



## **EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 4<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2024**

**SUBJECT: PUPIL ATTENDANCE**

**REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR 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. 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 for Caerphilly, up to the end of March 2024 is in line with the Welsh National average figure of 90.3%. This is an improving picture compared to the same period last academic year where the attendance for Caerphilly to the end of March 23 was 89.1% compared to the national average of 89.5%.

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 To note 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. The data below identifies the improvements in pupil attendance, comparing March 2023 to 2024. Although this data is positive, with an increase in all the indicators, there are still challenges ahead. The most notable challenge for schools is closing the gap in attendance between e-FSM and n-FSM pupils.

##### Comparison of March 2023 and March 2024

Mar-23	ALL PUPILS	FSM	NON-FSM	Mar-24	ALL PUPILS	FSM	NON-FSM
Secondary	86.80%	79.80%	88.70%	Secondary	88.10%	82.30%	89.90%
Primary	91.10%	87.00%	92.60%	Primary	92.30%	89.10%	93.60%
All	89.10%	84.10%	90.70%	All	90.30%	86.10%	91.80%

At the end of March 2023, overall school attendance in Caerphilly stood at 89.1%. At the end of March this academic year, it is 90.3%. This is an increase of 1.2%. eFSM learners have shown an even greater improvement, increasing from 84.1% at the end of March 2023, to 86.1% at the end of March 2024. Primary School average has increased from 91.1% to 92.4% over the same period, and Secondary schools have increased from 86.8% to 88.1%.

Caerphilly is currently ranked 13<sup>th</sup> out of 22 local authorities in Wales in terms of attendance (April 2024). This is a positive outcome as Caerphilly currently has the second highest FSM percentage compared to the other local authorities,

22 schools are now showing data higher than pre-covid (end of school year 2018/19)

The data demonstrates that improving attendance continues to be a challenge in the post-COVID period, but that we are starting to see improvements. The local authority continues to focus on vulnerable learners including those eligible for Free School Meals, which can be evidenced in the data above. To support this approach, the data team have introduced sharing individual school data relating to pupils with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), Children Looked After (CLA) and male/female characteristics.

Similarly, the number of pupils who are absent for at least 20% of sessions (persistent absentees) remains too high. There are currently 2653 pupils with attendance below 80%, although this is an improvement on the previous year, where there were 3291 pupils. The threshold for persistent absenteeism has recently increased to 90% which means the number of pupils within this category will be even higher.

The gap between authorised and unauthorised attendance has closed over the last 12 months by 1%. The local authority has been working hard to ensure that, overall, schools are increasing the levels of challenge to parents around non-attendance.

Processes to improve pupil attendance have become embedded over time and include:

- Monthly attendance data shared with all schools.
- Collaborative meetings between the school and local authority as part of the ‘Team Around the School’ process.
- Self-evaluation activities
- Headteacher briefing meetings.
- Scrutiny and cabinet reports and follow-up challenge

### 5.1.1 The emergence of a collective approach to improving attendance and reducing exclusions.

Partnership with Inclusion Services continues to become further aligned and strategic as a response to the continued priorities to improve attendance and reduce exclusions. In line with our approach to purposeful self-evaluation, this has been an ongoing process since the Covid-19 pandemic that continues to evolve based on emerging needs.

The diagram below represents the three-tier strategic approach that demonstrates the consistency and commonality across both services. However, it is important to note that the example strategies below are not in their infancy but have been embedded over time. There are also a range of other examples not included in the diagram.

Improving attendance and reducing exclusions

		Improving attendance examples	Reducing exclusions examples
1	Supporting school self-evaluation. →	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attendance supported self-evaluation activities.</li> <li>• Presentations to governors.</li> <li>• Team around the school.</li> <li>• Monthly data.</li> <li>• SDP exemplars</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion and exploration of exclusion data at termly Pastoral Leaders forum</li> <li>• Data is shared with all heads termly</li> </ul>
2	Wider professional learning offer →	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Termly workshops for FLOs.</li> <li>• Attendance circles training.</li> <li>• Reintegrating learner’s toolkit training</li> <li>• EBSA training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EPS wellbeing training offer</li> <li>• 3-year WRAP (Wales Restorative Approaches Partnership) pilot</li> </ul>
3	Support for individuals/groups – bespoke. →	School consultations - EWS Targeted intervention - EWS Link meetings between EPs and EWS. Llais and EBSA support KS3/NEETs – Inspire workers FPNs/prosecutions – legal processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EPS wellbeing interventions offer linked to Inclusion Compendium</li> <li>• EPS phased model of service delivery</li> </ul>

## **5.2 Impact of the three tier approach.**

The following sections illustrate the impact of some of the main activities to support schools.

### **Supporting school self-evaluation – sample of support activities**

#### **5.2.1 Attendance self-evaluation**

Supported self-evaluation activities are characterised by the following:

- Close scrutiny of roles and responsibilities, processes and strategies to consider the impact on pupil attendance data.
- High quality professional dialogue with an appropriate primary or secondary practitioner with school leadership experience. Meetings also include the link education welfare officer to verify information and consider ways to strengthen partnership working.
- Opportunities to gather the views of additional stakeholders including school clerks, pastoral leads, pupils and governors.
- A formal summary report that can be shared with stakeholders and contribute to school self-evaluation.
- In addition to action points for the school, the report includes opportunities to share best practice and recommendations for the EWO to include in ongoing school consultations.

Almost half of all schools have taken part in the process. In some cases, schools have requested a wider process of evaluation and support through an attendance and wellbeing review. This process involves senior inclusion and school improvement officers collaborating. Outcomes usually culminate in an ongoing Team Around the School process to monitor progress against the recommendations.

Feedback from headteachers on this process has been welcomed and identified as a tool to support their own self-evaluation.

#### **5.2.2 Attendance Data**

Attendance data is shared between schools on a monthly basis. Data includes:

- Overall pupil attendance:
- Difference with the previous year (allowing for seasonal changes)
- Difference with the previous month;
- Difference from the end of 22-23
- Difference from the end of 18-19 (pre-covid data)
- FSM vs non-FSM data
- Persistent absenteeism  $\leq 90\%$
- Persistent absenteeism  $< 80\%$

To support this approach, the data team have also begun sharing individual school data relating to ALN, CLA, and male/female on a termly basis.

The local authority is clear in the intent and purpose of sharing attendance data; that is, to allow school to identify schools with similar e-FSM profiles and share best practice where schools are beginning to make significant improvements to the data.

Feedback from schools has been very positive to this approach.

### **5.2.3 Team Around the School**

Two secondary schools have taken part in a Team Around the School approach, whereby they have attended monthly meetings with the Strategic Lead for School Improvement, the Lead EWO and EWO to focus on attendance processes. The self-evaluation toolkit provided a baseline assessment, with recommendations and areas for improvement identified.

The process has allowed open and honest conversations and has resulted in some positive changes in schools.

Therefore, Team Around the School has facilitated purposeful and detailed discussions with the schools that has led to bespoke support.

## **5.3 Wider professional learning offer – sample of support activities**

### **5.3.1 Termly attendance workshops**

Secondary school workshops are held in person, but due to the sheer volume of primary staff, these are still held via MS Teams. These workshops allow the education welfare service to deliver key messages. Spring Term agenda items included:

- Children Missing in Education (CME)
- Cluster approach to promoting attendance
- Legal Interventions
- Sharing best practice

School staff evaluations indicate positive feedback to the workshops and suggestions for agenda items are always accommodated, meaning schools are receiving the information they request.

### **5.3.2 Attendance seminars for headteachers**

Following a request during a headteacher meeting, additional seminars have been implemented for headteachers. Sessions, led by the Strategic Lead for School Improvement and the Principal Educational Psychologist, focus primarily on the role of leadership in securing good attendance. Themes for discussion have included:

- Estyn thematic report on secondary attendance
- The updated 'Belonging, Engaging and Participating' guidance with specific focus on the purpose and use of reduced timetables.
- Utilising the Inclusion Compendium to improve attendance and reduce exclusions.

Feedback from headteachers and local authority officers has been very positive. These meetings are an opportunity for stakeholders to have open, honest dialogue on challenging topics, acknowledging the challenge for all involved. This initiative helps to reinforce the local authority's commitment to development positive relationships with headteachers built on collaboration, co-construction and trust.

#### **5.4 Bespoke support for individuals/groups – sample of support activities**

##### **5.4.1. Link meetings between Educational Welfare Service and Educational Psychologists**

While the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) has already developed a reintegration toolkit for learners which schools can use to support pupils to return to school, both colleagues in the Educational Welfare Service (EWS) and the EPS have noted increasing numbers of pupils with increasingly complex needs.

To better understand the particular needs of these learners, senior officers from the EWS and EPS have been meeting each half term to jointly review cases that are causing particular concerns, taking a more wholistic overview of issues impacting learners' engagement to identify potential next steps to support their re-engagement with services and ideally, educational provision.

These meetings have a number of functions:

- provide a forum to review work undertaken to date in a multiagency context looking at all of the pupil's presenting needs i.e. not just their attendance for instance as the majority of pupils reviewed also had ALN.
- provide a psychological perspective on the reasons why pupils have stopped attending – initial reflections, on cases reviewed to date, suggest attachment and trauma related difficulties are a factor in some of the most “stuck” cases for instance.
- provide a safe space for professionals to problem solve cases together, building on the skills and strengths of both teams, to inform actions for the school and the EWO. In instances where direct work by the Educational Psychologist (EP) may be required, this is flagged with the pupil's schools so they can prioritise that pupil for their own EP to see.

This is a useful and productive process which reinforces the increasing alignment and coordination of teams across the directorate. Given the small number of cases and their complexity, establishing meaningful impact measures is difficult until the number of cases reviewed increases. However, the following measures will be considered after two terms:

- Levels of attendance where the pupil has been attending school – before and after the review meeting (no cases have been attending school at all up to this point).
- The learner's degree of engagement in educational opportunities if they are not attending school.
- The number of cases requiring further EP/ CAMHS/ Neuro Developmental assessment and any outcomes associated with these further assessments.

#### 5.4.2 Fixed Penalty Notices/Prosecutions/Legal processes

The following shows a breakdown of legal interventions across the borough over the last five years:

Fixed Penalty Notices issued by the local authority or its schools for non-attendance at school in academic years:

2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Sept. 2023 to present
204	123	Nil	Nil	190	166

Prosecutions pursued by the local authority against parents/carers for non-attendance at school (including details of the outcome if completed) in the academic years:

2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Sept. 2023 to present
72 prosecutions, 71 fined with 2 parents also given conditional discharge, 1 parent given 40 hours unpaid work	25 prosecution 25 fined	Nil	2 (attendance prosecution not FPN related) 2 fined	33 prosecutions 30 parents fined 3 cases dismissed	13

Although legal interventions are a last resort, the number issued in 2018/19 coincides with the rise in attendance across the local authority where the percentage of pupils attending school regularly reached its peak so far. The local authority recognises that there are cases where legal intervention is a helpful tool for schools where all other strategies have been explored. Senior education welfare officers attend governing body meetings to support governors in making this decision. There are, however, a high number of severe cases of anxiety or missed diagnosis, and many more cases whereby legal intervention is not appropriate.

#### 5.5 Next steps to maximise support to schools.

- Continue to self-evaluate the impact of support activities on pupil attendance. Utilise data and feedback from stakeholders to determine which activities prove most effective. Acknowledge that the support currently being utilised is leading to improvement in data; particularly for e-FSM learners.

- Continue to promote school self-evaluation as the key mechanism to improve attendance in each local setting. Aim for all schools to have undertaken this activity by Autumn half term.
- Increase the use of Team Around the School for settings which have not made the expected progress in attendance data.
- Continue to build on developing existing relationships to tackle issues associated with attendance that are challenging to resolve. Processes include:
  - Headteacher seminars
  - Partnership working with the educational psychology service.
- Maintain grant funding arrangements:
  - EWO per cluster model
  - Inspire project to support learners between the ages 11 -14.
  - Community Focused Schools with additional focus on promoting good attendance amongst families.

## **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 POWER

11.1 None

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Councillor Teresa Parry, Chair Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee  
Councillor Brenda Miles, Vice Chair Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee  
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