the exception of Bury special schools.

As persistent absence is defined as missing 10% or more sessions this would equate to missing a minimum of just over 27 sessions (14.5 days) in the two terms. Whilst Bury's overall figures are better than national in Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022, one fifth of our pupils (over 5000 pupils) missed almost three weeks of learning time in schools.

2.3 Severe Absence

Phase	Bury			National		
	% severe absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% severe absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference	% severe absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% severe absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference
Primary	0.33	0.37	0.04	0.39	0.63	0.24
Secondary	1.11	2.58	1.47	1.24	2.47	1.23
Special	5.47	5.25	-0.22	4.44	5.61	1.17
All schools	0.73	1.41	0.68	0.81	1.53	0.72

Severe absence increased in Bury between Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019 and Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022 by a slightly lower percentage than national. Bury's special schools saw a drop in severe absence in this period however secondary schools saw a greater increase than national and the figure for Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022 is the only one that is above national, albeit by 0.11%.

Severely absent is defined as missing 50% or more sessions. In Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022, 373 pupils were severely absent with 299 of these being in the secondary phase.

2.4 Absence of Vulnerable Groups

In primary, the groups with the highest absence in Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022 were pupils with an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) at 9.7% followed by pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM). These groups also had the highest persistent absence. In terms of severe absence the most significant group was EHCP pupils. There was no significant gender difference or English as an additional language (EAL) compared with English first language for overall absence. However, a higher percentage of EAL pupils were classed as persistent or severely absent compared with non-EAL and a higher percentage of boys were severely absent compared with girls.

In secondary, the groups with the highest absence in Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022 were pupils with special educational needs and/ or disabilities (SEND) and those FSM eligible pupils. These groups also had the highest persistent absence and severe absence. A higher percentage of girls than boys were absent, persistently absent and severely absent. The percentage of White British heritage pupils who were severely absent was almost double that of non-White British.

Across primary and secondary, the ethnic groups with the highest absence figures were travellers of Irish heritage and Gypsy Roma heritage pupils however in secondary White and Black Caribbean and White and Black African heritage has absence figures just below travellers with Irish heritage.

2.5 Authorised Absence

Phase	Bury			National		
	% authorised absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% authorised absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference	% authorised absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% authorised absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference
Primary	3.0	4.6	1.6	2.9	5.0	2.1
Secondary	3.8	6.0	2.2	3.7	6.3	2.6
Special	7.4	10.5	3.1	7.9	10.5	2.6
All schools	3.4	5.3	1.9	3.3	5.7	2.4

There was an increase in the percentage of authorised absence between Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019 and Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022 with the largest increase in special schools which was higher than the national increase. Overall Bury's increase in authorised absence was lower than the national increase by 0.5%.

3.8% of authorised absences were code as Illness (not appointments) in primary, 4.9% in secondary. 0.23% of authorised absences were for medical appointments in primary, 0.31% in secondary.

2.6 Unauthorised Absence

Phase	Bury			National		
	% unauthorised absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% unauthorised absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference	% unauthorised absence Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019	% unauthorised absence Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022	Difference
Primary	0.9	1.0	0.1	1.0	1.2	0.2
Secondary	1.6	2.3	0.7	1.5	2.4	0.9
Special	0.8	2.0	1.2	2.2	2.7	0.5
All schools	1.2	1.6	0.4	1.2	1.7	0.5

The percentage of unauthorised absence in Bury was in line with national in Autumn 2018/ Spring 2019 for all schools and slightly lower than national in Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022. Special schools saw a larger than national increase however the figure for Bury special schools remained below the national figure for special schools.

In primary schools, 0.38% of unauthorised absences were for Family Holiday (not agreed or days in excess of those agreed) with the same percentage classed as not covered by any other code. In secondary schools, 0.21% of unauthorised absences were for Family Holiday with 1.86% classed as not covered by any other code.

2.7 Use of the X Code

Not attending school due to COVID circumstances decreased across all phases between Autumn 2021 and Spring 2022. In both primary and secondary schools 0.97% of coding was against the X code across these two terms.

2.8 Lates

In primary schools 1.1% of present codes are lates before closure of registers, in secondary schools this is 3.1%.

2.9 Year Groups

In the period Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022, **absence** in primary year groups showed minor variation however Years 1 and 6 had slightly higher absence than the average figure for Bury primary schools. In secondary schools, Years 9 – 11 had absences above the Bury average figure, the highest absence being in Year 10. Absence in Year 7 was the lowest at 6.4% however this was above the primary average and absence in Year 6 (5.8%).

In relation to the percentage of **persistent absence**, Years 1, 4 and 6 have higher than the Bury average figure in primary with Years 8 – 11 being higher than the average figure for Bury secondary schools; there is a marked difference between Year 7 (8% below the Bury average) to just above (0.1%) in Year 8 and Years 9 – 11 with Year 9 having the highest persistent absence figure of 3.1% above the average.

In relation to the percentage of **severe absence**, Years 1, 5 & 6 have above Bury average figures for primary with Years 9 – 11 being above the Bury average figure for secondary; Year 10 has the highest severe absence at 3.77%.

2.10 Early Help Localities

Using the Early Help localities of Bury, Radcliffe and Whitefield the highest **absence and persistent absence** in Autumn 2021/ Spring 2022 was in Bury and the lowest was in Whitefield. However, **severe absence** was highest in Radcliffe with Bury and Whitefield being lower and with just 0.01% difference between the two localities.

3.0 Challenges and Next Steps

3.1 A key priority for Bury is to ensure 'live' attendance data is available for all Bury schools and therefore the ability to undertake full analyses. For example, under the new duty for the Virtual School we need to be able to monitor the attendance of children with a social worker and that requires a full data set and two different IT systems being able to link together effectively.

3.2 The DfE guidance 'Working together to improve school attendance' has been in place since September 2022. This requires significant changes in, and probably renaming of, the Education Welfare Service within the School Attendance Team. The traditional role of Education Welfare Officers in visiting homes is no longer the case with the role being replaced by a school attendance support officer.

The DfE guidance makes clear the expectations of schools, trust boards and governing bodies and local authorities. The local authority is expected to:

- Rigorously track local attendance data
- Have a School Attendance Support Team which provides the following core functions free of charge:
 - Communication and advice
 - Targeting Support Meetings
 - Multi-disciplinary support for families
 - Legal intervention
- Monitor and improve the attendance of children with a social worker through the Virtual School

3.3 Bury has continued to offer a Service Level Agreement (SLA) which provides a named Education Welfare Officer to those schools that buy back. 50% of Bury schools purchased the SLA from April 2022. The support was flexible with one high school purchasing 2.5 days per week to other schools having half a day per fortnight to others have case load work only.

Pre-summer, the intention was communicated with schools to cease delivery of the SLA from January 2023. However, schools have continued to have access to their time allocation with Education Welfare Officers following through existing cases and supporting the buy-back schools to transition to the new model.

3.4 The 2022/2023 academic year is a transition year for buy-back schools and for the local authority as we move to full delivery, in line with the principles within the DfE guidance by September 2023. To support all Bury schools, a draft model attendance policy was made available in September. The policy has been through consultation and a final version is now available. Comprehensive guidance to accompany the model policy is currently out for consultation. The guidance will be launched later this autumn term.

3.5 The expectation within the DfE guidance is that the revised service will work with all schools including independent schools and alternative provision. Currently, the focus is on Bury's state-funded schools. As the new service is to be delivered at no cost to schools and the DfE has stated that it should be able to be delivered within existing resources there are financial implications and potential demand pressures.

3.6 Currently the School Attendance Service and Education Welfare Service is within the Early Help Directorate of Children's Services. As attendance is a statutory duty of the local authority the intention is that it will move into the Education and Skills Directorate whilst retaining key links to Early Help in supporting families to improve attendance. This is linked to Phase 2 of the restructure of Children's Services.

4.0 Summary

Members may wish to note that attendance figures for Bury schools overall are better than the national which reflects schools' hard work in delivering these figures. However, the fact remains that absence is too high and, initially, the collective focus needs to be on improving overall absence to pre-pandemic levels and reducing the number of children and young people that are classed as either persistently or severely absent.

As governors in Bury schools, members may wish to ask if governing bodies they serve on have identified a lead governor for attendance; this is a recommendation in Bury's model attendance policy.

Members may also wish to refer to the [DfE's Summary table of responsibilities for school attendance \(May 2022\)](#) which provides guidance on the roles of parents, schools, academy trustees and governing bodies as well as local authorities for all pupils, pupils at risk of becoming persistently absent, persistently absent pupils, severely absent pupils. The guidance also outlines expectations for supporting cohorts of pupils with lower attendance than their peers, those with medical conditions or SEND with poor attendance and pupils with a social worker.

5.0 BACKGROUND – PART TWO - EXCLUSIONS

The latest published exclusions data is for the academic year 2020/21. As with absence these figures are compared with 2019/2019, the last full academic year pre-pandemic. However, it must be noted that the 2020/21 academic year was disrupted by COVID and so any comparisons are only potentially meaningful when comparing Bury picture with the national picture.

Figures are based on rates which relates to the number of suspensions or exclusions as a percentage of the school population which makes for a fair comparison between schools of differing population sizes. In this report this makes it a fair comparison of Bury with national rates.

The DfE released updated guidance in September 2022 on [Suspension and Permanent Exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England](#) to reflect the government’s ambition to create high standards of behaviour in schools so that children and young people are protected from disruption and can learn and thrive in a calm, safe and supportive environment.

The guidance provides schools and other bodies involved with information so that they can continue to use suspensions (formerly known as fixed-term exclusions) and permanent exclusions appropriately.

There have been changes to the legislation governing the disciplinary school suspension and permanent exclusion process which are reflected in the guidance.

Part two of the DfE’s guidance outlines the updates from the previous edition.

5.1 Permanent Exclusions

Phase	Bury			National		
	Permanent exclusion rate 2018/19	Permanent exclusion rate 2020/21	Difference	Permanent exclusion rate 2018/19	Permanent exclusion rate 2020/21	Difference
Primary	0	0.01	+0.01	0.02	0.01	-0.01
Secondary	0.18	0.07	-0.11	0.20	0.10	-0.10
Special	0	0	0	0.06	0.03	-0.03
All schools	0.07	0.03	-0.04	0.10	0.05	-0.05

In 2020/2021, Bury’s overall permanent exclusion rate was 0.03 which equates to 3 permanent exclusions for every 10,000 pupils whereas nationally the figure equated to 5 permanent exclusions for every 10,000 pupils.

Secondary permanent exclusions were below national in both academic years and saw a similar drop between 2018/2019 and 2020/2021.

5.2 Suspensions

Phase	Bury			National		
	Suspension rate 2018/19	Suspension rate 2020/21	Difference	Suspension rate 2018/19	Suspension rate 2020/21	Difference
Primary	1.36	0.70	-0.66	1.41	0.99	-0.42
Secondary	15.25	10.40	-4.85	10.75	8.48	-2.27
Special	1.61	1.37	-0.24	11.32	7.29	-4.03
All schools	6.62	4.45	-2.17	5.36	4.25	-1.11

Suspension rates reduced in Bury schools and nationally between the two academic years however, it should be noted that schools were 'closed' in the spring term 2021 and pupils were not in school across the academic year due to COVID-19.

Bury's suspension rates in primary schools are below national in both academic years and saw a greater reduction in the rate than national between 2018/2019 and 2020/2021.

Suspension rates in Bury's secondary schools are above national in both academic years although there was a greater reduction in the rate than national between 2018/2019 and 2020/2021.

Suspension rates in Bury's special schools are much lower than national.

Overall, Bury's suspension rates are higher than national however the gap above national reduced to 0.20 from 2018/2019 to 2020/2021.

5.3 Pupils with more than one suspension

Phase	Bury			National		
	1+ Suspension rate 2018/19	1+ Suspension rate 2020/21	Difference	1+ Suspension rate 2018/19	1+ Suspension rate 2020/21	Difference
Primary	0.50	0.34	-0.16	0.63	0.52	-0.11
Secondary	6.53	5.42	-1.11	4.93	4.38	-0.55
Special	1.34	1.14	-0.20	4.65	3.66	-0.99
All schools	2.79	2.30	-0.49	2.44	2.20	-0.24

Both Bury primary schools and special schools have lower suspension rates than national in the two academic years with special schools being well below national.

The suspension rate for pupils with more than one suspension is higher in Bury, due to secondary school rates, than nationally although Bury saw a greater decrease than national between 2018/2019 and 2020/2021.

5.5 Exclusions and suspensions in Bury primary schools

Two pupils were permanently excluded from two Bury primary schools in 2021/2022. This rate would be in line with the national figure for 2020/2021 (national data for the 2021/2022 academic year is not yet available).

In terms of suspensions, 47% of Bury primary schools suspended one or more pupils in 2021/2022. The majority of suspensions were for physical assault against an adult, persistent disruptive behaviour and physical assault against a pupil. The overall rate is below the national figure for 2020/2021.

5.5 Exclusions and suspensions in Bury secondary schools

The Social and Emotional Mental Health Partnership Manager for Bury secondary schools produces an annual partnership report. Whilst data for the 2021/2022 is yet to be published, Bury's provisional figures indicate a rise in the rate of permanent exclusions largely due to very high figures from a small number of schools; 45% of permanent exclusions came from two schools. The suspension rate is similar affected by high figures in a small number of schools, one with extremely high figures accounting for 28% of suspensions.

At this stage there are no national figures available for us to put Bury's provisional figures in context.

Analysis of the 2021/2022 provisional data indicates that a higher proportion of boys and pupils with no special educational need and/ or disability were permanently excluded. The vast majority of exclusions are from pupils with White British heritage. Year 10 saw the highest number of permanent exclusions followed by both Years 8 and 9.

The Partnership Manager is continuing to work with all secondary school leaders to reduce suspensions and exclusions and is meeting regularly with the schools with the high figures to discuss earlier intervention for pupils at risk of suspension or permanent exclusion. In addition the Director of Education has held meetings with the schools with the highest exclusion figures.

Currently there are three strategic priorities which have been identified, with associated activities, to drive improvements through the secondary inclusion partnership:

1. Realign the Partnership, in order to ensure a coherent, effective and efficient, continuum of provision for SEMH.
2. Ensure Partnership Protocol and Practice support early identification and intervention, in order to reduce exclusion and placement breakdown.
3. Develop outreach support and preventative programmes in order to ensure early identification and a graduated approach to assessment and intervention.

A comprehensive toolkit has been developed, which is currently under consultation, in order to improve consistency across the partnership. The toolkit will support the development of practice, processes and protocols in order to ensure a multi-agency approach to supporting schools to reduce exclusion.

6.0 Summary

Members may wish to note the work of Bury's primary schools and in the majority of secondary schools in supporting children and young people so that suspensions and permanent exclusion are reduced.

List of Background Papers:-

DfE guidance [Working together to improve school attendance \(May 2022\)](#)

DfE [Summary table of responsibilities for school attendance \(May 2022\)](#)

DfE guidance [Suspension and Permanent Exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England \(September 2022\)](#)

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Executive Director sign off Date:

JET Meeting Date: