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| Meeting of: | SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1 |
| Date of Meeting: | 18 NOVEMBER 2024 |
| Report Title: | PUPIL ATTENDANCE |
| Report Owner / Corporate Director: | LINDSAY HARVEY CORPORATE DIRECTOR (EDUCATION, EARLY YEARS AND YOUNG PEOPLE) |
| Responsible Officer: | MARK LEWIS GROUP MANAGER (EARLY YEARS AND YOUNG PEOPLE) |
| Policy Framework and Procedure Rules: | There is no effect upon the policy framework or procedure. |
| Executive Summary: | Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption to education for children in Bridgend, pupil attendance in Bridgend schools decreased. All local authorities in Wales have experienced similar challenges. School attendance is a priority for the directorate. While school attendance levels are starting to show a slow but steady increase since the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, they remain below pre-pandemic rates. The most common reason for absence is reported as illness and coded accordingly. Other reasons for pupil non-attendance include holidays and medical and dental appointments. The education welfare officers and schools have been working in close partnership to improve attendance levels within the context of the All-Wales Attendance Framework (2012). |

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 (SOSC1) with further detail as to how the Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate ('the directorate') is working with delivery partners and stakeholders to improve pupil attendance.

2. Background

- 2.1 Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption to education for children in Bridgend, pupil attendance in Bridgend schools decreased. All local authorities in Wales have experienced similar challenges.
- 2.2 Over the course of the past two school years, the number of challenges and pressures that schools have had to face has continued, demonstrating that, although the normal life of the school has resumed, the true impact of COVID-19 is now beginning to be seen in terms of pupil attendance.
- 2.3 The attendance data for pupils attending Bridgend primary and secondary schools during the period 2018-2019 to 2023-2024 is highlighted in the table below.

Table 1 Attendance data for pupils attending Bridgend primary and secondary schools during the period 2018-2019 to 2023-2024

| | 2018 - 2019 | 2019 - 2020 | 2020 - 2021 | 2021 - 2022 | 2022 - 2023 | 2023 - 2024 |
|-----------|-------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Primary | 94.8% | Not available | Not available | 90.1% | 91.5% | 92.3% |
| Secondary | 94.1% | Not available | Not available | 86.5% | 87.9% | 88.9% |

- 2.4 As illustrated in the table above, school attendance levels across primary schools has decreased by 2.5 percentage points from 2018-2019 to 2023-2024. School attendance levels across secondary schools has decreased by 5.2 percentage points from 2018-2019 to 2023-2024. While these reductions are concerning, this reflects a national position which has clearly been influenced by the pandemic.
- 2.5 A revised [School Attendance Enforcement Policy](#) was endorsed in September 2023 to ensure all children within the county regularly attend education provision. Education welfare officers ensure the local authority meets its responsibilities and work with schools, parents/carers to ensure compliance. The policy outlines the legal framework, procedures and alternatives for addressing non-attendance issues.
- 2.6 The Education (Penalty Notice) Wales Regulations 2013 give local authorities powers to issue fixed penalty notices (FPNs). Education welfare officers issue FPNs in response to requests from headteachers, deputy headteachers or police officers. FPNs may be considered for a minimum of 10 unauthorised sessions in the current school term, persistent lateness of more than 10 sessions in the current term, unauthorised holidays and other specific circumstances where the parents/carers have not engaged with the education welfare officers.

2.7 The local authority is responsible for the administration of FPNs and for bringing prosecutions. The local authority needs to ensure that there is sufficient evidence available to proceed to a successful prosecution if a payment of notice is not made. There have been no formal prosecutions issued for the school year 2023-2024. Consideration is given when deciding to issue a penalty notice for truancy as to whether it can be effective in helping to get the pupil back into school or alternative provision. The FPN is £60 if paid within 28 working days, £120 if paid after 28 working days but before 42 working days and if it is not paid within 42 working days prosecution procedures are initiated or the offence withdrawn.

2.8 The FPN data for the school year 2023-2024 is shown in the table below.

Table 2 FPNs issues in the school year 2023-2024.

| Reason | Number of primary school age children | Number of secondary school age children | Total number of children referred |
|--|--|--|--|
| 10+ unauthorised absences | 6 | 8 | 14 |
| 10+ unauthorised absences and failure to engage | 10 | 6 | 16 |
| 10+ unauthorised absences and persistent lateness | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| 10+ unauthorised absences and term time holiday | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| 10+ unauthorised absences, persistent lateness and failure to engage | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Persistent lateness | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Term-time holiday | 10 | 6 | 16 |
| Total | 28 | 30 | 58 |

2.9 The comparative attendance data of pupils in maintained schools for the school year 2023-2024 is shown in the table below.

Table 3 Attendance data for pupils in Bridgend compared to all-Wales attendance figures during the school year 2023-2024

| | Average percentage of sessions present | Average percentage of sessions of authorised absence | Average percentage of sessions of unauthorised absence | Average percentage of sessions of absence |
|------------------|--|--|--|---|
| All-Wales | 89.0% | 7.3% | 3.6% | 11.0% |
| Bridgend | 89.5% | 7.6% | 2.9% | 10.5% |

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 School attendance is a priority for the directorate. While school attendance levels are starting to show a slow but steady increase since the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, they remain below pre-pandemic rates. The most common reason for absence is reported as illness and coded accordingly. Other reasons for pupil non-attendance include authorised and unauthorised holidays and authorised medical and dental appointments. The education welfare officers and schools have been working in close partnership to improve attendance levels within the context of the All-Wales Attendance Framework (2012).
- 3.2 Education welfare officers support and advise schools on attendance including ensuring statutory legal functions are used consistently and appropriately.
- 3.3 A working group, convened to revise and develop the local authority's attendance strategy, has been in place for the last 18 months. The group's representation includes:
- Group Manager (Early Years and Young People) (as chairperson);
 - headteachers;
 - education welfare officers;
 - Communications and Marketing Team officers; and
 - Central South Consortium.
- 3.4 In addition, the local authority has developed truancy initiatives to support improved attendance. Marketing campaigns have been explored to ensure a consistent message is being relayed to parents/carers about the importance of school attendance. Schools have introduced the 'Attend to Achieve' approach to improving attendance. Additional detail of this scheme is outlined at paragraph 3.28. The local authority has developed an attendance audit tool for schools to complete alongside

the education welfare officer. The local authority wants to ensure that there is consistent support from the education welfare officers available in all schools. The attendance audit is a tool for schools to utilise as part of their self-evaluation. The audit tool will support data analysis, identify challenges to improving attendance, areas of good practice and attendance initiatives within the schools. Each primary and secondary school will complete a first draft of their attendance audit by 13 December 2024.

- 3.5 The local authority reviewed the early help arrangements which resulted in a recent restructure of the Education Welfare Service. Education welfare officers now form part of the Education Engagement Team.
- 3.6 The directorate aims to improve pupil attendance rates in primary and secondary school by two percentage points in 2025.
- 3.7 A large number of pupils have been affected by the pandemic due to lack of routine impacted by school closures and remote learning. Many pupils continue to present with anxiety and wellbeing issues. Addressing these issues is key in ensuring pupils reach their full potential in all aspects of life, including achieving a good education.
- 3.8 In addition to the requirement to improve general pupil attendance levels, Bridgend has identified the following three key issues which are affecting pupil attendance in Bridgend schools:
- significant gaps in attendance between our highest and lowest performing primary schools and similarly for secondary schools;
 - persistent absenteeism; and
 - poor attendance of some vulnerable groups.

Narrowing the gap

- 3.9 The comparative attendance data of the highest performing and lowest performing primary and secondary schools in Bridgend in 2023-2024 is highlighted in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Attendance data for highest and lowest performing primary and secondary schools in Bridgend during the 2023-2024 school year

| | Highest performing attendance | Lowest performing attendance | Percentage point gap |
|------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Primary school | 95.2% | 89.3% | 5.9% |
| Secondary school | 91.1% | 85.7% | 5.4% |

Persistent absenteeism

- 3.10 The definition of persistent absenteeism was changed nationally in 2023, reducing the threshold considered as persistent absence from 20% to 10% of sessions missed by a pupil, with the aim of encouraging 'earlier intervention'. Welsh Government statistics show that the percentage of persistently absent secondary school age pupils remained between 19% and 15.9% between 2013-2014 and 2018-2019.
- 3.11 Following the COVID-19 pandemic, persistent absence has more than doubled between 2018-2019 and 2023-2024 and the national percentage is now 37.1%, down from 40.1% in 2022-2023.
- 3.12 The persistent absenteeism data for the school year 2023-2024 is outlined in Table 5. The percentage points of persistent absence are that of the whole primary school and secondary school population.

Table 5 Persistent absenteeism data for the school year 2023 – 2024 at three thresholds under 90% attendance, under 80% attendance and under 50% attendance.

| Persistent absence level | Under 90% attendance | Under 80% attendance | Under 50% attendance |
|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Primary school | 23.95% | 5.39% | 0.72% |
| Secondary school | 34.97% | 15.38% | 5.09% |

- 3.13 The reasons for pupil absence are complex and multifaceted. There are a number of factors that influence non-attendance including parental attitudes, children's mental health, the cost of living crisis and the breakdown in the relationships between school and families.

Education Welfare Service (Education Engagement Team)

- 3.14 In August 2024, the Education Welfare Service and part of the Education Engagement Team were subject to a consultation and staff restructuring. The restructuring resulted in the education welfare officers becoming part of the Education Engagement Team. The education welfare officers and the Education Engagement Team co-ordinators are now line managed by two lead education

engagement co-ordinators with the service overseen by the Education Engagement Team Manager.

3.15 The key functions of the Education Welfare Service are as follows:

- supporting school attendance;
- providing advice, guidance and support to schools, professionals and families;
- undertaking welfare checks to ensure the wellbeing of pupils;
- to follow and work within legislation, national and local guidance;
- to provide relevant documentation for court; and
- identify electively home educated children and children missing education and notify appropriately.

3.16 Since the restructure the team manager and leads are working to ensure there is consistency in the support provided to schools and families. The previous management structure had the education welfare officers managed across three locality hubs, which presented with consistency issues. Developments are ongoing to ensure equity and consistency across the service.

3.17 A number of policies and procedures required updating. This includes both the [Elective Home Education Policy](#) and the [Children Missing Education Policy](#) which have recently been endorsed by Cabinet.

3.18 An area of development across the team is the fixed penalty notice procedure and prosecution. Training will be provided and internal processes mapped to support staff with a more robust process.

3.19 As with any new management structure there is a requirement to fully understand the service area, needs, demands and for staff to feel confident and supported by their management team. A strong emphasis has been placed on relationship building, listening to issues and taking action to resolve any concerns raised. Data has been utilised to understand the current position, areas of demand and deployment of resources based on need.

3.20 The indicative medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) proposal for 2025-2026 included in SOSC1's consideration of the MTFS 2024-2025 to 2027-2028 on 18 January 2024 has an indicative budget saving proposal for 2025-2026 of £136k (proposal reference EDF510 – Reduction in Education Welfare Service). This saving of £136k has been made during the current financial year.

3.21 The challenges in school attendance rates as well as increased school exclusions, levels of persistent absence, offending rates, associated anti-social behaviour can have a negative impact on educational attainment. Education welfare officers act as a point of contact for vulnerable children and families, identifying and addressing safeguarding concerns. Additional financial pressures on the service would result in

a gap in safeguarding measures and a potential increase in unmet care and support needs putting further pressure on Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate services.

- 3.22 The first attendance drive this school year will focus on the non-attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM). The data indicates that on average their attendance is lower than that of their peers. Welsh Government All-Wales data shows that eFSM pupils were absent for 13.6% of all school sessions in 2023-2024, compared to 7% for those not eligible for FSM. In 2023-2024, 5.5% of these absences were unauthorised for eFSM and 1.9% for those not eligible for FSM.
- 3.23 There is a multi-agency approach and visiting families will include officers from both the Education Engagement Team and Pupil Support Services (including education welfare officers, family engagement officers and lead workers). Including both services will provide a holistic approach for children and their families. Multi-agency working is key to ensuring families receive the support based on need.
- 3.24 Regular truancy patrols are undertaken, and the education welfare officers work closely with the local Police and conduct patrols once a school term. The youth justice service, children services, pupil support services and voluntary organisations are also actively involved in working with the Education Engagement Team in assisting to resolve non-school attendance of pupils and supporting families.

Marketing campaign

- 3.25 Between July and October 2024, there was a drive to promote the importance of school attendance and support available for families. Social media was utilised to advertise back to school grant support to reach a wider audience who may not access such information via the website. Posters and leaflets were also sent out via schools.
- 3.26 The local authority launched a campaign to highlight the importance of school attendance. Backed by schools across the county borough, the campaign highlights the importance for children to attend school and return to the classroom following the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the benefits of school beyond learning along with providing support and resources for parents of children who are struggling to attend.
- 3.27 The 'Miss School, Miss Out' short film is about attending school on time, every day, is not only important for a child's learning, but also for their wellbeing, achievement, and overall development. In the short film, the children discuss the reasons why regularly attending school is vital for their happiness and wellbeing, further education, and job opportunities.

The 'Miss School, Miss Out' video may be accessed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1usZS0DHYqo>



Attend to Achieve

3.28 Attend to achieve is a process which provides parents/carers with information on the links between attendance and attainment. This shows which category the child's attendance falls into when attendance is as follows:

- Green = 97% to 100%
- Amber = 93% to 96%
- Red = 92% and below

3.29 Each parent/carer will receive an 'Attend to Achieve' letter in the autumn and spring terms informing them of which category their child's attendance is currently in. This ensures that early intervention is received by pupils and families who are in need. However, headteachers have the discretion to exclude pupils from the circulation who may have extenuating circumstances.

Feedback from stakeholders and delivery partners

3.30 Following the restructure, feedback has been gathered from working groups and individual schools that small positive steps have been recognised already and that a consistent approach is beneficial to ensure that all clusters are accessing the same advice and resource to improving attendance.

Impact of activity

3.31 There has been an increase in pupil attendance as seen in the data (Table 3). The local authority is now above the all-Wales average. It is evident that schools who strategically implement and promote the activities highlighted above are likely to see

improved attendance rates. However, the directorate is acutely aware of the challenges ahead within the wider context of the challenging financial climate and challenging pupil behaviour.

Next steps

3.32 The Education Engagement Team will continue to support schools to improve attendance. The team will work collaboratively with the attendance working group to ensure there is strategic direction to improve attendance across the local authority. The team will look at identifying key themes and trends from attendance data and identify areas of improvement and examples of best practice from the attendance audits. The team will continue to support schools to reduce the levels of persistent absence and fundamentally ensure that the safeguarding of pupils remains a priority. Through consistent approaches, monitoring and evaluation the team will continue to promote positive school attendance.

4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. This is an information report, therefore it is not necessary to carry out an Equality Impact assessment in the production of this report. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

5.1 Summary on the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 assessment is listed below:

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Long-term | Children and families are enabled to take control and responsibility for the care and protection without intervention from the local authority. |
| Prevention | Schools having robust, effective and efficient safeguarding procedures that are understood across the school will ensure children are protected from harm. |
| Integration | The service is a multi-agency partnership where integration is key to good service delivery arrangements. |
| Collaboration | Collaboration is a key approach to ensure the protection of children and families. |

Involvement Participation and engagement arrangements will be strengthened to ensure everyone is aware of their responsibilities linked to safeguarding.

6. Climate Change Implications

6.1 There are no climate change implications as a result of this report.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

7.1 Safeguarding and corporate parenting are crucial when ensuring the wellbeing and educational attainment of children particularly in relation to school attendance. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Children Act 1989 provide the legal framework for safeguarding children. Schools have a duty to safeguard children which includes regular school attendance.

7.2 Poor school attendance could be a indication of underlying safeguarding issues. Schools must have mechanisms to identify attendance issues early and this includes the monitoring of attendance patterns and where necessary addressing potential safeguarding concerns.

7.3 The Education Engagement Team works in collaboration with schools, Children's Social Care, Health and the Police to ensure a multi-agency approach to supporting children who are at risk of abuse or neglect. Care-experienced children face challenges that can impact school attendance and it is crucial that the schools work in partnership with local authority officers to provide stability and support. Each care experienced child should have a personal educational plan (PEP) that addresses their educational needs including strategies to support attendance and engagement in school.

8. Financial Implications

8.1 There are no financial implications related to this report.

9. Recommendations

9.1 SOSOC1 is asked to:

- consider the contents of the report; and
- provide feedback and recommendations as required.

Background documents

None