

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL
Friday 11 February 2022

1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR HANNAFORD
Re: Bus Service Support Grant

Local buses are facing a funding “cliff edge” amid more cuts to vital routes. The emergency government coronavirus bus funding is due to end in March 2022 yet passenger numbers have not recovered fully. Stagecoach and others have already announced much reduced services and also warned of further cuts to come. Can the cabinet member please report back on what work is being done to assess the impact of these changes to bus services across Devon?

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR DAVIS

Officers from our Transport Coordination Service are working with our local bus companies on the possible impacts of the emergency covid funding coming to an end and what this may mean for commercial and Devon County Council supported local bus services. With the recovery in passenger numbers having stalled due to the Omicron variant without this funding, in the short-term services will be further reduced. This is likely to have a greater impact on areas with less frequent services. Taking this into account I have written to the Minister responsible for buses asking for urgent clarity on the funding.

We also still await the outcome of our Bus Service Improvement Plan we submitted to Government at the end of October. To meet the ambitions of this plan we need a stable, attractive and affordable public transport network across the County to build on.

2. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR HANNAFORD
Re: Concessionary Bus Pass Changes

Currently, Government proposals suggest that the state pension age is set to be increased from 66 to 67 between 2026 and 2028. Furthermore, the state pension age threshold for this benefit is expected to be hiked to 68 years of age in 2048. As a result of this change millions of people who otherwise would have been eligible for the free bus pass when they turned 66 will now have to wait even longer. Have we commenced some modelling work to look at how this impacts pensioners in Devon, and its overall effect on the business planning of local bus companies?

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR DAVIS

Based on previous increases in the age of eligibility linked with the state pension age, modelling was completed by the Department for Transport so they understood the financial impact of the change. In terms of patronage concessions were approximately 40% of overall passengers prior to the pandemic and there has been a small but noticeable reduction since the peak in 2012/13. However, some of the reduction in concessions travelling did result in an increased number of fare paying passengers.

Any local modelling is very difficult at the moment due to the fall in passenger numbers due to the pandemic. This has hit the number of concessions travelling. Once we know what the level of patronage will return to in the longer term, officers from our Transport Coordination Service will be looking at the longer-term outcomes for the County Council and our bus companies.

3. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BAILEY

Re: Schools Rebuilding Programme and Flood Risk Criteria

Can the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools confirm that he will use his best endeavours to ensure that the new flood risk criteria for the Schools Rebuilding Programme is applied to Tipton St John school in my ward so that the school can, as soon as possible, finally have the building it deserves within a flood free location.

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR LEADBETTER

Devon County Council has consistently promoted the need to relocate Tipton C of E Primary away from their current site. This has included direct representations to the Department for Education, promoting the need to factor in risk of flooding when prioritising projects for the National Schools Rebuilding Programme. I am delighted that Department has listened to Local Authorities and there is now an opportunity to make the case for Tipton C of E Primary to be included with the national school rebuilding programme. Devon County Council will continue to fully support the relocation of school.

4. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BAILEY

Re: Covid School Absences

Please can the Cabinet Member advise the daily number of children who have been absent from school due to covid since the start of the January term 2022 (in numbers and percentages and breakdown between primary and secondary school children)

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR LEADBETTER

The table below shows the daily number of students reported as absent from school for Covid-related reasons. This includes children who are positive for Covid and those with suspected Covid or still suffering from Covid-related symptoms. Please note a child will be included in the numbers for every day they are absent. For example, if they were away from school on the 3rd of Feb and on the 4th of Feb they would be counted on both days.

Covid-related absence

Date	Primary		Secondary		Primary and Secondary combined	
	Children with reported Covid Related Absence	% Reported Covid Related Absence	Children with reported Covid Related Absence	% Reported Covid Related Absence	Children with reported Covid Related Absence	% Reported Covid Related Absence
04/02/2022	1634	4.6%	1712	5.9%	3346	5.2%
03/02/2022	1625	4.6%	1452	5.6%	3077	5.0%
02/02/2022	1702	5.0%	1563	5.8%	3265	5.4%
01/02/2022	1789	5.2%	1745	5.8%	3534	5.5%
31/01/2022	2033	5.6%	1620	5.5%	3653	5.5%
28/01/2022	2455	6.6%	1498	5.5%	3953	6.1%
27/01/2022	2318	6.3%	1352	4.9%	3670	5.7%
26/01/2022	2440	6.7%	1448	5.1%	3888	6.0%
25/01/2022	2523	6.8%	1478	4.9%	4001	5.9%
24/01/2022	2304	6.6%	1355	4.7%	3659	5.7%
21/01/2022	2374	6.5%	1104	4.1%	3478	5.5%
20/01/2022	2235	6.1%	934	3.6%	3169	5.0%
19/01/2022	2004	5.4%	968	3.3%	2972	4.5%
18/01/2022	1820	5.0%	869	3.1%	2689	4.2%
17/01/2022	1643	4.3%	828	2.8%	2471	3.6%
14/01/2022	1108	3.1%	555	2.4%	1663	2.8%
13/01/2022	925	2.5%	706	2.4%	1631	2.4%
12/01/2022	788	2.3%	666	2.4%	1454	2.3%
11/01/2022	827	2.2%	755	2.4%	1582	2.3%
10/01/2022	746	2.0%	650	2.2%	1396	2.1%
07/01/2022	778	2.1%	833	2.6%	1611	2.3%
06/01/2022	727	2.1%	483	2.5%	1210	2.2%
05/01/2022	646	2.0%	518	1.9%	1164	1.9%

5. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BAILEY Re: Ventilation Improvements in Schools

In view of the airborne nature of Covid, please can the Cabinet Member advise how many Devon schools have had their ventilation improved since the start of the pandemic.

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR LEADBETTER

In most schools' adequate ventilation can be achieved by opening windows, where this is not possible the Department said they would make 7,000 air cleaning units available across the country for poorly ventilated teaching spaces in state funded schools (primary and secondary), FE colleges and early years settings. This is in addition to the 1,000 DfE-funded air cleaning units announced on 18 November for SEND and AP settings.

Schools had to submit an application to access the equipment and these were assessed by the DfE against a strict list of criteria. The DfE made direct contact with settings whose application was successful and deliveries are expected from February 2022. DCC do not know how many settings in Devon were successful, but we understand that some deliveries have started to be made.

6. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BAILEY Re: School Absences

It is estimated by the Centre for Social Justice that around 100,000 children are routinely absent from school in England since the start of the pandemic. Please can the Cabinet Member advise how many children in Devon are routinely absent from school in Devon for reasons other than Covid (in figures and percentages) and please advise how this compares with the situation prior to the pandemic.

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR LEADBETTER

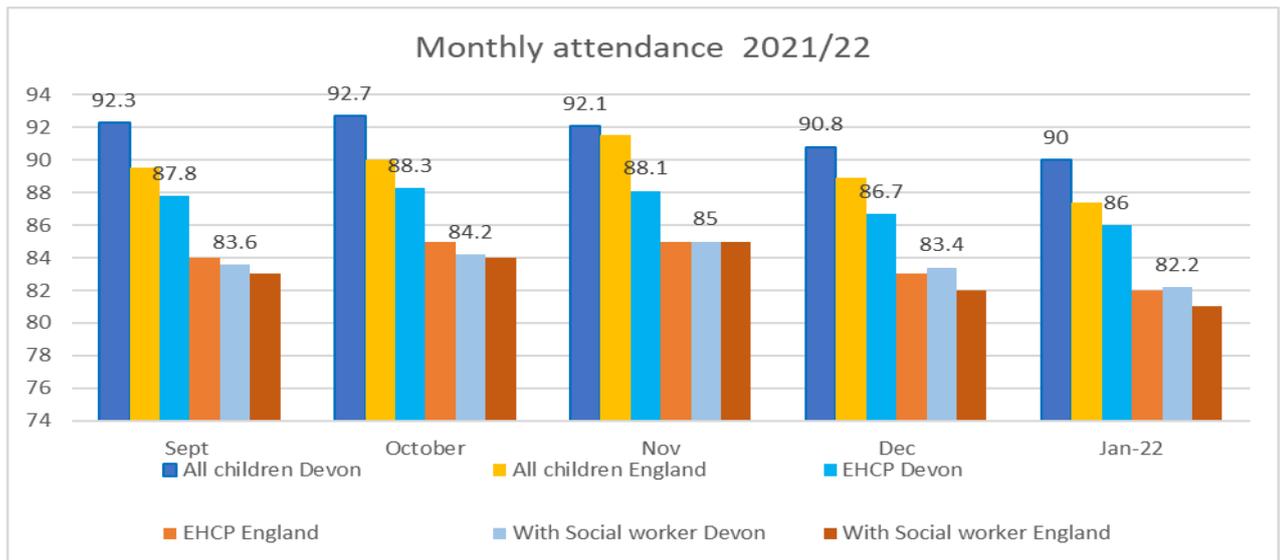
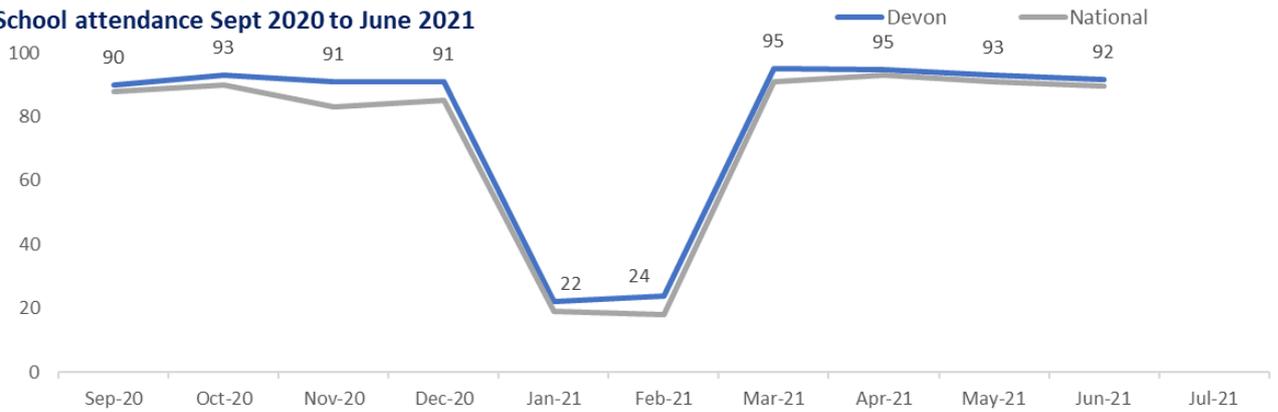
There is no national definition for a child being "routinely absent" from school. The report however defines a group of students who are "severely absent" from school as those who attend for less than 50% of the possible sessions. We have therefore used this benchmark in providing the information below.

The data collected by DCC does not facilitate reporting on children who are absent from school being split out into "reasons other than Covid". This is because the attendance code for a child who is absent if they are ill with Covid is the same as if they are absent for other illnesses, including mental health.

We can however report that 1062 children have had attendance of 50% or below for this academic year to date. This represents 1.1% of the state funded school population in Devon and includes those who have any medical reasons for non-attendance. Of these children, 337 had attendance of 50% or below where part of the non-attendance was unauthorised. All of these children are monitored by Education Welfare officers within the school or Babcock LDP.

Attendance in schools across Devon has remained above the National Average throughout the pandemic as shown overleaf

School attendance Sept 2020 to June 2021



**7. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BAILEY
Re: Full Findings of Race Audit Report**

Please can the Leader confirm that the full findings (as opposed to the summary) of the Race Equality Audit will be published forthwith.

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR HART

The Race Equality Audit report has been available in full on the Council website at <https://www.devon.gov.uk/equality/performance-and-monitoring/raceaudit21> since 26 January.

8. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR BAILEY
Re: Race Equality Audit and Scrutiny Committees

Please can the Leader commit to the Race Equality Audit being brought to the next meetings of the Scrutiny committees and that the authors of the Audit will be invited to attend each scrutiny committee meeting.

REPLY BY COUNCILLOR HART

The three anti-racism consultants who carried out the audit have completed their work and the Chief Executive and I have thanked them for it.

Scrutiny Committees will have an important part to play in oversight of progress with implementing the recommendations to ensure that the Council is the best possible employer and service provider to everyone.

The Lead Officer for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion will be reporting to forthcoming Scrutiny Committee meetings.