

REVIEW BY THE CHILDREN, FAMILIES & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE: *PERSISTENT ABSENTEEISM: STATUTORY SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN IN HILLINGDON*

Cabinet Member & Portfolio	Councillor Susan O'Brien, Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education
Responsible Officer	Julie Kelly, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Report Author & Directorate	Ryan Dell, Democratic Services
Papers with report	Persistent Absenteeism review final report

HEADLINES

Summary	To receive the final report detailing the major review conducted by the Children, Families & Education Select Committee which considered the issue of persistent absenteeism among statutory school age children in Hillingdon.
Putting our Residents First Delivering on the Council Strategy 2022-2026	<p>This report supports our ambition for residents/ the Council of: An efficient, well-run, digital-enabled council working with partners to deliver services to improve the lives of all our residents</p> <p>This report supports our commitments to residents of: Safe and Strong Communities</p>
Financial Cost	There are no direct financial costs arising from the initial recommendations with potential future investment subject to development of an appropriate business case and funding strategy.
Select Committee	Children, Families & Education Select Committee.
Ward	N/A.

RECOMMENDATION

That:

- 1) the Select Committee's report and recommendations which seek to both support and provide further strategic direction on the Council's aims to assist in enabling young people to attend school regularly, be welcomed; and
- 2) their implementation be taken forward by Officers, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education, as set out in the report.

SELECT COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Parental Engagement and Support

1. Officers to continue to work with schools, nurseries and early years centres to educate and inform parents and carers about the positive benefits of school attendance, both academic and social, as a means of early intervention.
2. Officers to investigate the use of the Learn Hillingdon service to educate and inform adult learners (who are parents) about the importance of school attendance.
3. The Council to support schools to deliver welcome programmes for families new to the borough.

Mental Health & Wellbeing

4. The Council and schools to continue to work collaboratively, supporting those families with children and young people who are persistently absent due to poor mental health, and to signpost to alternative services such as CAMHS, KOOTH, Hillingdon Autistic Care & Support (HACS) and CNWL where appropriate.

School Environment & Culture

5. Council to encourage Attendance cluster groups to share good practice among schools on a range of topics such as EBSNA, anti-bullying and trauma-informed practice.

Data & Monitoring

6. Ask schools to explore how pupil attendance at after school clubs correlates with general pupil attendance within schools. What are the patterns and trends?

Collaboration & Community Involvement

7. Council to continue to raise awareness and highlight the positive benefits of school attendance, both academic and social, within local community and local partnership groups. To include a poster campaign in schools, libraries, Council venues and Hillingdon People.

Reasons for recommendations

The recommendations arising from this major review aim to support the Council, schools, young people and their families in enabling regular school attendance, thereby supporting young people's academic and social development.

Alternative options considered/ risk management

The Cabinet could decide to reject some, or all, of the Committee's recommendations or pursue alternative routes by which to progress the objectives of the review.

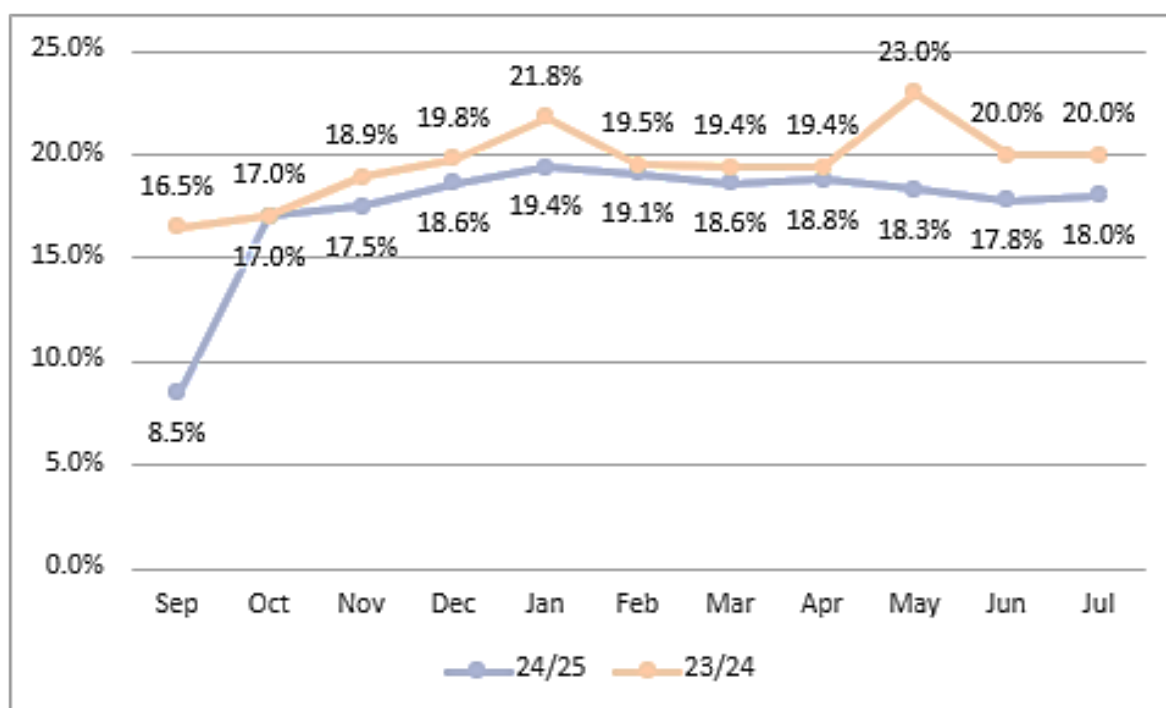
SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Context

The Committee's major review commenced in earnest in 2024 in response to rising levels of persistent absenteeism among statutory school-age children in Hillingdon, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to understand the root causes, assess the effectiveness of current interventions, and recommend improvements to support attendance and educational outcomes. A child is persistently absent if they miss 10% or more of their school sessions. This can have an impact on young people's achievement, wellbeing, and wider development.

Persistent absenteeism is a national issue. Data at the start of the review from 2023 suggested that whilst Hillingdon's rate of unauthorised absence was broadly in line with national figures, the rate of persistent absence was somewhat higher, thereby validating the importance of the review. As outlined in the Committee's report, several positive actions have been taken alongside the Committee's review in schools, which has reduced the persistent absenteeism rate and in 2025 it is now below the national average.

For Cabinet's information, as the Committee's review was undertaken during a certain period of time, for broader context of the longer-term persistence absence rate trends in Hillingdon, this is set out in the graph below and demonstrates an improvement between 23/24 and 24/25 academic years:



The Committee's review, therefore, looks to build on and sustain those actions to help reduce such rates further. The report will support the work of the Attendance Support service in helping to shape its ways of working, identifying areas of weakness and how overall engagement with key stakeholders can be improved.

The review

The review uncovered a range of complex and interrelated factors contributing to persistent absenteeism:

- **Parental Influence & Engagement:** Lack of understanding of the importance of attendance, financial pressures, and negative parental experiences with education.
- **Mental Health & SEND:** Anxiety, depression, and undiagnosed conditions such as ASD and ADHD were common barriers.
- **Bullying:** Both verbal and physical bullying significantly impacted attendance.
- **Health & Illness:** Chronic conditions and long waiting times for CAMHS support.
- **COVID-19 Impact:** Shifted parental attitudes and disrupted routines.
- **Transport & Housing:** Long commutes and temporary housing created logistical challenges.
- **School Environment:** Variability in school capacity to manage absenteeism and inconsistent support structures.

The Committee engaged a wide range of important stakeholders through six themed witness sessions to gather evidence:

1. **Education officers** – setting the scene of persistent absenteeism in Hillingdon
2. **Other Local Authorities** – comparative insights from Camden, Harrow, and Buckinghamshire Councils.
3. **School Staff** – headteachers and attendance officers from primary and secondary schools, and a survey sent to schools.
4. **Young People** – sharing lived experiences of absenteeism, bullying, and mental health.
5. **Safeguarding Professionals** – discussing the protective role of schools.
6. **Parents and Carers** – highlighting challenges with SEND, mental health, and school support.

The Committee concluded that:

- **Persistent absenteeism is a complex, multi-dimensional issue** that cannot be addressed by schools alone. It requires a **coordinated, borough-wide response** involving families, schools, local authorities, and health services.
- **Parental engagement is critical.** Early and consistent communication with families can help prevent absenteeism from becoming entrenched.
- **Mental health and SEND support must be strengthened**, with better signposting and access to services.
- **School culture and environment matter.** Trauma-informed practices, anti-bullying strategies, and inclusive environments can improve attendance.
- **Data-driven approaches** are essential to identify trends, target interventions, and monitor progress.
- **Community involvement and awareness** can help shift attitudes and reinforce the value of education.

The Committee's recommendations

The Committee's final recommendations to Cabinet were shaped by:

- **Six themed witness sessions** involving council officers, school staff, young people, parents and carers, and safeguarding professionals.
- **Survey responses** from schools across the borough.
- **Comparative analysis** of practices in other local authorities.
- **Data analysis** on attendance trends and vulnerable cohorts.



- **Direct testimony** from those affected, especially young people and families.

This evidence-based approach has ensured that the seven recommendations in the report (based on five themes) were grounded in real experiences and practical insights:

Recommendation theme	Recommendations	Why proposed?
Parental Engagement and Support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Officers to continue to work with schools, nurseries and early years centres to educate and inform parents and carers about the positive benefits of school attendance, both academic and social, as a means of early intervention. 2. Officers to investigate the use of the Learn Hillingdon service to educate and inform adult learners (who are parents) about the importance of school attendance. 3. The Council to support schools to deliver welcome programmes for families new to the borough. 	<p>Parental attitudes and awareness were repeatedly identified as key factors in absenteeism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental attitudes were repeatedly identified as a major influence on children's attendance. Some parents undervalue daily attendance or prioritise holidays and wellbeing days over school. • Disengagement often stems from parents' own negative experiences with education or challenges like housing instability and financial stress. • Early intervention through nurseries, early years centres, and adult learning (e.g., Learn Hillingdon) was seen as a way to shift attitudes before problems become entrenched. • New families to the borough may not be familiar with local expectations or support systems, so welcome programmes could help integrate them early, undertaken by schools themselves
Mental Health & Wellbeing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. The Council and schools to continue to work collaboratively, supporting those families with children and young people who are persistently absent due to poor mental health, and to signpost to alternative services such as CAMHS, KOOTH, Hillingdon Autistic Care & Support (HACS) and CNWL where appropriate. 	<p>Mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression, were major contributors to absenteeism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and trauma were among the most cited reasons for persistent absenteeism. • Long CAMHS waiting lists and inconsistent school responses left many families without adequate support. • Testimonies from young people and parents & carers highlighted how mental health struggles often go unrecognised or unsupported by schools. • Signposting to services like KOOTH, HACS (if relevant) and CNWL was seen as a practical way to bridge the gap while formal support is arranged.
School Environment & Culture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Council to encourage Attendance cluster groups to share good practice among schools on a range of topics such as EBSNA, anti-bullying and trauma-informed practice. 	<p>School climate, bullying, and trauma-informed practices influence attendance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A positive, inclusive school culture was shown to be a protective factor against absenteeism. • Witnesses described how bullying, unsupportive environments, and lack of trauma-informed practices led to school avoidance. • Schools that implemented emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA) strategies and shared best practices through attendance clusters saw improvements.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraging more schools to participate in these attendance hubs could help spread effective approaches borough-wide.
Data & Monitoring	6. Ask schools to explore how pupil attendance at after school clubs correlates with general pupil attendance within schools. What are the patterns and trends?	<p>Better data can help identify patterns and target interventions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools and the Council need better tools to identify patterns and intervene early. One area of interest was the correlation between after-school club attendance and general attendance, which could help identify vulnerable students. Improved data analysis could help target interventions more precisely, especially for students who are at risk but not yet persistently absent.
Collaboration & Community Involvement	7. Council to continue to raise awareness and highlight the positive benefits of school attendance, both academic and social, within local community and local partnership groups. To include a poster campaign in schools, libraries, Council venues and Hillingdon People.	<p>A borough-wide culture of valuing education is essential.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent absenteeism is not just a school issue – it is a community-wide challenge. Testimonies emphasised the need for shared responsibility among schools, families, local services, and the wider community. A public awareness campaign (e.g., posters in libraries, schools, and Council venues) could help reinforce the message that attendance matters for both academic and social development.

Cabinet Member and Officer comments how the Committee's recommendations can be implemented

Much of the work needed to implement these recommendations can be absorbed into the Attendance Support team's existing practice through mechanisms such as their termly attendance meetings with schools and the termly locality-based cluster groups which have been established. This will therefore come at no additional cost.

A public awareness campaign will come at a minor additional cost, however, the use some of the income generated from the issuance of penalty notices can fund this.

On recommendation 3, officers will review if any additional information or guidance that the Council can best provide to schools. Cabinet should note that schools will organise their own welcome programmes for new families.

The Cabinet Member welcomes the Committee's review which shows that practical and proactive actions can and have helped reduce persistent absenteeism in Hillingdon. The Cabinet Member will take forward the recommendations with officers and implement in the most appropriate and cost-effective way.

Financial Implications

There are no direct financial costs arising from the initial recommendations with potential future investment subject to development of an appropriate business case and funding strategy.

RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities

Implementation of the recommendations will improve collaboration between the Council, schools, young people and their families, and will encourage more regular school attendance, whilst attempting to remove barriers to this.

Consultation & Engagement carried out (or required)

The Committee sought a range of internal and external witness testimony, as set out in the report.

CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate Finance

Corporate Finance have reviewed this report and concur with the Financial Implications set out above, noting the recommendations arising at the time of the review commencing, in response to the rising levels of persistent absenteeism among statutory school-age children in Hillingdon, to seek both support of the recommendations and to provide further strategic direction on the Council's aims to assist in enabling young people to attend school regularly.

Furthermore, it is noted that there are no direct financial implications associated with the initial recommendations contained in this report, with any future investment will be subject to the development of a funding strategy.

Legal

There are no legal impediments to the recommendation set out within the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL.