



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

STATISTICS

# Summary of absenteeism at school before and during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: September 2014 to August 2022

A report looking at attendance and absenteeism at school before and during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on a consistent basis with historical data and including information on absenteeism by type and by pupil characteristics for September 2014 to August 2022.

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# Introduction

This release presents attendance and absenteeism data over time for Wales on a consistent basis where possible. This will help to inform the debate on the impact of the pandemic on attendance and absence and also provide useful background context to the [GCSE results published by Welsh Government on 6 October 2022](#).

We have recalculated the data for the two school years affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (2020/21 and 2021/22) to be as consistent with historical definitions as the data allows. However, there are some key differences in the way the data was collected and some limitations in the data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 that prevent us from calculating the data to be fully consistent. See the [quality and methodology information section](#) for more details. The data is presented here to estimate how the pandemic affected attendance at school, but users should be cautious in interpreting comparisons over time and small differences between pupils with certain characteristics. Please also note that due to this recalculation the data presented here for 2020/21 and 2021/22 is not comparable to the attendance data published every week during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, when pupils were absent from school it was likely that the majority were not engaged in any formal learning. During the pandemic, whilst some pupils would not have been able to engage in remote learning, for example due to illness, the majority of pupils who were absent from school were likely to be engaged in remote learning. This is an important distinction to be aware of when looking at the data contained in this publication and what absence means for education and learning.

All data in this publication relates to pupils of statutory school age only (aged 5 to 15). Overall absence rates and data by gender includes data from primary, middle, secondary and special schools. Data broken down by other pupil

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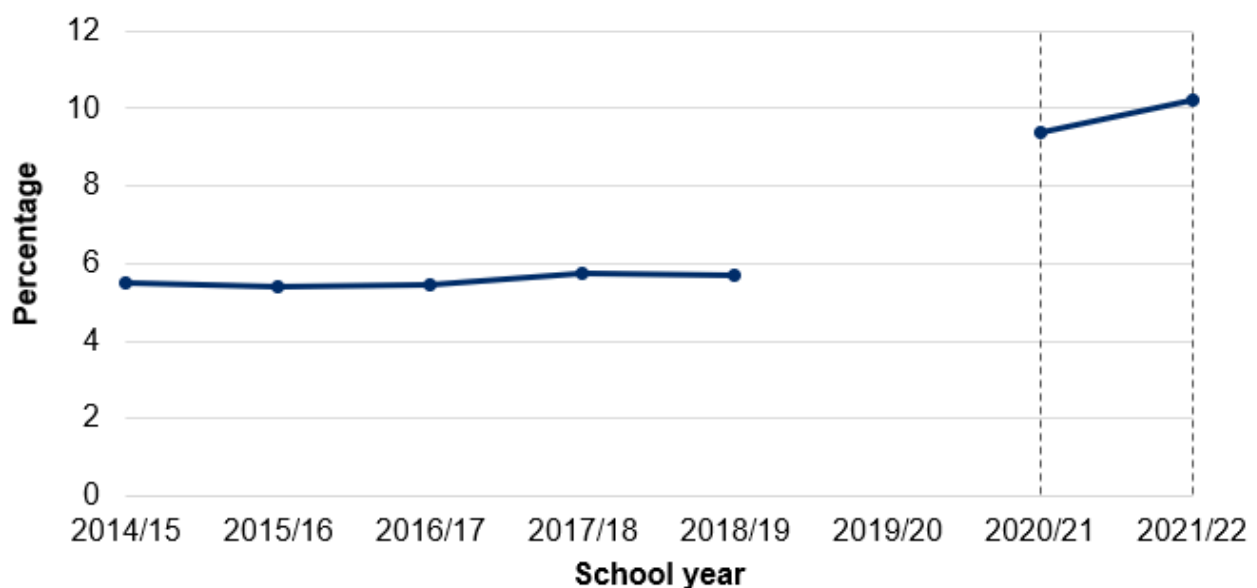
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characteristics does not include special schools. Data was not collected for 2019/20 as the start of the first national lockdown coincided with the data collection period. A half day session missed means that a pupil was not present in school for that half day session, although they may have been engaged in remote learning.

## Overall absence

In the points below, the phrase 'during the pandemic' means the school years 2020/21 and 2021/22 and 'before the pandemic' refers to the years up to 2018/19.

**Chart 1: Percentage of half day sessions missed due to absence, all pupils, 2014/15 to 2021/22**



Source: Schools in Wales

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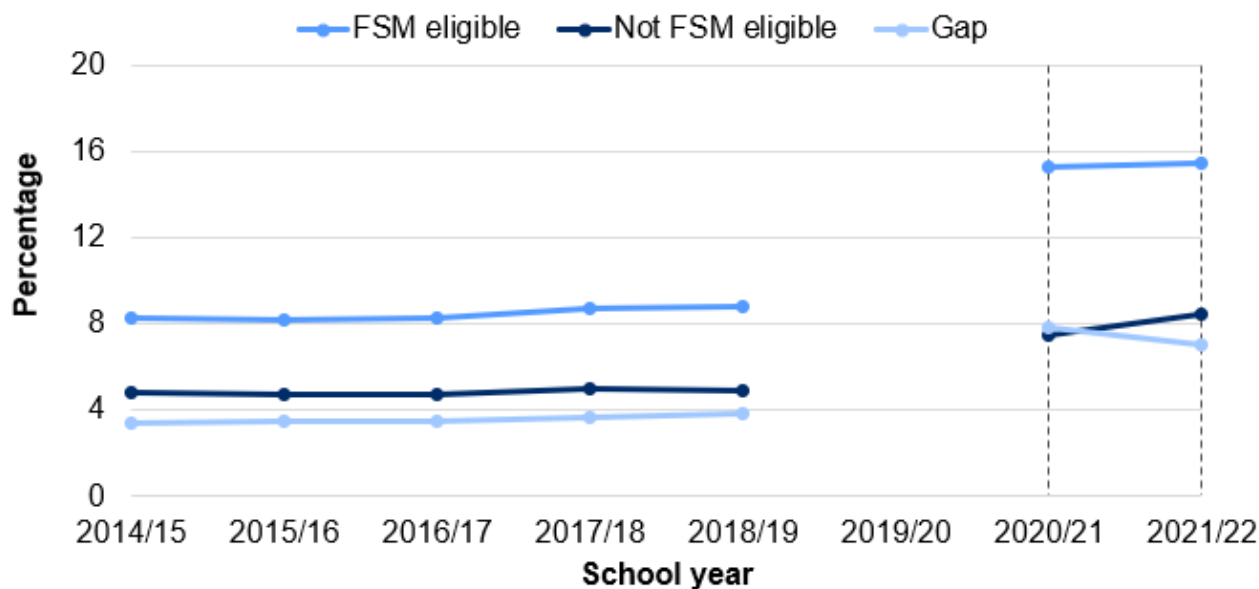
## Percentage of half day sessions missed due to absence, all pupils (MS Excel)

- Absence was higher during 2020/21 and 2021/22 than in previous years.
- Absence was between 3.5 and 5 percentage points higher, almost double the level before the pandemic.

## Gender

- The gender gap in overall absence in 2020/21 was the same as in the two years before the pandemic, with the absence rate for boys 0.2 percentage points higher than for girls.
- In 2021/22 boys had a lower absence rate than girls by 0.2 percentage points, a pattern not seen in any of the five years before the pandemic.

**Chart 2: Percentage of half day sessions missed due to absence, by free school meal (FSM) eligibility, 2014/15 to 2021/22**



Source: Schools in Wales

### Percentage of half day sessions missed due to absence, FSM eligibility (MS Excel)

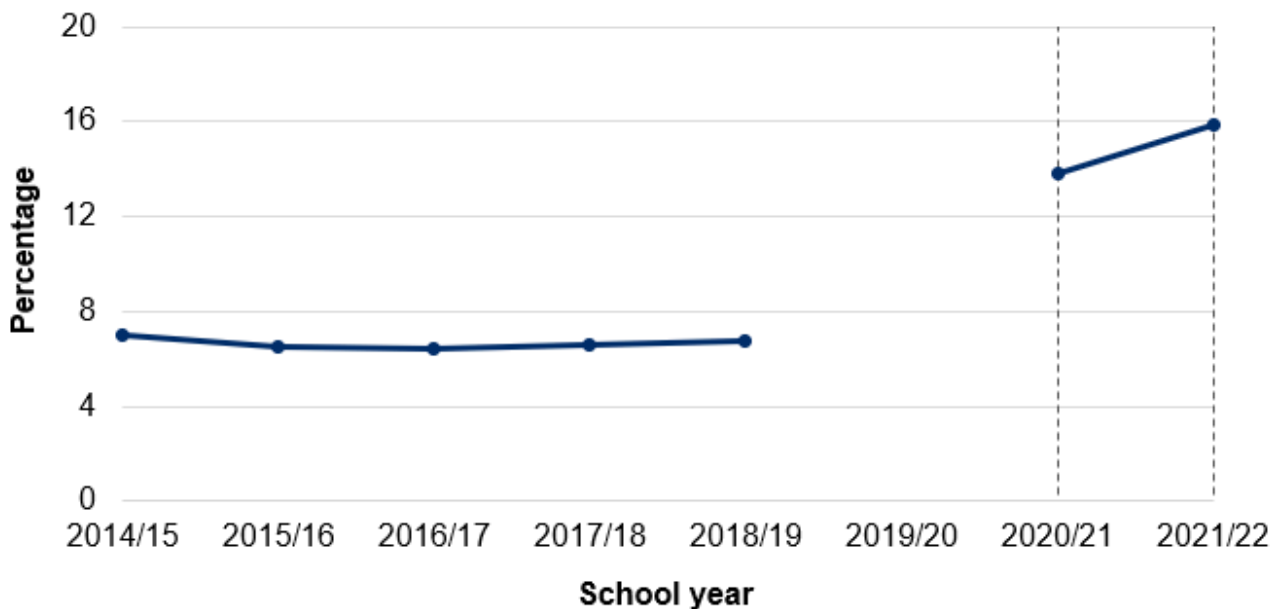
- The COVID-19 pandemic had a greater impact on the absence of pupils eligible for FSM.
- Absence for pupils eligible for FSM was around 6.5 percentage points higher during the COVID-19 pandemic than it was before the pandemic.
- Absence for pupils not eligible for FSM was around 3 percentage points higher during the COVID-19 pandemic than it was before the pandemic.
- The gap almost doubled to over 7 percentage points during the pandemic.

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**Chart 3: Percentage of half day sessions missed due to absence, year 11 pupils, 2014/15 to 2021/22**



Source: Schools in Wales

### Percentage of half day sessions missed due to absence, year 11 pupils (MS Excel)

- Levels of absence tend to increase as pupils get older, but with a spike amongst very young children due to normal childhood illnesses.
- Continuing the trend from before the pandemic, absence was highest amongst pupils in year 11 (the year most pupils sit their GCSEs).
- Absence also increased the most during the pandemic amongst pupils in year 11, from around 6.5% prior to the pandemic to 15.8% in 2021/22.

## Ethnicity

- The existing patterns of absence continued during the pandemic. Absence

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was highest amongst Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller pupils and lowest amongst pupils from a Chinese background.

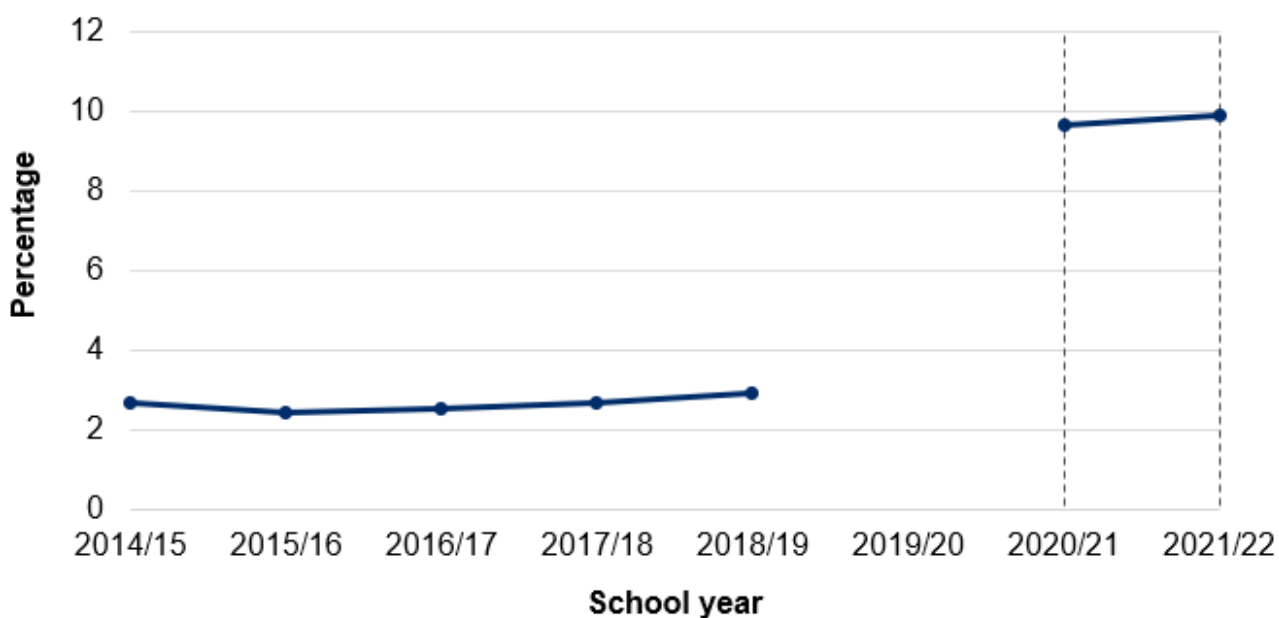
- All main ethnic groups saw an increase in absence rates during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Persistent absence

Persistent absence is defined as missing more than 20% of available school sessions over a whole school year. In 2020/21, the period from 14 December 2020 to 26 March 2021 has not been included in either the total number of sessions possible or the number of sessions missed, as most pupils except for vulnerable children and children of critical workers were not expected to be in school as a result of school closures due to the pandemic. This is consistent with the treatment of whole school closures in the historical data.



**Chart 4: Percentage of pupils who were persistently absent, all pupils, 2014/15 to 2021/22**

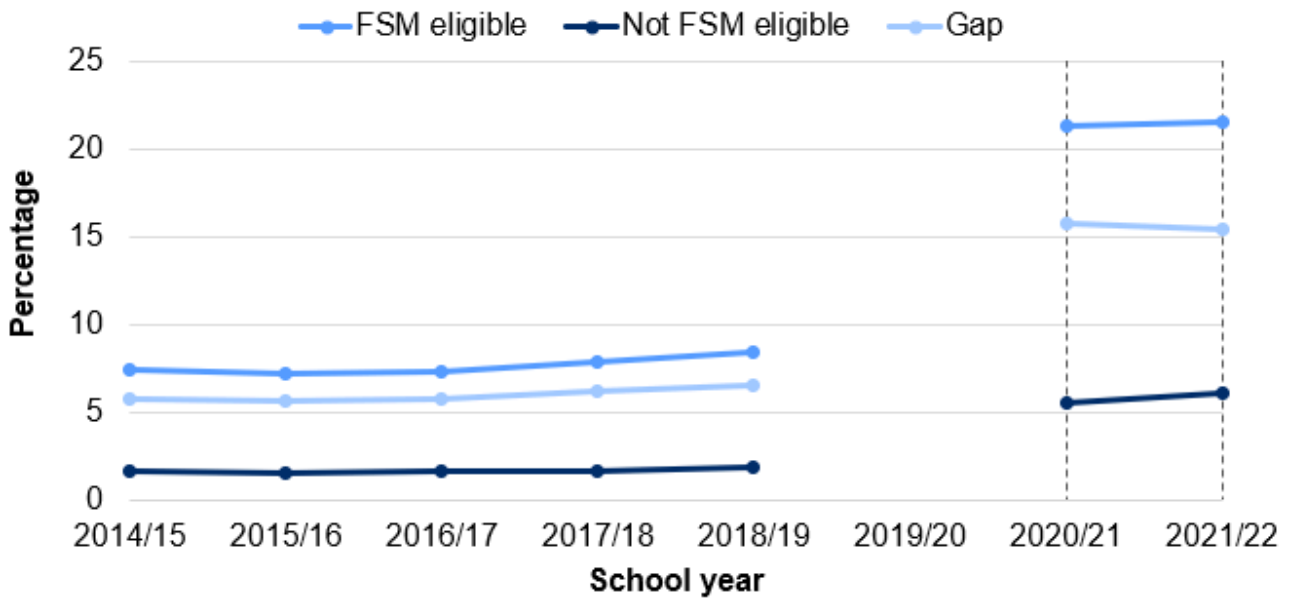


Source: Schools in Wales

### Percentage of pupils who were persistently absent, all pupils (MS Excel)

- Levels of persistent absence were higher during the pandemic.
- Around 10% of pupils were persistently absent during the pandemic compared to fewer than 3% before the pandemic.

**Chart 5: Percentage of pupils who were persistently absent, by free school meal (FSM) eligibility, 2014/15 to 2021/22**

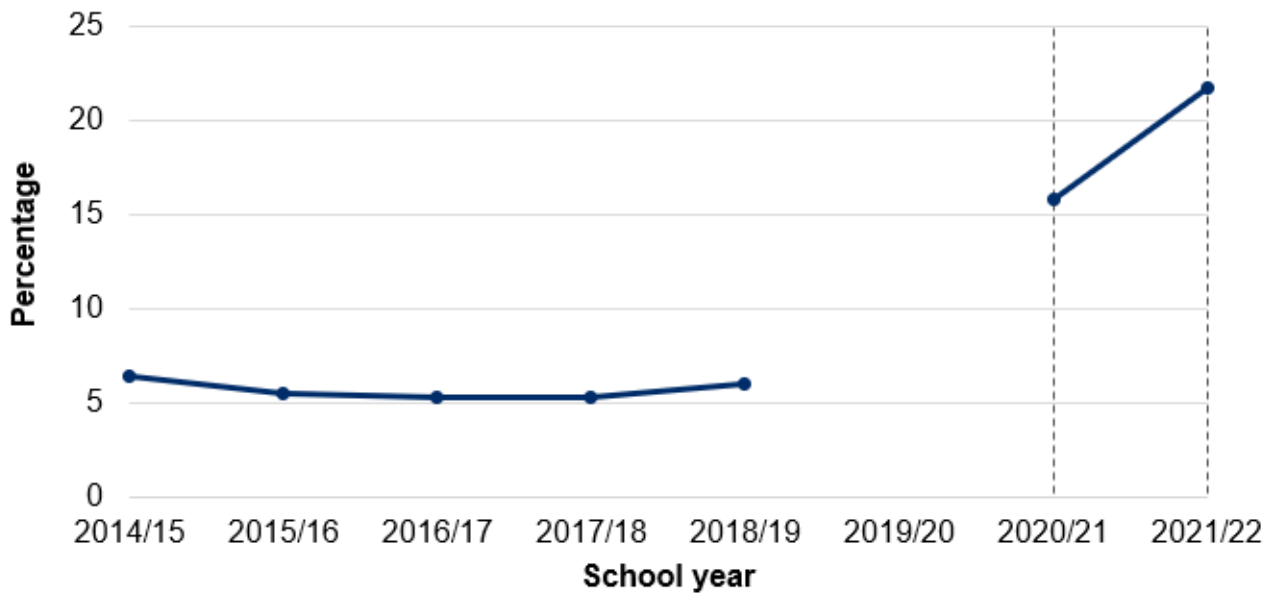


Source: Schools in Wales

**Percentage of pupils who were persistently absent, by FSM eligibility (MS Excel)**

- The COVID-19 pandemic impacted to a greater extent on persistent absence amongst pupils eligible for FSM.
- Around 21% of pupils eligible for FSM were persistently absent during the pandemic compared to 6% of pupils who were not eligible. The gap grew from around 6 percentage points before the pandemic to 16 percentage points during the pandemic.

**Chart 6: Percentage of pupils who were persistently absent, year 11 pupils, 2014/15 to 2021/22**



Source: Schools in Wales

### Percentage of pupils who were persistently absent, year 11 pupils (MS Excel)

- Persistent absence was highest among pupils in year 11, continuing the pattern from before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- However, in 2021/22, almost 22% of year 11 pupils were persistently absent compared to between 5% and 6% before the pandemic.

# Quality and methodology information

## National Statistics status

These statistics are not National Statistics. The data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 is considered management information and have been produced in response to developing national and local events during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Public health context

Full or partial school closures in Wales during the COVID-19 pandemic were guided by public health guidelines and statutory rules around isolation. In the context of schools the priority was to keep learners, staff and their families safe. Where health advice and rules allowed, school attendance remained compulsory in Wales throughout the pandemic. However, regardless of the reason for non-attendance, the Welsh Government did not consider it appropriate to use punitive measures (for example fines) during this period. During the pandemic, absence from schools did not necessarily mean absence from learning or education, with schools fully supporting their learners remotely.

There were numerous periods where schools were fully or partially closed for public health reasons, and these periods are shown in this [timeline of school closures](#).

The [Coronavirus Timeline: Welsh and UK Government response](#) documents the major policy decisions taken in the UK, with many of these decisions having a direct impact on school attendance.

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## Key differences in data collected on school absence before and during the pandemic

The key differences from a Welsh Government perspective were in data collection methodology and frequency, data validation, new attendance codes and changes to an existing attendance code. All these changes will impact on comparisons over time.

From a school's perspective, the additional challenges facing them during the pandemic will have meant that attendance registers took longer to update and confirming the exact nature of an absence from pupils or parents will have been more difficult. This can be seen in the more widespread use of code 'N' (no reason for absence provided yet) during the COVID-19 pandemic. If data was not available within three weeks then it was not collected by Welsh Government which will affect the reported levels of absence during the pandemic.

These key differences are described in the following table.

## Key differences in data collected on school absence before and during the pandemic

Area of difference	Before the COVID-19 pandemic	During the COVID-19 pandemic
Data collection frequency	Data was collected annually at the end of the school year. Termly totals were available for every pupil but no daily or weekly data. The data collection timetable was set to ensure that schools had sufficient time to enter all of their finalised attendance data.	Data was collected weekly, with data available for every day for every pupil. Data for every week was collected a total of three times to allow schools to update their information. Any updates after this three week period were not collected.

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Area of difference	Before the COVID-19 pandemic	During the COVID-19 pandemic
Data collection methodology	Schools would generate an attendance data set within their information management system at the end of the year once all data entry was complete.	Data was automatically extracted every Sunday from school information management systems, whether the data was complete or not.
Validation	Once the data had been provided to Welsh Government, it was validated against a set of rules and schools were given a two week period to review and amend the data as necessary. The final attendance figures were agreed with schools.	There was no validation period. Data was not agreed with schools.
Data coverage	All maintained schools	On an average day data was received from over 99% of maintained schools.
New attendance codes	Not applicable	Two new attendance codes were added to school information management systems in November 2020. These were: ';' – illness due to COVID-19 and '[' – remote learning due to COVID-19.
Changes to definitions of attendance codes	Not applicable	Before the COVID-19 pandemic, code 'Y' was defined as 'full or partial closure of the school'. The definition of the code was changed in November 2020 to be "school directed absence due to COVID-19. This change in

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Area of difference	Before the COVID-19 pandemic	During the COVID-19 pandemic
National Statistics Status	The data collection, validation and publication was in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics and it was designated as National Statistics.	definition will have impacted on the perception and use of this code.  Data was not validated. Not all schools provided data every week. Any incorrect or incomplete data after the three week period was not collected. The data was treated as management information.

Please note that the data published in this release is not comparable to the data published every week during the pandemic. In order to be as consistent as possible with historical definitions, codes 'I' and 'Y' do not have the same statistical meaning in this release that they did in every attendance release published in 2020/21 and 2021/22 (see below).

## Changes to the statistical meaning of codes to make the data comparable over time

In order to make the data collected during the pandemic as comparable as possible with the data collected before the pandemic we changed the statistical meaning of two codes. Code 'Y' (school directed absence due to COVID-19) and code 'I' (remote learning due to COVID-19) were treated as 'authorised absence' during the pandemic but have been changed to mean 'not required to attend' in this release. Both these codes cover the circumstances where a pupil is sent home to learn but they have not been confirmed as having COVID-19. In most circumstances before the pandemic where pupils were sent home when they were not ill the appropriate code to use was code 'Y', which was treated as 'not

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required to attend'. Therefore the most appropriate way to treat these codes to be consistent with historical data is to treat them as 'not required to attend'.

## Comparability

All 4 UK nations publish regular data on attendance in school. We do not advise making comparisons between the nations due to differences in data collection methods, presentation and definitions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Well-being of Future Generations Act (WFG)

The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 is about improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales. The Act puts in place seven wellbeing goals for Wales. These are for a more equal, prosperous, resilient, healthier and globally responsible Wales, with cohesive communities and a vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language. Under section (10)(1) of the Act, the Welsh Ministers must (a) publish indicators (“national indicators”) that must be applied for the purpose of measuring progress towards the achievement of the wellbeing goals, and (b) lay a copy of the national indicators before Senedd Cymru. Under section 10(8) of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, where the Welsh Ministers revise the national indicators, they must as soon as reasonably practicable (a) publish the indicators as revised and (b) lay a copy of them before the Senedd. These national indicators were laid before the Senedd in 2021. The indicators laid on 14 December 2021 replace the set laid on 16 March 2016.

Information on the indicators, along with narratives for each of the wellbeing goals and associated technical information is available in the [Wellbeing of Wales report](#).

Further information on the [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act](#)

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**2015.**

The statistics included in this release could also provide supporting narrative to the national indicators and be used by public services boards in relation to their local wellbeing assessments and local wellbeing plans.

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