Consultation on improvements to pupil absence statistics

Summary of responses and next steps

October 2015

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Introduction

A user consultation on changes to the way the Department for Education publishes pupil absence statistics and the way persistent absence is measured was included in the "Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn 2013 and spring 2014" National Statistics publication in October 2014[1].

This document summarises the feedback received from users in response to the consultation and the resulting next steps.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-2013-and-spring-2014

Changes proposed in the consultation

The consultation in October 2014 set out proposed changes in relation to two aspects of pupil absence statistics:

- The format of absence National Statistics publications
- The persistent absence methodology

The proposals are summarised below, but full details can be found in the [original consultation document](#).

The format of absence National Statistics publications

Instead of publishing figures for pupil absence on three separate occasions each year, we propose to publish one National Statistics publication containing all three parts:

- **May – part 1: Interim autumn term absence:** To include the same information that is currently published in the autumn term, but with information in a machine readable CSV format rather than in MS Excel data tables. This will provide users with a greater range of pupil absence information. This will also include a short commentary on the headline figures.
- **October – part 2: Interim combined autumn and spring term absence:** To include the same information that is currently published in the autumn and spring. The information and data will be published in the same format as outlined in part 1.
- **March – part 3: Full year results:** To include the same information that is currently published in the annual publication, with a commentary on the underlying trends.

The intention of the proposal is to make it easier for users to find all of the Department's absence data in one place, including time series information to allow easy comparison of data over time. There would be no loss of information

We also proposed to publish a "Guide to absence statistics" to cover all three parts of the National Statistics publication. This would contain detailed information on the background, methodology and data quality of absence statistics.

The persistent absence methodology

We proposed that the methodology for persistent absence should be changed so that it is reported using a pupil level distribution, where a pupil is defined as a persistent absentee only if 15 per cent or more is missed of the actual total number of sessions available to them individually.

The key advantages of this methodology are:

- It will capture those pupils who are persistently absent but are not identified as such under the current methodology because they attend a school with a shorter than average school year or move schools during an academic year and therefore never reach the threshold number of sessions to be classed as a persistent absentee, despite having missed 15% of their own possible sessions
- If a pupil attends a school which has a higher than average number of days in its school year and they miss a greater number of sessions than the current threshold for persistent absence, but not 15% of their own possible sessions, then they will no longer be regarded as a persistent absentee
- It is consistent with the way that overall absence rates are calculated based on all pupil enrolments in a school (regardless of how long they have been there) and the total possible sessions available to each individual.

Consultation questions

As part of the consultation, users were asked to provide feedback on the proposed changes, particularly in response to the following:

1. Are there any aspects which users feel should not be taken forward?

2. Are there any developments which are not included in the proposed plan that users feel would be essential?

3. Whether the proposed changes to the persistent absence methodology are an improvement.

The closing date for responses was 28 November 2014

Summary of responses received

We received 11 responses to the consultation. A list of the organisations providing a response is included in **Annex A.**

The format of absence National Statistics publications

Many respondents did not comment specifically on the proposed changes to the format of the absence National Statistics publications. However, those comments that were received were generally supportive, with respondents agreeing to the proposed changes and highlighting that the introduction of files in csv format would make it easier for them to re-use the data.

The persistent absence methodology

Responses received in relation to the changes to the persistent absence methodology were mixed.

Supportive responses reported that:

- It will overcome the inaccuracies in the current methodology around different term dates / lengths for individual schools.
- The move to a "true" 15% measure will identify all pupils with poor attendance and avoid the potential for students to change schools or be removed from the school roll mid-way through the year if they are likely to cross the threshold and be classified as a persistent absentee.
- Identifying persistent absentees earlier would be easier under the proposed new methodology, as schools could use their overall absence data to identify pupils in this category on a daily basis.

The main concerns raised regarding the change in methodology were:

- Local authorities or schools where there is high mobility, which leads to increased absence or pupils moving schools, could potentially be at a serious disadvantage under the new methodology.
- It may make it more difficult for schools to easily identify those pupils at risk of becoming persistent absentees at an early stage in the school year, compared to the current threshold measure.
- Some respondents were unclear as to whether schools would be able to make comparisons with previous years, including on RAISE online, if the new methodology were adopted.

Response to feedback and concerns raised

Based on the limited but positive responses received, the Government has decided to proceed with the proposed changes to the format of absence National Statistics publications as outlined in the original consultation document.

In response to the concerns users raised around the proposed change to the persistent absence methodology, in particular in relation to the impact for pupils who have high mobility and often move schools, we considered the following alternative options:

- Retaining the existing methodology for persistent absence
- Modifying the proposed new methodology to include a minimum possible session threshold that pupil enrolments would have to reach before they were included in persistent absence calculations
- Publishing two sets of figures – with one based on the proposed new methodology and one based on the modified version of the proposed methodology

Based on analysis of the different options, the Government decided to proceed with implementing the new methodology as proposed in the consultation document.It is a fairer, more accurate and more transparent method of calculating persistent absence across schools as a whole compared to both the existing methodology and the alternative methodology outlined above.

When the new methodology is implemented, schools will be able to identify potential persistent absentees as they move through the academic year by using their own management information to identify those pupils who have missed the relevant percentage of the possible sessions available to them. In addition, they will be able to monitor pupils who are close to being classified as persistently absent, over any time period, in order to more easily identify and address such attendance issues early. Schools will also be able to use the shadow figures which have been published based on the new methodology in the National Statistics publications in October 2014, March 2015 and May 2015 (and which will be included in the October 2015 and March 2016 releases) to help them to understand the impact of the changes to the methodology.

Next steps

The changes to format and persistent absence methodology will be implemented as set out below:

Academic year	Approach to publications
2014/15 (Publications in October 2015 and March 2016)	The remaining two publications for this academic year will: • Be published in the same format as in previous years • Continue to use a main measure of persistent absence based on the existing methodology • Include shadow figures based on the new methodology in order to help users to understand the impact of the changes to the methodology ahead of its implementation
2015/16 (Publications in May 2016, October 2016 and March 2017)	Figures will be published as one National Statistics publication with three parts where: • The two interim releases will present data in a machine readable csv format rather than in MS Excel data tables and having a short accompanying commentary on the headline figures • The new persistent absence methodology will be used as the main measure of persistent absence. The change in methodology will be implemented at the same time as the move to persistent absence being measured at a 10% rather than 15% level, in order to minimise disruption in the measurement of persistent absence over time.

We introduced "A guide to absence statistics" in March 2015. This will continue to be reviewed and updated alongside the preparation of each new publication.

Annex A: List of organisations who responded to the consultation

The 11 responses to the consultation were from representatives of the following organisations:

- Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
- Birmingham City Council
- Essex County Council
- Hampshire County Council
- Leicester City Council
- North Somerset Council
- North Yorkshire County Council
- The Radclyffe School
- Sheffield City Council
- Somerset County Council
- Swindon Borough Council

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