



EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 20TH JUNE 2023

SUBJECT: PUPIL ATTENDANCE

**REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR EDUCATION AND
CORPORATE SERVICES**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide members with an overview of the strategies currently being deployed to improve pupil attendance following the Covid-19 pandemic. This is identified as a main priority for improvement in the 'Pursuing Excellence Together' education strategy.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 After several years with limited results, pupil attendance improved in both 2018 and 2019. In 2019, secondary attendance (94%) was above the national average and primary attendance (94.7%) was in line with the national average. During this period, the percentage of pupils with less than 80% attendance (persistent absenteeism) also reduced. These outcomes were a result of effective partnership working between the Local Authority and schools to strengthen processes for improving attendance.

However, as in all Local Authorities across Wales, attendance has been negatively affected by the pandemic, and therefore, is a priority for all schools and education settings across Caerphilly. The current attendance figure up to the end of March 2023 is slightly below the national average (89.1% v 89.5%).

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Update on the impact of strategies to improve pupil attendance and provide members with the opportunity to ask questions, seek further clarification and offer views.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 Members are asked to consider the approach the Local Authority has adopted in the ambition to recover pupil attendance data to pre-covid levels. To achieve this, all stakeholders in education need to be fully committed to this ambitious shared goal.

5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 Comparative data to pre-covid attendance levels identifies that overall, attendance has decreased significantly from the 2018-19 academic year. As a result, improving pupil attendance has been included in the list of main priorities in the revised education strategy 'Pursuing Excellence Together'.

Lead officers identified issues that school and families are facing in regard to attendance and planned a strategic re-focus for the 2022-23 academic year. The work was carried out via pupil voice exercises, workshops with attendance and pastoral staff, meetings with headteachers and regular meetings with education welfare officers.

- 5.2 The work carried out by education welfare officers identified several issues acting as barriers to schools:

Illness – Factors that have contributed to high levels of illness include Covid-19, seasonal flu, and more recently, anxiety around Strep A and Scarlet Fever. This has led to uncertainty around when a child is well enough to be in school.

Holidays – Families are taking holidays during term time which have been re-scheduled following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mental health and anxiety of some pupils and parents has deteriorated over the last three years, leading to long term absence.

School refusal – Some pupils struggle to manage whole days in school and parents are struggling to cope with behaviours and attitudes.

A **cultural change** around attitudes to school attendance.

Recruitment - Some staff who joined school attendance and pastoral teams are new to the role, and therefore, require induction training on best practice strategies.

In addition, the disproportionate low attendance amongst **pupils in receipt of free school meals** compared to their peers, particularly relating to long-term absence.

- 5.3 Attendance of children in maintained schools has improved in recent months with provisional Welsh Government data reporting attendance of 89.1% (as of 31.03.23). This compares to a Welsh average of 89.5%. However, attendance data had dipped to 88.2% by the end of the Autumn term 2022 largely due to an increase in sickness levels alongside continued parental anxiety close to the Christmas holiday period.

The data below identify the improvements in pupil attendance from the end of December 2022 to the end of April 2023. However, the data identifies some of the challenges ahead, most notably the low attendance across all schools, the differential between primary and secondary schools, and the differential between FSM pupils and their peers.

December 2022

	ALL PUPILS	FSM	NON-FSM
Secondary	85.9%	79.2%	87.8%
Primary	90.3%	86%	91.9%
All	88.3%	83.3%	89.9%

April 2023

	ALL PUPILS	FSM	NON-FSM
Secondary	86.9%	80%	88.8%
Primary	91.3%	87.2%	92.7%
All	89.3%	84.3%	90.8%

- 5.4 Whilst the current data remain an area of concern, it is important to maintain the ongoing strategic drive towards improving attendance. Some of the key actions are listed below:
1. Every effort is made to recognise the hard work, commitment and team spirit of schools, education welfare officers and other stakeholders, who require significant resilience to undertake their role. Opportunities to celebrate successes and achievements are promoted.
 2. Education welfare officers work closely with schools and other settings to reset expectations, re-introduce and revise attendance processes (including challenge to parents/carers), as well as carrying out individual casework with pupils and families. In addition, there are also wider strategies to improve parental engagement that include the Family and Community Engagement toolkit, the Heart of The Community Award work and the Community Focused Schools initiative.
 3. Communication with key stakeholders regarding attendance is ongoing. This includes headteacher forums, attendance workshops, and Local Authority letters to parents and carers.
 4. Targeted intervention has taken place across all secondary schools. This includes several officers across the Local Authority working for an identified number of days within a specific school catchment. This has resulted in positive improvements in data and favourable feedback from secondary headteachers.
 5. Attendance action plans have been devised and issued to primary and secondary headteachers to integrate within their school development plans.
 6. Termly workshops provide additional training for school staff. This also includes the opportunity for the sharing of best practice across settings. Engagement with these sessions is very good.
 7. School attendance data is collected monthly and shared with key stakeholders. This data is also scrutinised by the Strategic Lead for School Improvement to evaluate impact, and then shared with all headteachers. This initiative has resulted in particularly favourable feedback from schools.
 8. 'Team around the School' meetings are available for schools that wish additional support on improving attendance. Meetings are held regularly to support the schools in re-establishing attendance processes and evaluate the impact of school strategies.
 9. The attendance self-evaluation document has been updated. Schools have been encouraged to engage with the process.
 10. Additional funding from Welsh Government has been utilised to

- increase the capacity in the Education Welfare Service;
 - provide targeted schools in areas of high deprivation with additional funding to build capacity;
 - employ 'English as an additional language' family liaison officers (Eastern European and Ukrainian) to support families where language may be a barrier to communication and support.
11. Additional training has been provided for Governors through network meetings and attendance at Governing Body meetings.
 12. Truancy patrols have taken place alongside the police to target hotspots to ensure a visible presence in the community and decrease persistent absenteeism.
 13. Fixed penalty notices have been reintroduced as a last resort where all other avenues have been explored.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 Pupils with poor attendance are more likely to fall behind with their work, have gaps in their learning, and therefore, achieve lower examination results. This will affect their life chances for the future. We all have the responsibility to ensure that our pupils achieve the best start in life, so they can reach their full potential.

7. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 This report provides information and therefore an integrated impact assessment has not been completed at this time.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Staff costs to deliver staff training and interventions have been funded through a mixture of funding from core services, augmented by access to additional Welsh Government funding specifically aimed towards promoting excellent pupil attendance.

9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Additional funding from Welsh Government has built capacity to increase the number of educational welfare and family liaison officers working across the Local Authority. Cessation of this funding would have implications that would need to be considered and monitored.

10. CONSULTATIONS

- 10.1 The report incorporates the views of the consultees. Feedback identified the need to recognise ongoing strategies to improve pupil attendance outside of the work of the education welfare service.

11. STATUTORY POWERS

11.1 None

Author: Paul Warren, Strategic Lead for School Improvement

Consultees: Christina Harray, Chief Executive
Richard Edmunds, Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services
Councillor Teresa Parry, Chair Education Scrutiny Committee
Councillor Jo Rao, Vice Chair Education Scrutiny Committee
Councillor Carol Andrews, Cabinet Member for Education and Communities
Keri Cole, Chief Education Officer
Debbie Harteveld, Director – Education Achievement Service
Sally Speedy, Principal School Improvement Partner (EAS)
Hayley Davies-Edwards, Principal School Improvement Partner (EAS)
Sue Richards, Head of Education Planning and Strategy
Jane Southcombe, Finance Manager
Sarah Ellis, Lead for Inclusion and ALN
Sarah Mutch, Early Years Manager