| Report No.
CSD23047 | **London Borough of Bromley** |
| | **PART ONE - PUBLIC** |

Decision Maker:	**CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND FAMILIES POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**
Date:	**13 September 2023**
Decision Type:	Non-Urgent Non-Executive Non-Key
Title:	**UNAUTHORISED ABSENCE FROM SCHOOLS**
Contact Officer:	Scott Bagshaw, Head of Access to Education and Inclusion Tel: 020 8313 4442 E-mail: scott.bagshaw@bromley.gov.uk
Chief Officer:	Jared Nehra, Director of Education
Ward:	All Wards

1.   Reason for decision/report and options

1.1   On receipt of an earlier report in relation to school exclusions, Committee requested an additional information briefing be scheduled to PDS on 'unauthorised absence' in schools (colloquially referred to as Truancy).
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2.   **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

Members are asked to note the content of the information briefing and planned activity in relation to the monitoring of unauthorised absence.

Impact on Vulnerable Adults and Children
1. Summary of Impact: Schools cannot effectively teach and enable children to flourish in their learning if the children are not in school. Schools can be one of the greatest safety factors in the lives of vulnerable children with education being the greatest asset we can give them. Being in school with access to a quality education is paramount to the success of all children but particularly vulnerable children and attendance is an essential element to that.

Transformation Policy
1. Policy Status: Not Applicable
2. Making Bromley Even Better Priority:
    (1) For children and young people to grow up, thrive and have the best life chances in families who flourish and are happy to call Bromley home.
    (4) For residents to live responsibly and prosper in a safe, clean and green environment great for today and a sustainable future.
    (5) To manage our resources well, providing value for money, and efficient and effective services for Bromley's residents.

Financial
1. Cost of proposal: Not Applicable
2. Ongoing costs: Not Applicable
3. Budget head/performance centre: N/A
4. Total current budget for this head: £ N/A
5. Source of funding: N/A

Personnel
1. Number of staff *(current and additional)*: N/A
2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours: N/A

Legal
1. Legal Requirement: N/A
2. Call-in: Not Applicable: Information Briefing

Procurement
1. Summary of Procurement Implications: N/A

Property
1. Summary of Property Implications: N/A

Carbon Reduction and Social Value
1. Summary of Carbon Reduction/Sustainability Implications: N/A

Impact on the Local Economy
1. Summary of Local Economy Implications: N/A

Impact on Health and Wellbeing
1. Summary of Health and Wellbeing Implications: N/A

Customer Impact
1.	Estimated number of users or customers *(current and projected)*: School-age population.

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Ward Councillor Views
1.	Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? Not Applicable
2.	Summary of Ward Councillors comments: N/A

3.   COMMENTARY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1   'Truancy' is a colloquial reference to a child staying away from school without permission. Formally referred to as 'Unauthorised Absence' as per Section 444(1) Education Act 1996.

Data

3.1.2   Unauthorised absence data provided in this report comes from the latest statistical release by the DfE Autumn 2022/23. The data release from the DfE is the most comprehensive data collection, however the time lag on the data being released into the public domain is significant. Autumn and spring data for the academic year 2022/23 is not released until October 2023, with the full year data being released in May 2024. The lag in receiving this data from the DFE, places limitations on its use for strategically shaping the way we work in Bromley.

3.1.3   Following revised attendance guidance in May 2022, during the 2022/23 academic year, the DfE indicated that new duties for local authorities would involve tracking attendance data, forming part of the statutory school returns and accessible from the DfE each month. More recently it has been reported that this ambitious approach by the DfE has been scaled back. Data will now be available on a borough wide basis only rather than at individual school level. This makes targeted attendance work with individual schools more challenging for councils, as schools may chose not to volunteer sharing attendance data with the Council.

Attendance Taskforce

3.1.4   In Bromley officers have been proactive in this area (pending the final outcomes of the Government's proposals), work has been underway to develop the Attendance and Inclusion Taskforce in collaboration with schools. This group meets on a termly basis to review the attendance patterns we can gather through our own software systems. The system used, called Studybugs, enables a dashboard of indicators to be informed by school level data and provide comparisons to share with schools. It is the intention that best practice will be highlighted for school level support and guidance. The data will also enable the identification of schools in more challenging circumstances that would benefit from an offer of direct support and advice for improvement activity.

3.1.5   The Attendance and Inclusion Taskforce is charged with maintaining strategic oversight of attendance related issues. This might involve looking at factors concerning geographical areas or deprivation, and how once identified, other agencies might support improvements in attendance through targeted activity or programmes to support particular communities.

3.1.6   The Attendance and Inclusion Taskforce is in its infancy, but the collective view is that the remit will include support with engagement with schools. It will offer strategic oversight to some Education Welfare activity and look carefully at patterns in data to provide both challenge and support to schools and teams engaged in improving attendance for our vulnerable groups. Schools need not use the Education Welfare Service for their attendance management, so the Taskforce can also be a conduit for
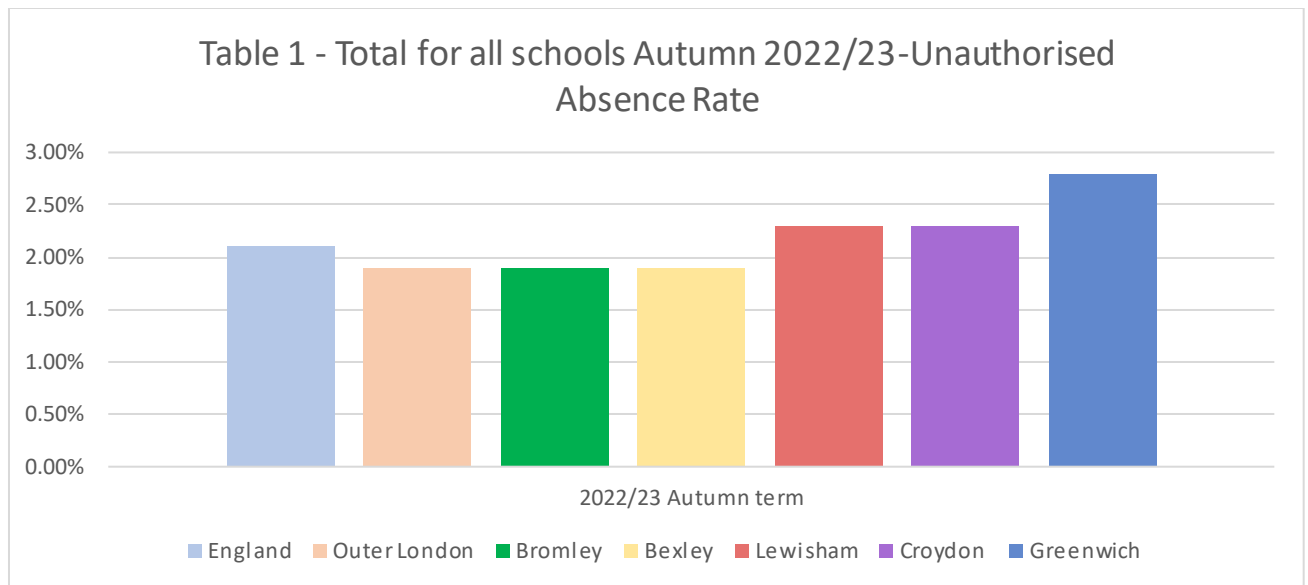
engaging schools who may be outliers in need of support, but not currently using the Bromley Education Welfare officers for their attendance management activity.

3.1.7   The Studybugs software is already being put to good use. The Education Welfare Service is able to analyse whole school cohorts to look for patterns in attendance which in turn enables targeted activity.

3.1.8   The software also has more advanced features available to schools that buy into the Education Welfare Service, allowing persistently absent pupils to be split further into other categories such as pupil premium, SEN, as well as identifying trends such as whether attendance is declining, improving or staying the same. It has hyperlinks attached to each child's name allowing officers to have a quick link to their attendance certificate for further analysis of patterns.

3.1.9   The system allows officers to identify pupils for whom attendance may be of concern and provide the data in the termly targeted meetings with schools. For those schools who don't sign up, they will need to provide the Council with the report and individual children's attendance certificates. Studybugs provides easy access and saves time in providing this information for both schools and the LA and is provided at no cost to the school. At present we have 63% of Bromley schools sharing their data through Studybugs. For schools/trusts that have chosen to opt out, attendance data on vulnerable pupils can still be extracted from the School Census, however this has limitations as the data is typically several months old once available. Officers have lobbied the Department for Education to make the sharing of live attendance data mandatory, but it remains optional under current DfE guidance.

3.1.10   Through the Education Transformation Programme the Education Welfare Service (EWS) has sought to introduce a new senior position and adjusted responsibilities for Education Welfare officers. This will provide an increased focus on direct work with schools, informed by the data we can now extract from the 'Studybugs' live database. Whilst schools are responsible for their own attendance management (which is aften bought in externally), this service development offer will help to indicate where schools are not achieving maximum impact and where limited budgets may derive better value from the Council's own EWS service contracts.

3.1.11   Depending on the level of commitment the Government envisages from councils, further resource in the service may be required in the future, but the current approach has been considered through the Transformation process.
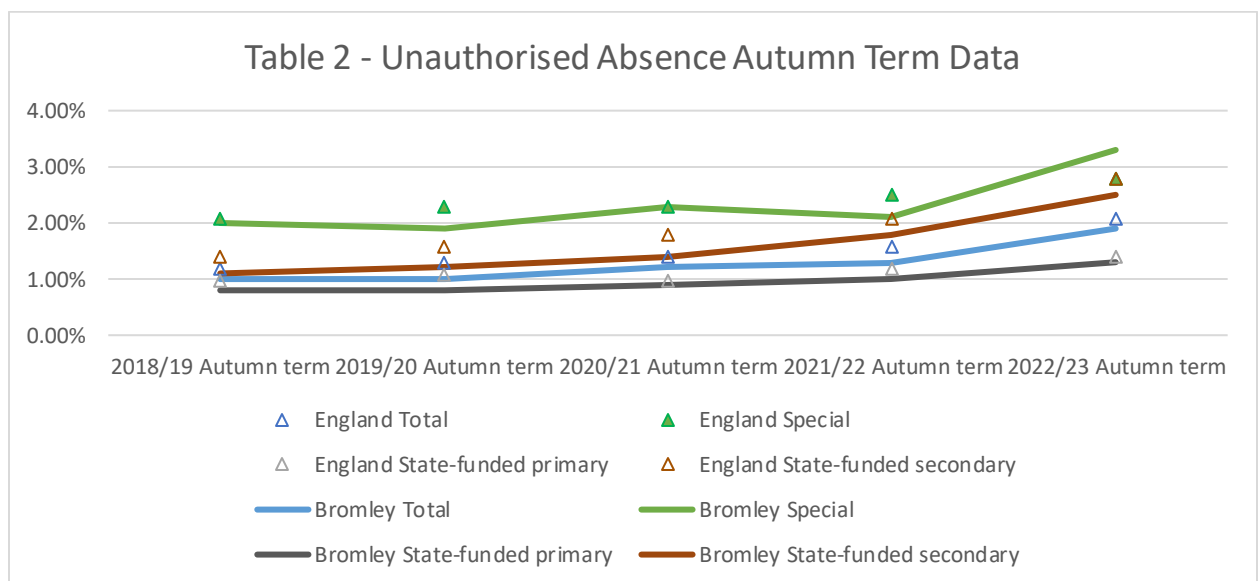
3.2 HOW DOES BROMLEY COMPARE ON UNATHORISED ABSENCE RATES

3.2.1 Bromley's current absence rate is 7.4%, with 1.9% being identified as unauthorised. Unauthorised absence - the 'truancy' figure – is a small part of the overall absence figure.

3.2.2 Table 1 (below) shows that in Bromley the level of unauthorised absence is below National levels for England by 0.2% and level that of outer London boroughs. When compared to our neighbouring boroughs we have the lowest levels alongside Bexley.

Table 1 - Total for all schools Autumn 2022/23-Unauthorised Absence Rate

3.2.3 Table 2 demonstrates the trends in unauthorised absence rates over the course of the pre and post Covid era. The trend in Bromley has mirrored the National picture with a post Covid spike. This is a trend that has appeared across all councils.

Table 2 - Unauthorised Absence Autumn Term Data

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3.2.4 Table 3 shows the figures for Bromley remain below national figures but that they have grown more rapidly over the course of the last academic year comparatively. It is anticipated that with improvements in access to up to date data at a school level, officers will be able to address this recent trend in a targeted way directly with schools.

Table 3	Unauthorised absence Autumn Term 2021/22	Unauthorised absence Autumn Term 2022/23	Difference in %
England	1.6	2.1	0.5
Outer London	1.5	1.9	0.4
Bromley	1.3	1.9	0.6

3.2.5 Special schools invariably have significantly higher levels of unauthorised absence. This is consistently the case across England and presents a 'normal trend'. During the last academic year, Bromley Special schools went from below National average to above the comparator for unauthorised absence, so this will be a focus of school level discussions going forward.

3.3 ABSENCE RATES INCLUDING PERSISTENT ABSENCE vs SEVERE ABSENCE

3.3.1 Absence tends to be split into two categories for reporting purposes nationally. The first is Persistent Absence (PA) which relates to those learners with attendance rates below 90%, and Severe Absence (SA) relating to cases where attendance falls to below 50% attendance. These figures include all absences marked against a child whether or not this is authorised and legitimate.

3.3.2 It is important to recognise the figures presented below present all absence, both authorised and unauthorised. Whilst this goes beyond the 'truancy' remit of the report, it highlights some interesting trends worthy of mention. The information is perhaps best described as attendance data as it captures whether the children are in school or not, regardless of whether there is an entirely legitimate reason for that. The data presented below provides a snapshot of Bromley compared with National performance data.

LA: ALL SCHOOLS

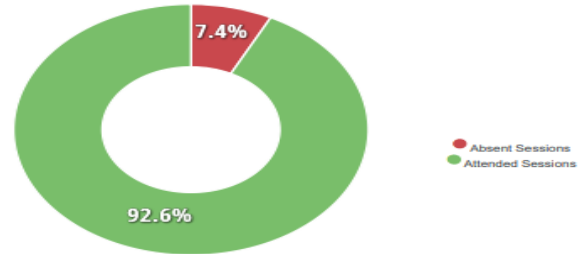ACADEMIC YEAR: 2022/23 | AREA: ALL AREAS - KEY INDICATORS | COMPARATOR: NATIONAL

ABSENCE – AUTUMN | OVERALL ABSENCE

From a cohort of **43,736 enrolments** in your LA, you had an Overall Absence of **7.4%**, this is based on **421,817 sessions** being missed out of a **possible 5,685,926**.
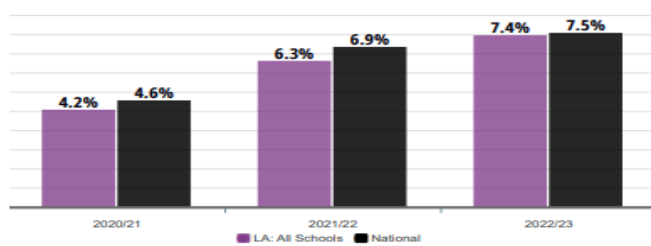
Your Overall Absence rate equates to an average of **9.6 sessions** missed by each pupil.

14.4% of your cohort have no Overall Absence sessions, a total of **6,277 pupils**.

Absence - Autumn: Overall Absence | Value

- Absent Sessions
- Attended Sessions

7.4%
92.6%

Absence - Autumn: Overall Absence | Trend

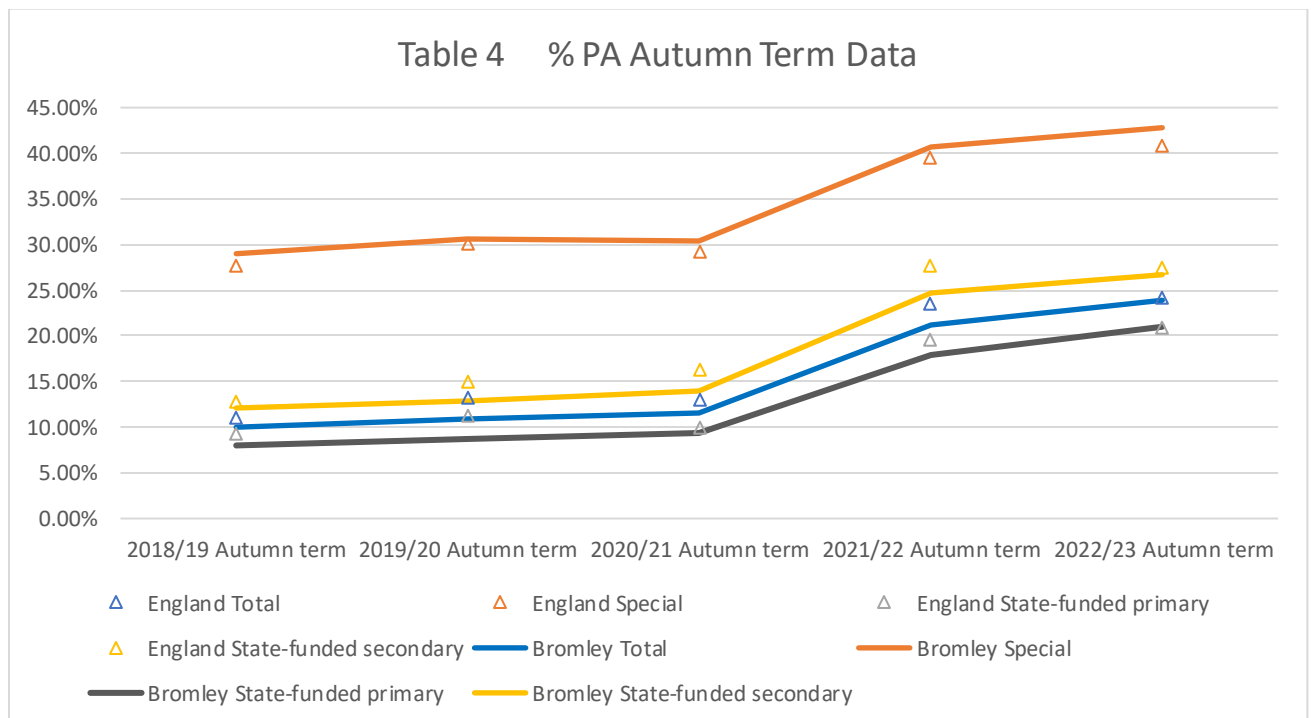| 2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
4.2% / 4.6%	6.3% / 6.9%	7.4% / 7.5%

- LA: All Schools
- National

Your LA's Overall Absence has **increased by 1.1%** from **6.3%** in 2021/22 to **7.4%** in 2022/23.

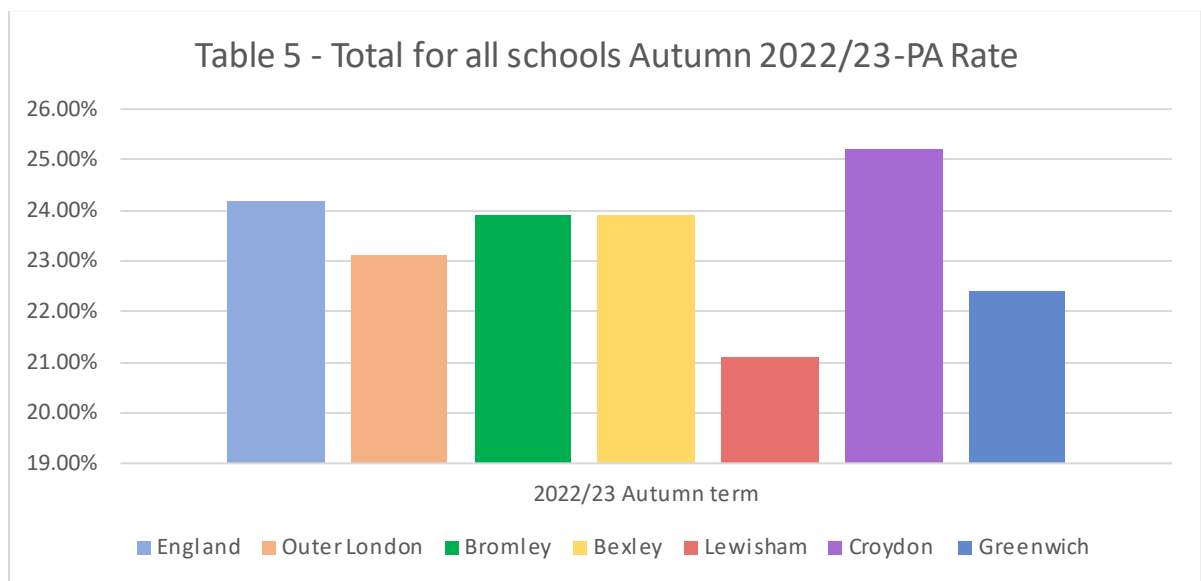Your LA's average for the last 3 academic year(s) is **6.0%**.

3.3.3   Whilst this provides useful pictorial insight, breaking data down further between school types, looking at more local comparators can be equally useful.

3.3.4   Persistent Absence (under 90% attendance) is presented in Table 4 demonstrating the trends in Bromley compared with national figures – these are closely aligned.

Table 4   % PA Autumn Term Data

△ England Total   △ England Special   △ England State-funded primary
△ England State-funded secondary   ── Bromley Total   ── Bromley Special
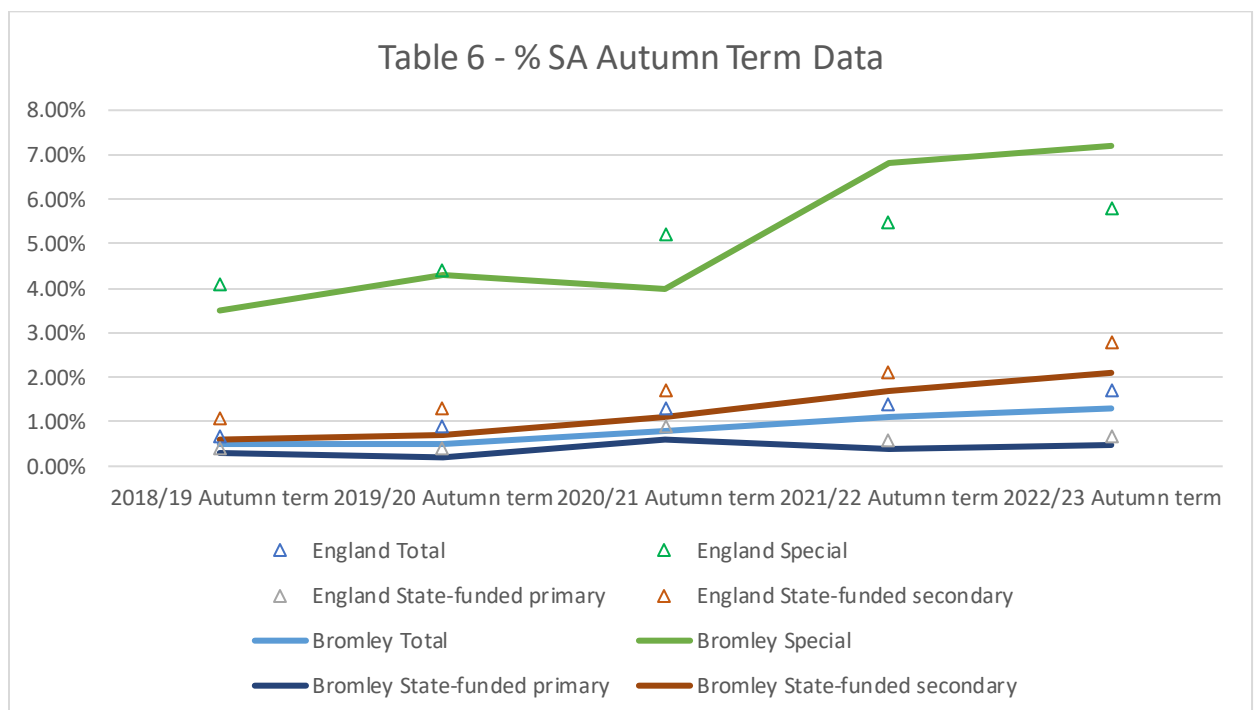── Bromley State-funded primary   ── Bromley State-funded secondary

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3.3.5 Table 5 indicates the performance in Bromley for Persistent Absence in comparison to England, Outer London and our neighbouring authorities.

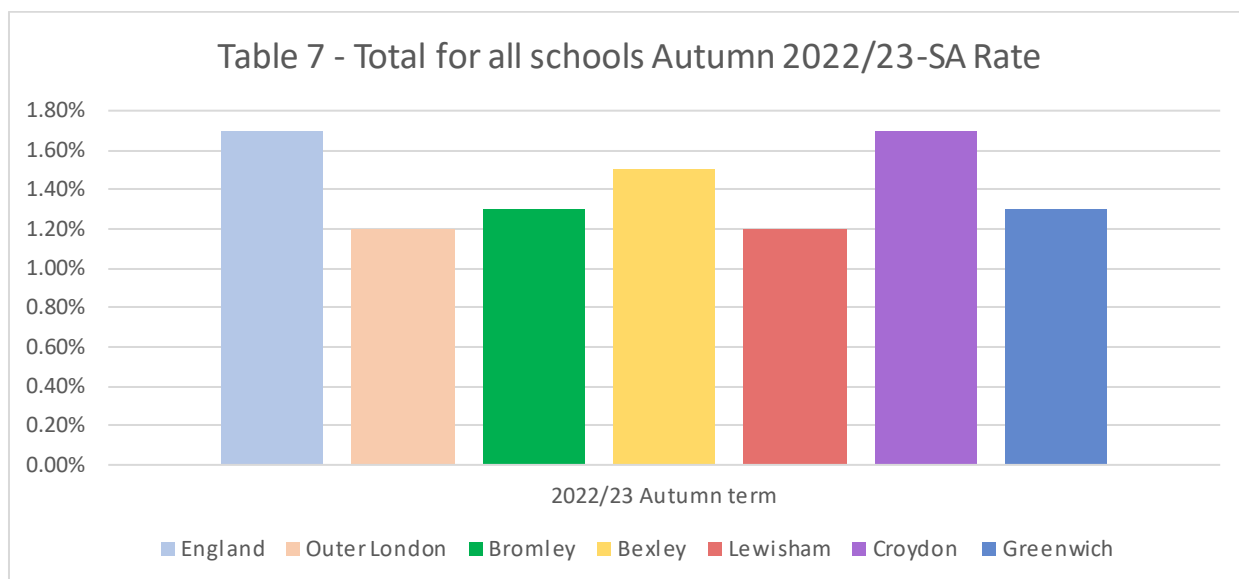Table 5 - Total for all schools Autumn 2022/23-PA Rate

3.3.6 Levels of PA in Bromley are below National average, although above Outer London levels.

3.3.7 The picture is quite different when it comes to Severe Absence trends in Bromley demonstrated by Table 6 below.

Table 6 - % SA Autumn Term Data

3.3.8 Bromley's overall severe absence and the totals of severe absence in its primary and secondary sectors is below National average. It is however an area of focus that special schools in Bromley are demonstrating above average levels of persistent absence comparative to the national position.

3.3.9 There may be a range of contributing factors including increasing difficulties in securing suitable local provision (exacerbated by ongoing delays in the opening of a new special free school in the borough) and complexity of presenting needs particularly around social emotional and mental health.

Table 7 - Total for all schools Autumn 2022/23-SA Rate

3.3.10 The levels of pupils identified as severely absent in Bromley are in-line with our neighbours and Outer London levels. Whilst it is concerning that levels have increased, we can take some reassurance that this is a similar pattern emerging across the UK and we will be focusing our attention on addressing this through the work of the Attendance and Inclusion Taskforce.

3.3.11 The breakdown of pupil groups is a very important indicator for our targeted activity. We can see where our focus and challenges sit – there are no surprises in this data and the activity to support our vulnerable learners is relentless.

Visualisations	Absence - Autumn Overall Absence					Absence - Autumn Unauthorised Absence				
	Value	Previous Value	%tile Rank	%tile Rank Trend	Cohort	Value	Previous Value	%tile Rank	%tile Rank Trend	Cohort
Local Authority - Bromley	**7.4%**	6.3%	**50**	-16 ▼	43,736	**1.9%**	1.3%	**41**	-4 ▼	43,736
Male	7.6%	6.2%	56	-21 ▼	22,021	1.8%	1.2%	36	-4 ▼	22,021
Female	7.2%	6.4%	49	-15 ▼	21,715	1.9%	1.4%	38	-1 ▼	21,715
Disadvantaged	12.1%	9.9%	87	-20 ▼	8,321	4.6%	3.3%	74	-11 ▼	8,321
Non-Disadvantaged	6.3%	5.5%	48	-13 ▼	35,415	1.2%	0.9%	32	+2 ▲	35,415
SEN No Recorded Provision	6.7%	5.7%	47	-8 ▼	35,788	1.5%	1.1%	33	+2 ▲	35,788
SEN Support	10.2%	8.3%	55	-12 ▼	5,698	3.3%	2.3%	52	-8 ▼	5,698
SEN EHCP	12.3%	10.9%	51	-7 ▼	1,994	3.1%	2.3%	44	-5 ▼	1,994
SEN Support & EHCP	10.8%	9.0%	59	-12 ▼	7,692	3.2%	2.3%	46	-4 ▼	7,692
Minority Ethnicity	7.0%	-	52	-	19,339	1.8%	-	41	-	19,339
Other than Minority Ethnicity	7.8%	-	48	-	24,397	1.9%	-	32	-	24,397
EAL	6.7%	5.3%	44	-14 ▼	6,571	1.5%	1.1%	26	+2 ▲	6,571
Non-EAL	7.5%	6.5%	45	-13 ▼	37,165	1.9%	1.4%	40	+1 ▲	37,165

3.3.12 The Virtual School uses the Welfare Call service to diligently monitor and track the daily attendance of all children currently on a Child Protection Plan, aged 3-18, through daily phone calls to schools. There is 100% compliance across all schools in collecting data for these students. This enables the service to target and work closely, linking Social Care, Education colleagues and our schools giving all involved the support needed to improve school attendance for this vulnerable group.

3.4 NEXT STEPS

3.4.1 Attendance and Inclusion Taskforce will continue to provide strategic oversight with schools, responding to trends across the LA. The Taskforce will identify trends earlier, and through the EWS take proactive approaches directly with schools to address absence before it becomes routine for children. (Studybugs - providing live pupil level data, enabling real time information – as opposed to DfE data that is several months out of date).

3.4.2 In line with new DfE directives, the service will introduce termly targeted attendance meetings to encourage schools to have focussed discussions on individuals experiencing PA.

3.4.3 Reviewing the way we work with partner agencies – Youth Justice Service and Children and Families Hub to ensure children can receive earliest possible access to education and get support when this is breaking down.

3.4.4 Attendance week (training for schools) - providing bitesize training. Sessions will be recorded and made available to schools on-line.

3.4.5 Updated online forms and website pages - providing schools and families with clear relevant information on the latest guidance from the Department for Education and updates on the attendance work and trends in the borough.

4. IMPACT ON VULNERABLE ADULTS AND CHILDREN

4.1 Schools cannot effectively teach and enable children to flourish in their learning if the children are not in school. Schools can be one of the greatest safety factors in the lives

of vulnerable children with education being the greatest asset we can give them. Being in school with access to a quality education is paramount to the success of all children but particularly vulnerable children and attendance is an essential element to that.

4.2 The Virtual School uses Welfare Call to diligently monitor and track the daily attendance of all vulnerable Bromley children making sure they work closely with Social Care and Education colleagues to give them the support needed to access school.

5. TRANSFORMATION/POLICY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The Council has worked in partnership with school leaders to develop targeted strategies that enable oversight and monitoring of attendance levels in schools, enabling identification of where support and challenge are required.

5.2 During the course of the last academic year, ahead of impending legislative changes, Bromley have formed an Attendance and Inclusion Taskforce which monitors attendance levels in schools with a view to targeting support activity and focus where outliers present.

5.3 Schools in Bromley operate with a high level of autonomy and this work has been progressed and developed in conjunction with a broad mix of school types. By having schools represented on the Taskforce, we have secured cooperation and made good progress, with data sharing agreements now in place with the vast majority of schools in the borough.

5.4 Not every Trust operating schools in the Borough has agreed to share attendance data through Studybugs. Whilst national government was seeking to develop a solution to this by setting National reporting mechanisms, these initial intentions now appear to have been revised to area level data as opposed to school specific data on attendance.

Non-Applicable Headings:	FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS LEGAL IMPLICATIONS PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS CARBON REDUCTION/SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS IMPACT ON THE LOCAL ECONOMY IMPACT ON HEALTH AND WELLBEING CUSTOMER IMPACT WARD COUNCILLOR VIEWS
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	