

CITY OF BRADFORD METROPOLITAN DISTRICT COUNCIL JOINT STRATEGIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND SCHOOL ABSENCE

December 2024

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Executive summary

Introduction

School attendance is vital to enable children and young people to achieve their full potential through education and beyond. A number of local and national initiatives are in place to support children and young people, their families, and schools to reduce the risk and impact of persistent absence from school.

Who is at risk and why?

A number of risk factors exist for poor school attendance. These include a child's age, sex, ethnicity, the presence of special educational needs or disabilities, and growing up in a low-income household. Emotionally-based school avoidance is a particular area of concern for children and young people, their families and schools, and one which the Council and partners are working hard to address.

Unmet need and gaps

Since before the covid-19 pandemic, school absence has increased in Bradford and nationally, and remains above pre-covid levels. Although absence rates in Bradford have partially improved or plateaued over the past year, the proportion of children experiencing severe persistent absence continues to increase in secondary schools, and the rates of unauthorised absence continues to increase, with much higher rates than in the region and the country as a whole. There are significant inequalities in school absence across the district, with children at particularly high risk of missing school including those living in areas of deprivation, children in receipt of free school meals, children attending special schools and those with EHCPs or SEN support, children from some ethnic minority backgrounds, and children with English as an additional language.

Recommendations for consideration

	Recommendation
	Research
1	Continue to develop cross-system work combining research and practice to come up with innovative insights and solutions to help children and young people attend school.
2	Qualitative research/work directly with children, young people and families should be done to understand the reasons for absence classified as "illness" and "unauthorised other".
	Support to schools
3	Identify children at high risk of poor school attendance early through EYFS scores, geographic location, and pupil characteristics, to offer early, bespoke support if attendance begins to decline
4	Protect the budget for the vital investment into Attendance Support services to maintain the current work and relationships which have already been developed between the council, schools, and wider partners

5	Continue to deliver universal support to all schools, but target additional efforts in areas of deprivation, those with communities at higher risk of school absence, and special schools
Support to communities	
6	Ensure that all professionals in contact with children, young people and families are aware of the importance of school attendance, and know what to do if they are concerned about a young person's attendance.
7	For schools with particularly low attendance and high rates of persistent absence, school attendance officers and schools should work via local community groups to reach families who are disengaged from schools and services.
Monitoring	
8	Schools to collate and submit data regularly, and in a timely, complete way, to enable the local authority to act quickly on any concerns
9	Local authority to monitor data routinely to identify any concerns with a school or individual at an early stage.

Full JSNA report

1 Who is at risk and why?

There are a number of factors which predict a higher risk of school absence. These include: age, ethnicity, and sex of the child, presence of special educational needs and disabilities, having English as an additional language, and growing up in a low-income household^{1, 2}.

There is a wealth of evidence linking poor school attendance to worse outcomes for children and young people³. School attendance is vitally important for children and young people to reach their full potential. Analysis of data from 2018/19 by the Department for Education⁴ shows that:

“Pupils with higher attainment at KS2 and KS4 had lower levels of absence over the key stage compared to those with lower attainment.

- Pupils who did not achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in 2019 had an overall absence rate of 4.7% over the key stage, compared with 3.5% among pupils who achieved the expected standard and 2.7% among those who achieved the higher standard.
- Pupils who did not achieve grade 9 to 4 in English and maths GCSEs in 2019 had an overall absence rate of 8.8% over the key stage, compared with 5.2% among pupils who achieved a grade 4 and 3.7% among pupils who achieved grade 9 to 5 in both English and maths.

Generally, the higher the percentage of sessions missed across the key stage at KS2 and KS4, the lower the level of attainment at the end of the key stage.

- Among pupils with no missed sessions over KS2, 83.9% achieved the expected standard compared to 40.2% of pupils who were persistently absent.
- Among pupils with no missed sessions over KS4, 83.7% achieved grades 9 to 4 in English and maths compared to 35.6% of pupils who were persistently absent.”

Research shows that the impact of missing school varies depending on the reasons for absence, with truancy, illness, and exceptional family circumstances all having negative effects on later academic results³. A number of possible reasons for this link have been

¹ Wood M. L., Gunning L., Mon-Williams M. (2024) The relationship between ‘school readiness’ and later persistent absenteeism. *R. Soc. Open Sci.*11240272. Available at: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/author/Wood%2C+Megan+L>

² N8 Research Partnership (2024). An evidence-based plan for addressing poverty with and through education settings. Available at: https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Poverty_Report_2.pdf

³ Klein, M., Sosu, E. M., & Dare, S. (2022). School Absenteeism and Academic Achievement: Does the Reason for Absence Matter? *AERA Open*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211071115>

⁴ Department for Education (2022). Ad hoc statistics: The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4. Available online at: [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4, Academic year 2018/19 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-link-between-absence-and-attainment-at-ks2-and-ks4)

suggested: a result of missing learning time; children engaging in harmful behaviour while out of school; a direct impact of poor mental or physical health on both learning and school attendance; and absence leading to worse relationships with teachers and other students.

2 Size of the issue locally

Absence and Persistent Absence rates for Bradford's children and young people are poor compared to the rest of the country. For primary, secondary, and special schools, Bradford ranks below the majority of local authorities in England.

School Type	Bradford ranking compared to other English LAs – Overall Absence	Bradford Ranking compared to other English LAs – PA	Bradford Ranking compared to other English LAs – Severe Absence
<i>Primary</i>	<i>133 of 152</i>	<i>137 of 152</i>	<i>131 of 152</i>
<i>Secondary</i>	<i>149 of 152</i>	<i>145 of 152</i>	<i>148 of 152</i>
<i>Special</i>	<i>103 of 150</i>	<i>91 of 150</i>	<i>117 of 150</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>148 of 153</i>	<i>146 of 153</i>	<i>148 of 153</i>

Table 1: Bradford's persistent absence (PA) and overall absence ranking compared to other English local authorities, Autumn term 2023/24

2.1 Absence Rate

Absence is recorded by state-funded primary, secondary, and special schools and sent to the Department for Education (DfE). The *absence rate* is the number of sessions of school missed as a proportion of total sessions possible. A number of codes are available to describe reasons for absence (see appendix 1), and are broadly divided into *authorised absences* (absence with permission from the school, including absences where a satisfactory explanation has been provided, e.g. illness), and *unauthorised absences* (absence without permission from the school, including all unexplained or unjustified absences and arrivals after registration has closed).

The most recent school attendance data published by the DfE shows that attendance patterns have undergone significant changes since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, with increasing absence rates being seen nationally. The increase is more pronounced within Bradford, as highlighted in Chart 1: the absence rate across Yorkshire and Humber (Y&H) and England as a whole follow similar trajectories, with the rate of absence in Bradford rising above this.

The gap between Bradford and national data narrowed in 2021/22 but widened again in 2022/23. While absence rates slightly declined nationally and regionally, they continued to increase in Bradford, albeit at a slower pace than seen previously.

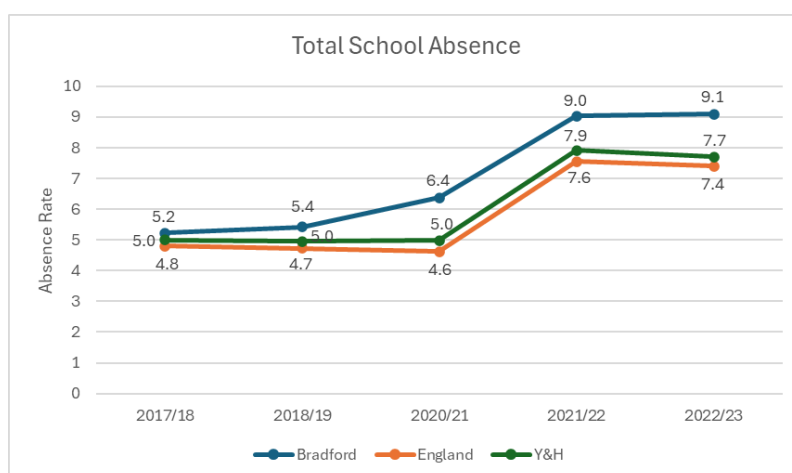


Chart 1: Total School Absence with national and regional comparators

2.2 Authorised/Unauthorised Absence

The rise in school absences within Bradford is primarily driven by an increase in unauthorised absence. Whilst authorised absence remains at levels similar to those observed nationally and regionally, the rate of unauthorised absence is higher.

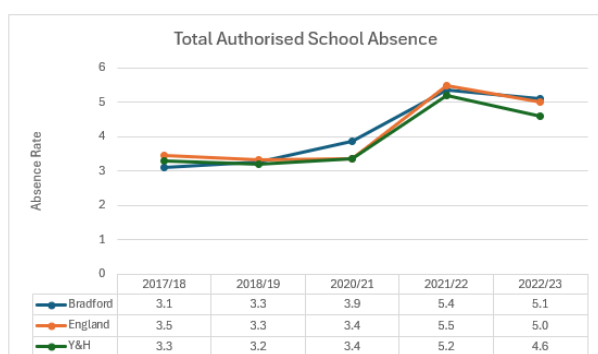


Chart 2: Authorised School Absence

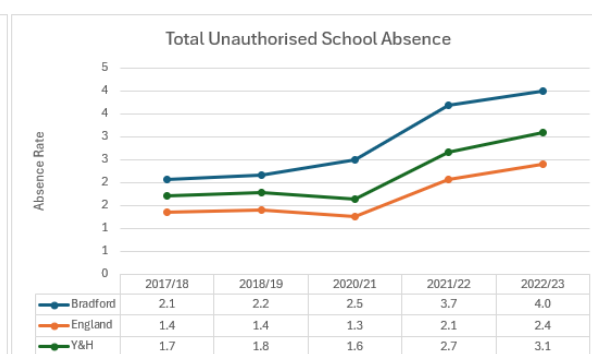


Chart 3: Unauthorised School Absence

2.2.1 Phase

The absence rate within the primary school phase experienced a slight decrease in 2022/23 compared to the previous year. A larger decrease was seen nationally and regionally resulting in the gap between Bradford and the national rate increasing again after narrowing in 2021/22. The absence rate within the secondary school phase continues to rise, though at a slower pace in 2022/23 than seen previously. The national and regional secondary school absence rate remained static in 2022/23, resulting in a further widening of the gap between Bradford and comparators.

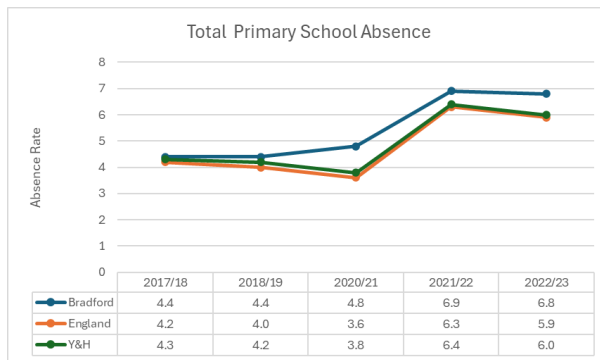


Chart 4: Primary School Absence

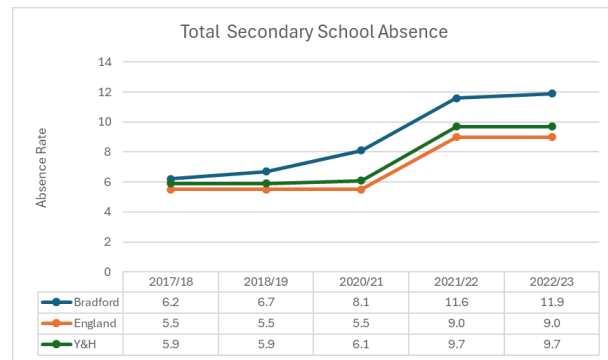


Chart 5: Secondary School Absence

2.2.2 Statistical Neighbours

Local authorities' statistical neighbours are defined using a methodology that groups local authorities with similar characteristics, allowing for meaningful comparisons and benchmarking.

Chart 6 shows that, when compared to our statistical neighbours, Bradford has the highest absence rate for 2022/23 at 9.1%. For comparison, Telford and Wrekin have the lowest absence rate with 6.8% and Walsall has the next highest absence rate compared to Bradford, at 8.0%. The gap between Bradford and the national average is 1.7%.

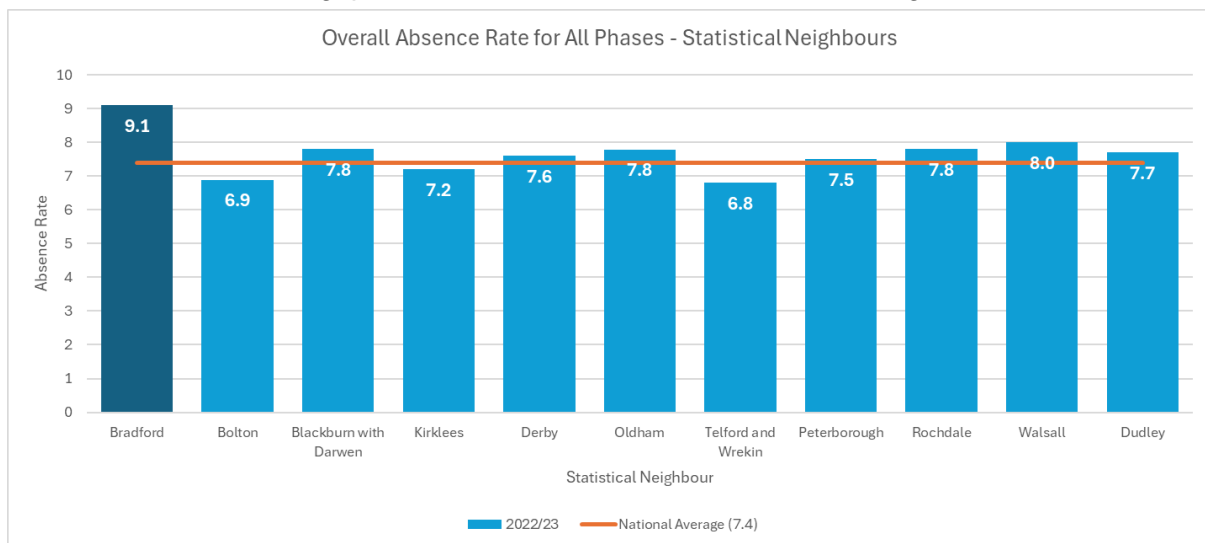


Chart 6: Overall Absence Rate compared to Statistical Neighbours

2.3 Persistent Absence

Persistent Absence (PA) is defined as a percentage of pupils attending fewer than 90% of their own possible sessions. The PA rate increased significantly across England post-pandemic; however, the most recent data published by the DfE shows a slight decrease. Although PA within Bradford is higher than the national average, it follows a similar pattern.

As with the absence rate, the gap between Bradford and the national average slightly narrowed in 2021/22, but it has increased again in 2022/23 and now stands at 6.6%.

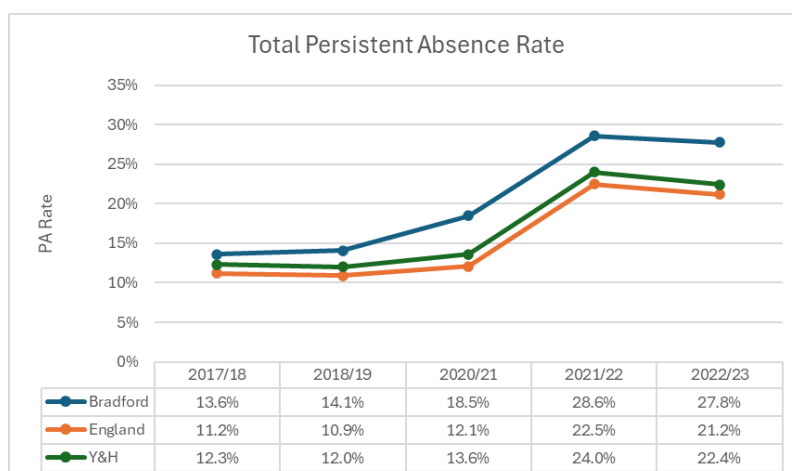


Chart 7: PA Rate with national and regional comparators

2.3.1 Phase

Bradford's PA rate is consistently higher than the national and regional average across both the Primary and Secondary school phases. Although the gap between Bradford and the national average is more pronounced within the Secondary school phase, this disparity remained relatively stable in the most recent year compared to Primary schools. PA within the Primary school phase decreased in Bradford recently, but at a slower pace than was experienced nationally.

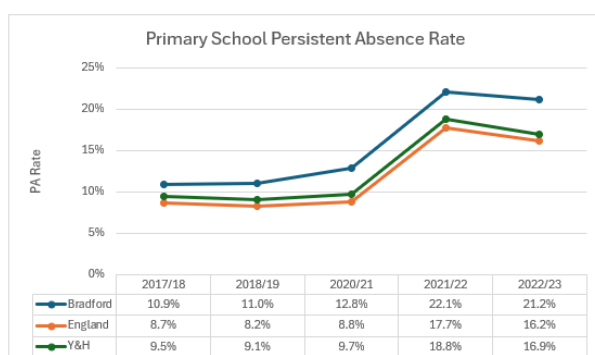


Chart 8: PA Rate - Primary School Phase

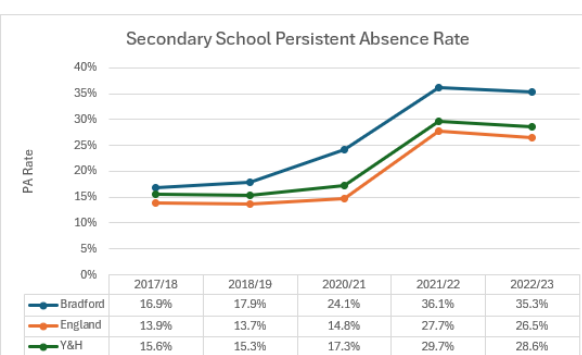


Chart 9: PA Rate - Secondary School Phase

2.3.2 Statistical Neighbours

Compared to our statistical neighbours, Bradford has the highest PA rate, at 27.8%. Telford and Wrekin have the lowest PA rate with 19.3%, a gap of 8.5%. The gap between Bradford and England as a whole is 6.6%.

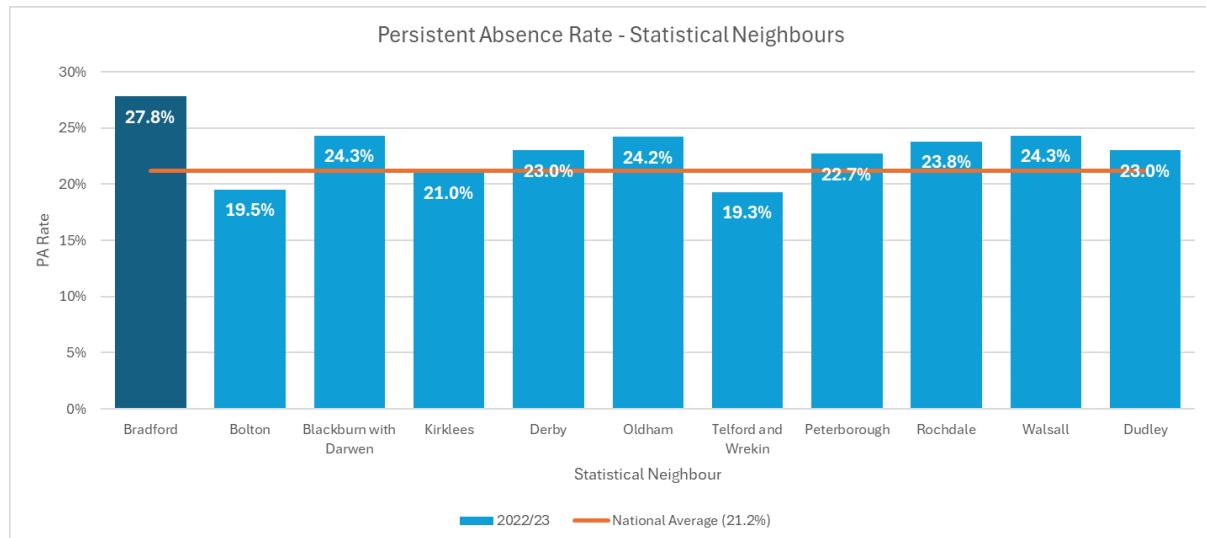


Chart 10: PA Rate compared to Statistical Neighbours

2.4 Severe Absence

Severe Absence (SA) is defined as the percentage of pupils attending fewer than 50% of their own possible sessions. Severe absence has been steadily increasing across England post-pandemic. This increase has been more evident within Bradford than elsewhere on average, as demonstrated in chart 11 below, where the gap between Bradford and the national average is gradually increasing.

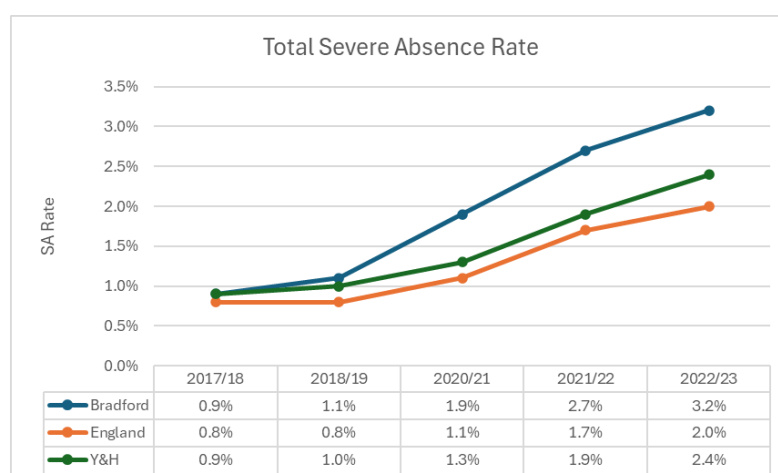


Chart 11: SA Rate with national and regional comparators

2.4.1 Phase

As with PA, the SA rate is higher within the Secondary school phase, and the gap between Bradford and the national average is also more pronounced. Although the PA rate in Bradford's primary phase had not reduced in line with the reduction seen nationally, Bradford's SA rate plateaued in 2022/23 when national and regional rates increased slightly. This has resulted in a narrowing of the gap between Bradford and the national average across the Primary school phase for SA.

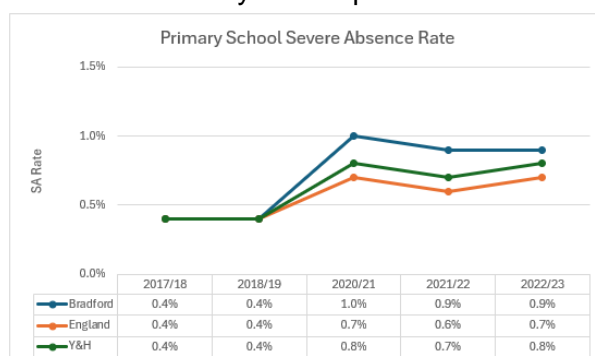


Chart 12: SA Rate – Primary School Phase

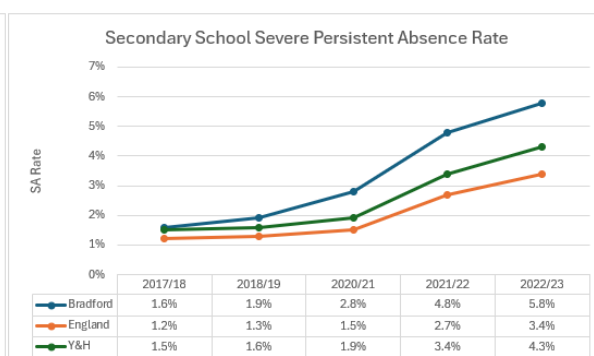


Chart 13: SA Rate – Secondary School Phase

2.4.2 Statistical Neighbours

Compared to our statistical neighbours, Bradford has the highest proportion of children with SA at 3.2%. Bolton has the lowest SA rate with 1.6%: half the rate of Bradford. The gap between Bradford and national is 1.2%.

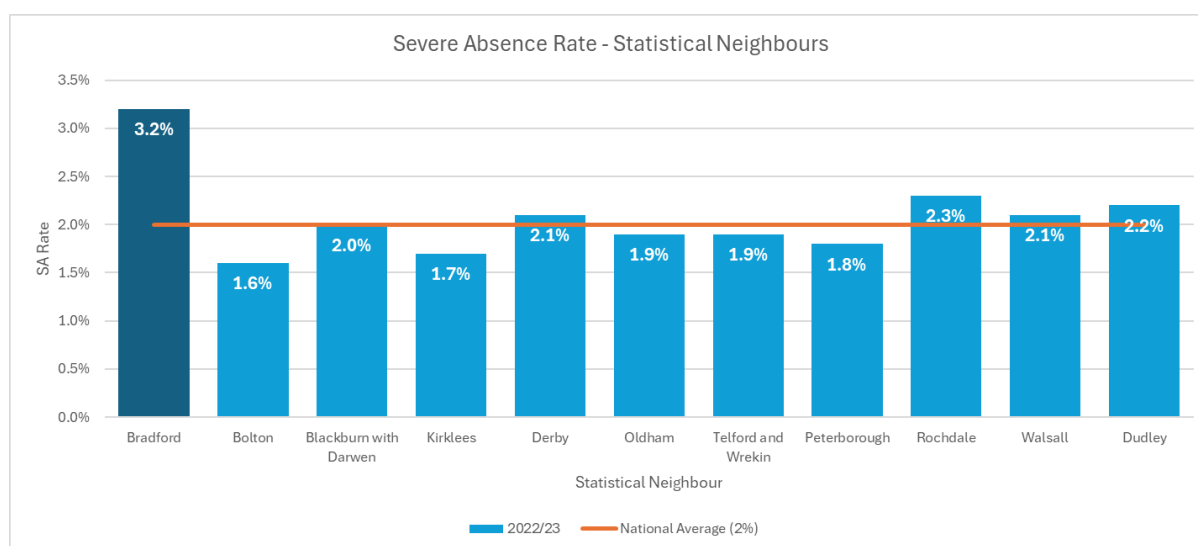


Chart 14: SA Rate compared to Statistical Neighbours

2.5 Reason for Absence

Chart 15 shows the absence reasons for the 2022/23 academic year. See appendix 1 for definitions of the categories.

Illness is the most common reason for school absence within Bradford and across England. The reasons for absence when comparing Bradford's absence rates to those nationally and regionally are similar. However, the use of the "Other" category is more frequent in Bradford, particularly for unauthorised absences. Bradford does appear to have a slightly increased rate of absence due to religious observance, and unauthorised holiday then the region and the country as a whole. The numbers to accompany the bar chart can be seen on table 1 below.

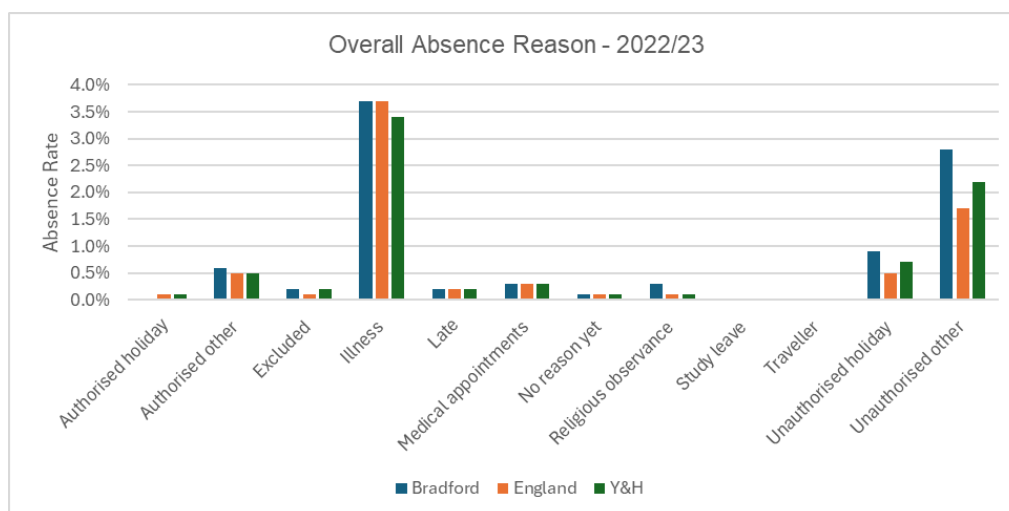


Chart 15: Reason for Absence 2022/23 DFE

The overall absence rate for illness in Bradford matches the national average. When considering school phase, the Bradford illness absence rate is higher than the national average within the Primary phase, and lower within the secondary phase. The unauthorised other rate is higher in Bradford overall and is the top reason for absence within the secondary school phase. In contrast, illness remains the leading cause of absence within secondary schools nationally.

Reason for Absence	Primary Phase - Absence Rate			Secondary Phase - Absence Rate			Overall Absence Rate		
	Bradford	England	Y&H	Bradford	England	Y&H	Bradford	England	Y&H
Authorised holiday	0.00%	0.10%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.10%
Authorised other	0.30%	0.30%	0.30%	0.80%	0.70%	0.70%	0.60%	0.50%	0.50%
Excluded	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.50%	0.30%	0.40%	0.20%	0.10%	0.20%
Illness	3.50%	3.40%	3.20%	3.90%	4.10%	3.60%	3.70%	3.70%	3.40%
Late	0.10%	0.10%	0.10%	0.30%	0.20%	0.20%	0.20%	0.20%	0.20%
Medical appointments	0.20%	0.20%	0.20%	0.30%	0.40%	0.30%	0.30%	0.30%	0.30%
No reason yet	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.10%	0.10%	0.10%	0.10%	0.10%
Religious observance	0.30%	0.10%	0.10%	0.20%	0.10%	0.10%	0.30%	0.10%	0.10%
Study leave	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.10%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Traveller	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Unauthorised holiday	1.00%	0.60%	0.90%	0.70%	0.40%	0.50%	0.90%	0.50%	0.70%
Unauthorised other	1.20%	0.80%	1.00%	5.00%	2.70%	3.70%	2.80%	1.70%	2.20%

Table 1: Reason for Absence 2022/23 including school phase

2.6 Characteristics

(Based on latest DfE data for Academic Year 2022/23)

2.6.1 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

There is a significant gap between the absence rates of students with SEND and those without. The same pattern is seen when scrutinising PA and SA.

The disparity between the attendance rates of those pupils with an EHCP compared to those with no SEN is greater in Bradford than seen nationally (6.6% compared to 5.7%)

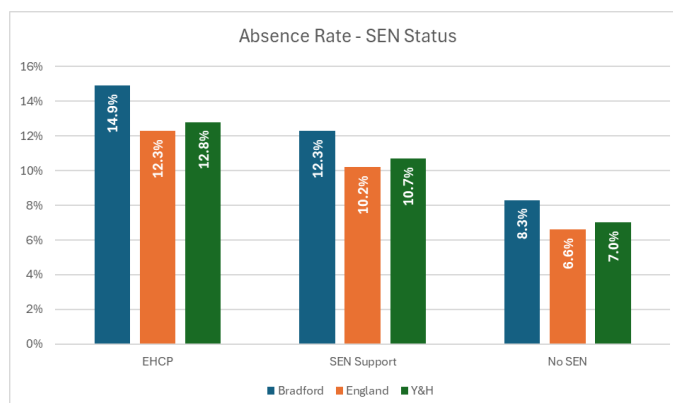


Chart 16: Absence Rate – SEN Status

2.6.2 Ethnicity (Major Ethnic Group)

The higher absence rate in Bradford overall suggests that pupils in most ethnic groups will likely have higher absence rates. This is true of all ethnic groups except pupils from a Black background whose rates are below the national average. By contrast, for SA rates, children from a Black background have a higher rate than seen nationally.

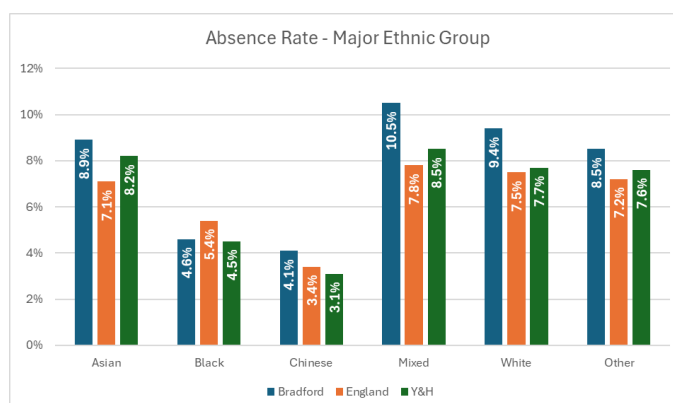


Chart 17: Absence Rate – Ethnicity

Pupils from Mixed ethnic backgrounds have the highest rate of absence across Bradford, Yorkshire & Humber and England. They also have the highest PA and SA rates in Bradford. Nationally, pupils from a Mixed ethnic background face the highest PA rate, while pupils from a White background have the highest levels of SA.

2.6.3 Sex

In Bradford, males have a higher absence rate than females. Across England, females have a slightly higher absence rate. This pattern is similar for PA, but for SA, both sexes in Bradford have the same rate (with females still experiencing higher SA nationally).

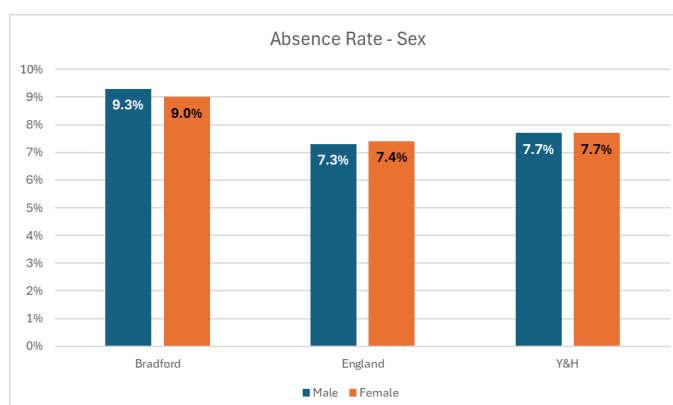


Chart 18: Absence Rate – Sex

2.6.4 Free School Meal Eligibility

There is a clear disparity between the absence rate for those children who are eligible for free school meals (a measure often used as a proxy for deprivation), and those who are not.

The gap is larger within Bradford than it is nationally, yet smaller in comparison to Yorkshire & Humber.

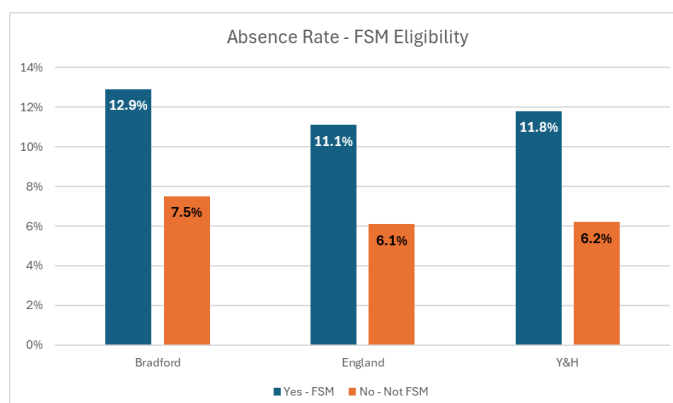


Chart 19: Absence Rate – FSM Eligibility

2.6.5 English as a first Language

Nationally, pupils whose first language is English have a higher absence rate than those who speak English as an additional language. The opposite is seen in Bradford and regionally, where absences are higher amongst pupils who do not have English as their first language.

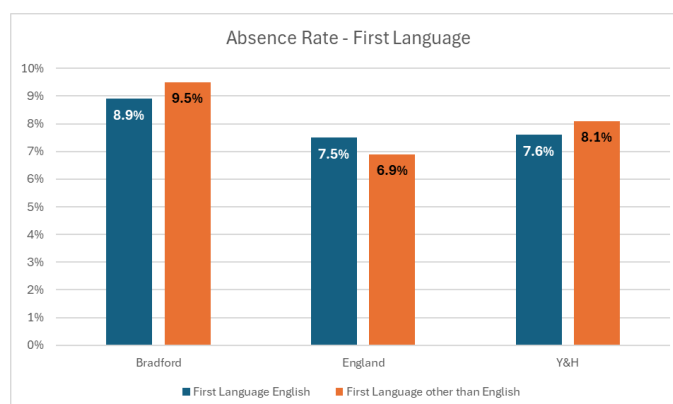


Chart 20: Absence Rate – First Language

2.6.6 National Curriculum Year (NCY)

As expected from earlier analysis of absence rates and school phases, the greatest disparity for Bradford pupils compared to regional and national rates becomes apparent from NCY 7 onwards when the gap significantly widens. The largest deviation from the national average occurs in NCY 11.

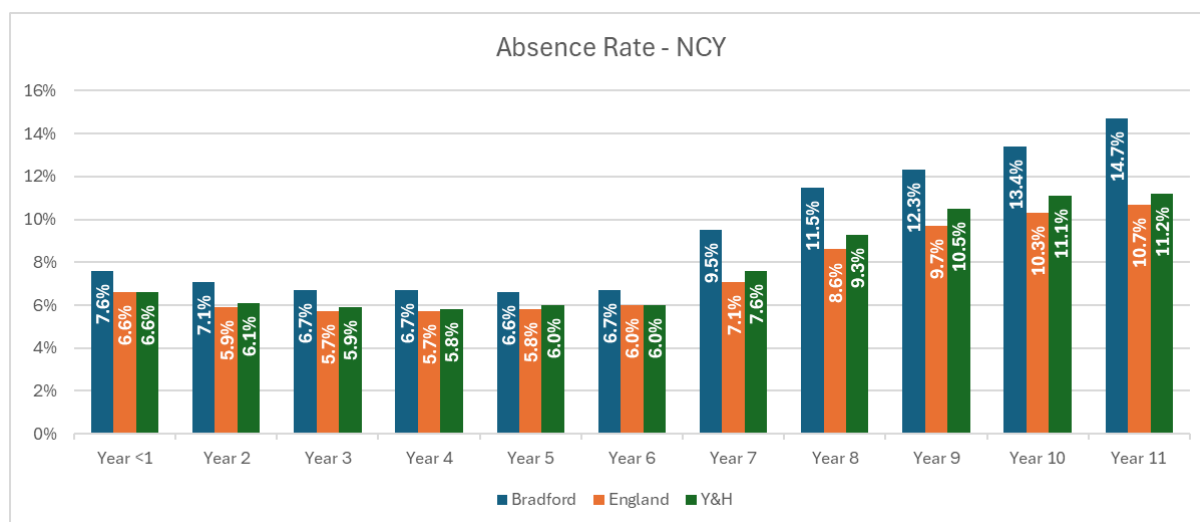


Chart 21: Absence Rate – NCY

2.7 Geographical distribution

Connected Bradford is a project linking anonymised data from health, education, social care, and more, to enable detailed analysis of factors which are linked to a variety of outcomes. The Bradford Institute for Health Research (BIHR) used this dataset to look at the geographical and demographic distribution of school absence in Bradford. The team made a number of discoveries⁵, finding that unauthorised absence is not evenly spread throughout the district. Rather, the absence rate is much higher in areas of disadvantage compared to more affluent areas, and a relatively small number of children and young people contribute disproportionately to absence rates, particularly in areas where absence rates are relatively lower.

2.8 Predictors of higher risk of school absence

The BIHR team also used education data to identify pupils at increased risk of persistent absence¹. The research linked attendance records with information from the school census, finding that children who were eligible for free school meals were more likely to be persistently absent, as were children with SEND, females, and children with English as an

⁵ Wood et al (2024) Improve school attendance: New collation of routinely collected data shows where early support is needed. Note 11, Policy Leeds, University of Leeds. <https://doi.org/10.48785/100/265>

Additional Language. Compared to white British pupils, pupils identifying as of Pakistani background were less likely to be persistently absent, while those categorised as “other” ethnic groups were more likely.

In the same paper, the team explored the link between “school readiness” as assessed by teachers in Reception class at age 4-5 years and later risk of persistent absence^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}. The research found that children who were not “school ready” at this age were 2.4 times more likely to experience persistent absence in their later schooling, compared to pupils who were considered “school ready”. This was true even after taking into account the other factors described above which increase the risk of persistent absence from school: such as children who have English as an additional language, children with SEND, and those eligible for free school meals. The authors suggested possible reasons for this link, including higher parental engagement with education leading to both increased chances of the child being school ready and later increased school attendance, and possible undiagnosed needs such as mental health problems or neurodivergence leading to both lower attainment at age 4-5 years, and increased risk of persistent absence later in life.

3 National guidance

National statutory guidance for schools, local authorities, and safeguarding practitioners is in place, published by the Department for Education. The new *Working together to improve school attendance*⁶ guidance is in place from August 19th 2024, and focuses on:

- schools **working with children and families** in order to understand their barriers to attendance, and helping to overcome them. This may include working with outside partners such as early help or safeguarding agencies, where necessary.
- The impact of a **positive school culture** on attendance, through the use of policies on topics such as “attainment, behaviour, bullying, special educational needs support, supporting pupils with medical conditions or disabilities, safeguarding, wellbeing, and support for disadvantaged students...”.
- The importance of **leadership, clear attendance policies, appropriate resourcing, and day-to-day** procedures for monitoring and responding to absences.
- Regular analysis of data to make sure that pupils at risk of poor attendance are recognised and supported early.
- Schools sharing information and working collaboratively with partners, including other schools, local authorities, voluntary organisations, and communities.
- Being mindful of children’s specific needs, including physical and mental ill health or disabilities, and providing extra support for those children who need it.
- Finally, the new guidance sets out a new national framework for penalty notices. This takes a “support first” approach, to be used where attendance support has already been provided and has not worked or where support is not appropriate, for example, in the case of an unauthorised holiday in term time.

6

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65f1b048133c22b8eecd38f7/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance_applies_from_19_August_2024.pdf

There are also a number of expectations of local authorities, who have a key role in providing wider support to enable children to overcome barriers to attendance, and providing strategic leadership across a local area. These expectations include:

- Tracking local attendance data and devising a strategic approach to attendance
- Having a School Attendance Support Team which provides certain core functions free of charge to all schools. Attendance Support Teams can also trade additional services to schools.
- Monitoring and improving the attendance of children with a social worker through a Virtual School.

In addition to the new statutory guidance, other reforms are also being implemented:

- For the 2024/25 academic year, the DfE are mandating the provision of pupil level attendance data from all state funded schools from the beginning of school year 2024-25.
- The Department has also laid regulations to change the way that attendance and admissions registers are recorded, so that:
 - o admission and attendance registers must both be kept electronically,
 - o one of the new list of attendance and absence codes must be recorded for every pupil for each school session,
 - o schools must inform their local authority when a pupil has, or will, miss 15 days due to illness.

4 Current activity, service provision and assets

School attendance is a major national priority, with a number of initiatives launched recently with the aim of reducing school absence. Attendance Hubs⁷ are virtual networks of schools, led by a school leader from a school with a good attendance record, to share practice and discuss challenges with other school leaders. They aim to meet half-termly over a period of 12 to 18 months.

The Department for Education also launched an attendance communications toolkit for schools: a collection of information and advice, along with sample text and templates for text messages, emails and letters which can be sent to parents and carers. This was published alongside a media campaign with the strapline “Moments matter, attendance counts”, which ran from January to March 2024⁸.

Locally, Bradford Council have launched a number of initiatives over the last 2 years to raise awareness of the importance of school attendance and the consequences of poor attendance, to encourage all services to think “attendance is everyone’s business” and to

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/attendance-hubs>

⁸

<https://dfegovukassets.blob.core.windows.net/assets/Attendance%20campaign/Attendance%20campaign%20communications%20toolkit%20for%20schools.pdf>

prioritise education and school attendance in all decision-making regarding families. A snapshot of this work can be found in the diagram below:



Figure 1: initiatives, improvements and programmes delivered by Bradford Council to support attendance over the previous 2 years.

One of the most important developments is an Attendance Support Team, which reached full-strength in April 2024. The team consists of 16 Officers and 2 Senior Officers and is responsible for delivering the council's statutory and core services as outlined in "Working Together to Improve School Attendance" to all 200+ schools in Bradford. The team ensures schools and families receive the support to improve attendance and is key to ensuring that the momentum of school attendance improvement is maintained over the next few years.

Almost 100 schools have signed up to a new attendance charter, which aims to ensure a consistent approach to attendance across the district.

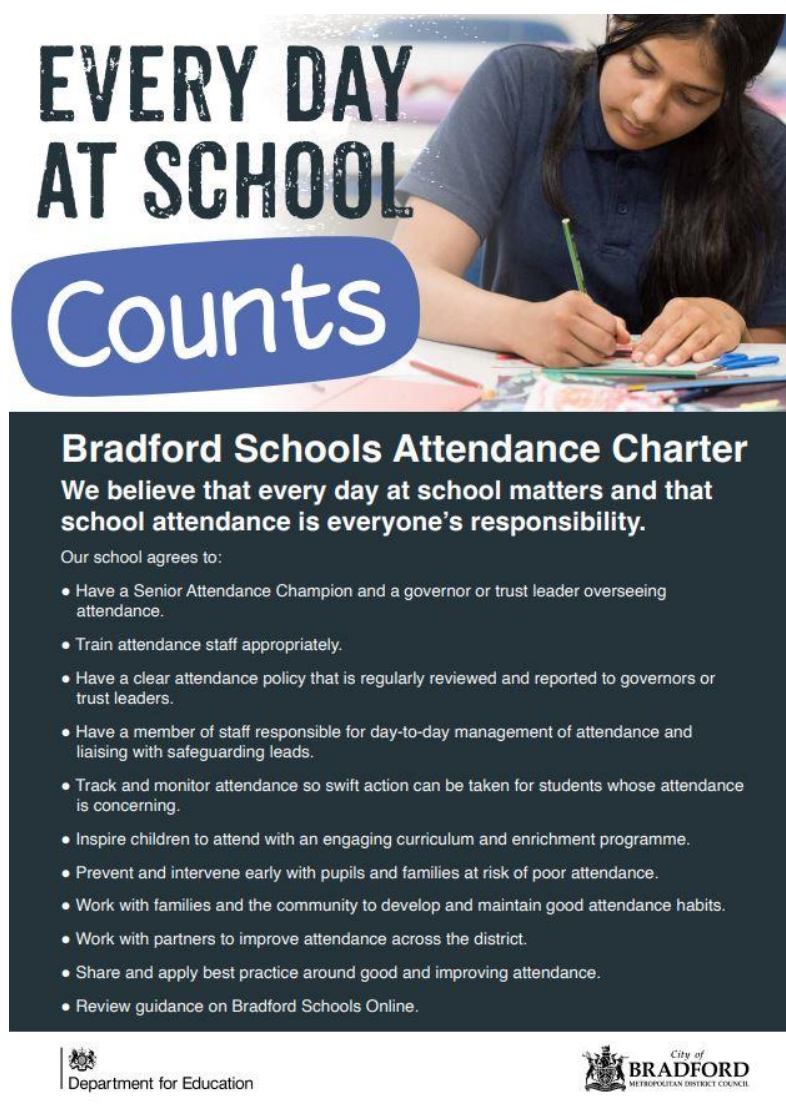


Figure 2: CBMDC attendance charter

In addition, a steering group formed of academics, practitioners, and strategic leaders is in place in the district to bring together local data, evidence, and current practice to tackle the issue of high absence rates locally.

Separately, schools in Keighley have agreed a joint attendance policy to ensure a consistent approach to attendance within the area, and to support each other in the work to improve attendance.

5 Local Views

To inform the support offered to children and young people, families and schools with emotion-based school avoidance (EBSA), the educational psychology team in Bradford

Council gathered views from families, young people and professionals in schools during 2024⁹.

What schools told us:

- School staff generally understand that EBSA often relates to emotional and mental health, and sometimes to SEN needs
- Some staff view the impacts as prolonged absence from school, and some as a dislike of school
- The use of language to describe EBSA is not consistent
- Many staff recognise the complex factors contributing to EBSA, including those relating to home, the child, and the school
- Many schools use a joined-up approach, working with parents/carers and children and young people
- The majority of staff surveyed report that EBSA concerns are increasing
- Most staff feel that they have a good knowledge of the challenges associated with EBSA
- Only a third of staff say they have the necessary skills and confidence to support EBSA

What parents/carers told us:

- The most common age of onset of concerns is at Year 3 to Year 7, but the impact on attendance is more likely in Y7
- Most parents/carers with concerns about their children reported an underlying special educational need (80%). Most commonly, this was in the area of Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) or Communication and Interaction
- Less than a quarter of parents/carers indicated that these needs had already been identified prior to EBSA concerns
- Almost half reported that their child's needs were still not formally identified
- It was reported that half of the students waited at least 1-2 terms before school responded to concerns

What helps?	What is unhelpful?	What could help?
Relationships	Lack of consistent support	Better relationships
Understanding	Lack of understanding from school	Support from services
Reasonable adjustments	Fines/pressure	Reasonable adjustments
External support		Better understanding

Table 2: summary of parents'/ carers' responses to Bradford EBSA consultation, 2024

⁹ CBMDC (2024) Guidance for schools in responding to emotionally-based school avoidance.

Available online at:

<https://bso.bradford.gov.uk/userfiles/file/EBSA%20Guidance%20for%20BSO%20word%20version4.docx>

What young people told us:

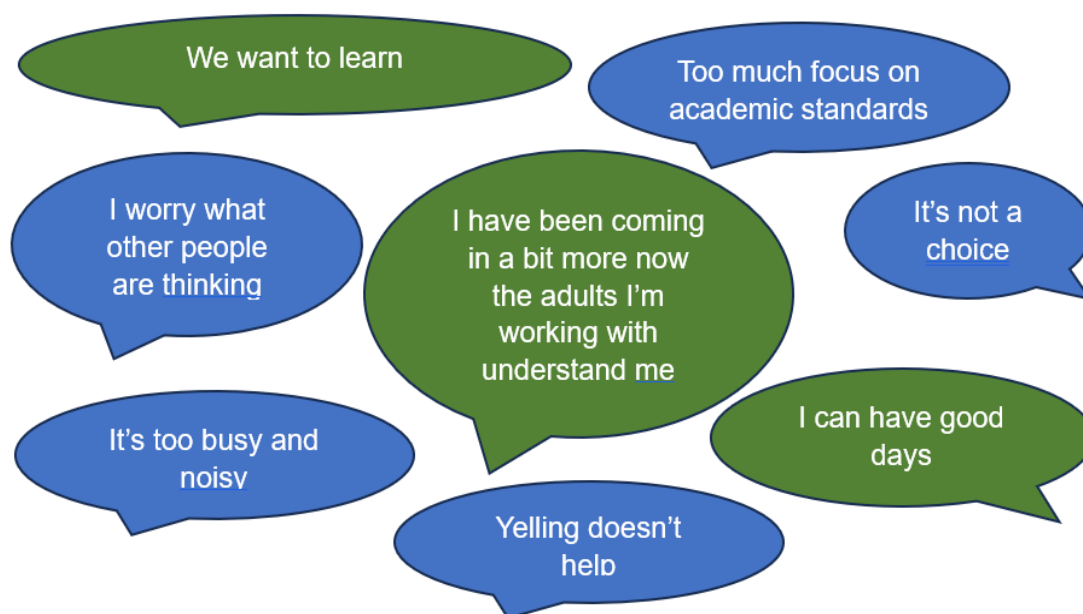


Figure 3: summary of young peoples' responses to Bradford EBSA consultation, 2024

6 Evidence of what works

There is limited evidence for how to support children, young people and families to attend school where this is a problem. One rapid evidence review by the Education Endowment Foundation¹⁰ identified a number of studies, mostly based in the US, which covered a range of intervention types, including:

- Mentoring
- Parental engagement
- Responsive and targeted approaches
- Teaching of social and emotional skills
- Behaviour interventions
- Meal provision
- Incentives and disincentives
- Extracurricular activities

The review found that most of the evidence was weak, with large variation in the interventions and small effect sizes. However, "positive impacts were found for both parental communication approaches and targeted parental engagement interventions. The impact was larger for targeted approaches. Responsive intervention in which a member of staff or team use multiple interventions and target approaches specifically to the needs of individual pupils was also found to be effective."

¹⁰ Education Endowment Foundation (2022) Attendance Interventions, Rapid Evidence Assessment, London: Education Endowment Foundation. Available online at: <https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/pages/Attendance-REA-report.pdf?v=1723508570>

This indicates that targeted, bespoke work with individual pupils and their families is likely to be most effective in helping children and young people to attend school.

7 What is on the horizon?

The ongoing financial crisis facing Bradford Council has the potential for restricting and possibly damaging the positive impact that recent investment has had on improving school attendance. It is critical that the work to date continues, especially given Bradford's poor attendance in relation to all other LAs in England, and the consequences this has on Bradford's children and young people.

Bradford's Educational Psychology team are in the process of developing and disseminating resources to support schools and families with Emotion-Based School Avoidance (EBSA)¹¹. The team have launched local guidance and a toolkit for schools and held a Spotlight Conference and the first of a series of guidance implementation training sessions.

Plans for 2024/25

For the academic year 2024/25, the EBSA project will be continued and extended. This will include:

- Parent support groups
- Supporting the Education Emotional Wellbeing Practitioner team to enhance their offer to include EBSA
- Developing a whole school training offer
- Continuing to roll out EBSA guidance implementation training
- Offering monthly workshops to provide training on specific themes relating to the guidance
- A consultation and individual case work offer to schools who have followed a plan do review process and need further support
- Individual intervention for individuals who are unable to access a current well-being offer due to not being in school
- Links with Post 16 providers to consider needs beyond school in terms of preparation for adulthood

As part of the EBSA project, research has been commissioned from Manchester University to evaluate the guidance and its implementation.

Separately, there are plans in place to explore the possibility for implementing asthma checks in school for pupils with asthma. This has the potential to improve control of asthma, and to support children to stay well and in school.

¹¹ CBMDC Educational Psychology (2024) Responding to emotionally-based school avoidance. Available online at: <https://bso.bradford.gov.uk/content/educational-psychology/responding-to-ebsa---guidance-for-schools>

What does this tell us?

1 Unmet needs and service gaps

The data above show that absence from school has increased since before the covid-19 pandemic, and remains above pre-covid levels. Although absence rates in Bradford have partially improved or plateaued over the past year, the proportion of children experiencing severe persistent absence continues to increase in secondary schools, and the rates of unauthorised absence continues to increase, with much higher rates than in the region and the country as a whole.

Children at particularly high risk of missing school include those living in areas of deprivation, children in receipt of free school meals, children attending special schools and those with EHCPs or SEN support, children from some ethnic minority backgrounds, and children with English as an additional language. This leads to inequalities in access to education, and therefore resulting inequalities in many life chances.

Although work is underway both nationally and locally to support schools, families and children, these inequalities remain.

2 Knowledge gaps

Although the data gives us a good idea of who is most at risk of school absence and the broad reasons for absence, the relatively high proportion of absences recorded as “unauthorised other” means that there remains scant knowledge of the precise reasons why many children and young people in Bradford are missing school. In addition, the “illness” category is broad, and covers both mental health and physical health. Without knowing the specific causes of absence, it is difficult to develop interventions to support children and young people back into the classroom. This is an area which would benefit from further investigation.

What should we do next?

1 Recommendations for consideration

	Recommendation
	Research
1	Continue to develop cross-system work combining research and practice to come up with innovative insights and solutions to help children and young people attend school.

2	Qualitative research/work directly with children, young people and families should be done to understand the reasons for absence classified as “illness” and “unauthorised other”.
Support to schools	
3	Identify children at high risk of poor school attendance early through EYFS scores, geographic location, and pupil characteristics, to offer early, bespoke support if attendance begins to decline
4	Protect the budget for the vital investment into Attendance Support services to maintain the current work and relationships which have already been developed between the council, schools, and wider partners
5	Continue to deliver universal support to all schools, but target additional efforts in areas of deprivation, those with communities at higher risk of school absence, and special schools
Support to communities	
6	Ensure that all professionals in contact with children, young people and families are aware of the importance of school attendance, and know what to do if they are concerned about a young person’s attendance.
7	For schools with particularly low attendance and high rates of persistent absence, school attendance officers and schools should work via local community groups to reach families who are disengaged from schools and services.
Monitoring	
8	Schools to collate and submit data regularly, and in a timely, complete way, to enable the local authority to act quickly on any concerns
9	Local authority to monitor data routinely to identify any concerns with a school or individual at an early stage.

Key contacts

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Appendix 1: Absence types recorded by schools

Indicator	Description	
1	Authorised absence rate	Authorised absence is absence with permission from a teacher or other authorised school representative - including absences where a satisfactory explanation has been provided. For example, through illness. Authorised absence rate is calculated as the number of authorised absence sessions as a proportion of total sessions possible.
2	Unauthorised absence rate	Unauthorised absence is absence without permission from the school. This includes all unexplained or unjustified absences and arrivals after registration has closed. Unauthorised absence rate is calculated as the number of unauthorised absence sessions a proportion of total sessions possible.
3	Absence rates by reason e.g. illness	Absence rates by reason are calculated as the number of absence sessions for the given reason as a proportion of total sessions possible.
4	Authorised illness	Absence rate associated with pupil absence due to illness (excluding medical or dental appointments).
5	Authorised medical and dental appointments	Absence rate associated with pupil absence due to medical or dental appointments.
6	Authorised religious observance	Absence rate associated with pupil absence due to religious observances.
7	Authorised study leave	Absence rate associated with year 11 pupil absence during public examinations.
8	Authorised traveller	Absence rate associated with traveller families known to be travelling for occupational purposes and who have agreed this with the school but it is not known whether the pupil is attending educational provision.
9	Authorised holiday	Absence rate associated with a leave of absence granted by school head teachers
10	Authorised excluded	Absence rate associated with pupil absence where they have been excluded however no alternative provision has been made. Alternative provision must be arranged from the sixth consecutive day of any fixed period or permanent exclusion.
11	Authorised other	Absence rate associated with pupil absence for authorised reasons, but not included in the reasons above.
12	Unauthorised holiday	Absence rate associated with a leave of absence that has not been granted, or is in excess of the period granted.
13	Unauthorised late after	Absence rate associated with pupil absence at the time the registers close.

	registers closed	
14	Unauthorised no reason yet	Absence rate associated with absence for an as yet undetermined reason. Absence denoted a no reason yet may change to another reason retrospectively.
15	Unauthorised other	Absence rate associated with pupil absence for unauthorised reasons, but not included in the reasons above.