

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Thursday 18 th March 2021
Report Subject	School Attendance and Exclusions
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Education & Youth
Report Author	Chief Officer (Education & Youth)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides information with regards to the levels of attendance and exclusion across Flintshire schools including an outline of the main reasons for pupil absence and exclusion.

The data reported has been impacted on by the COVID -19 pandemic. Schools have experienced extended periods of closure during the academic year 2019/20 and Welsh Government suspended data collection and publication during the year. This has prevented any meaning comparison with previous years' data for Flintshire and any consideration against national trends.

Attendance across Flintshire schools has shown a general trend of reduction, with illness accounting for the majority of absences. Levels of persistent absenteeism have been comparatively high too. However, this report is for the school year 2019/20 and it must be noted that the initial COVID -19 lockdown commenced in March 2020. It is therefore not possible to draw direct data comparisons between the school year 2019/20 and previous school years as a consequence.

The levels of permanent and fixed-term exclusion have been increasing, particularly in secondary schools. Once again the data for the school year 2019/20 has been directly affected by COVID-19 lockdowns. Welsh Government First Release data publications have not been published as a result of the pandemic which means that we are unable to draw any comparison with trends across Wales.

It is therefore essential that you review the report and the data with a degree of caution as the data utilised has been extracted solely from our local database. It is still possible to utilise this data to explain the strategic priorities that commenced in the school year 2019/20 to address the Estyn Recommendations. It must be stated that this data has not been compared with WG data streams as a consequence of the suspension of these processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Members consider the attendance data for Flintshire schools and the actions undertaken by officers to support engagement and safeguarding during the period of lockdown.
2	Members recognise that the data provided has been impacted by COVID-19 lockdown and school closures.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND EXCLUSIONS
1.01	<p>School attendance and exclusion data is usually published by Welsh Government (WG) retrospectively and in a number of different formats. However, during 2019/20, Welsh Government suspended data publications and performance measurement processes as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This report is therefore constructed utilising Flintshire County Council unverified data, extracted from local databases and covers both the primary and secondary sectors.</p> <p>The information provided in the appendices for 2019/20 relates to the period 1st September 2019 to the 20th March 2020 when schools closed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the exception of offering provision for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children, schools remained closed for the remainder of the academic year, with the exception of the three week Check In, Catch Up period. Attendance during this period was not mandatory and has therefore not been included in the datasets.</p>
1.02	<p>Table 1 in Appendix 1 provides the overview of pupil attendance across both primary and secondary schools (mainstream and special) for the last 3 academic years. Primary attendance had remained fairly static over the previous 3 years however, local data confirms a slight overall reduction for 19/20 up to and including 20th March 2020.</p> <p>Attendance in secondary schools dropped below the Welsh average in the years immediately prior to 19/20 and local data confirms a further reduction in actual attendance in the first two terms of 19/20. This was a small reduction and is in line with expectations given that early signs of the</p>

	impending pandemic were being seen at the start of the calendar year. The levels of unauthorised absence remain relatively low.
1.03	The high levels of authorised absence stated in Table 3 suggests that parents/carers are providing schools with acceptable reasons for absence and much of this absence reflects parents anxiety. It can be seen in Table 3 that for 2019/20 the "I" mark (Illness as an explanation) surpasses all other marks approved by Headteachers. This suggests that Headteachers worked with their parents taking account of their concerns about the impact the pandemic was having on their families. Holidays in the primary sector once again account for the second highest percentage of authorised absences, but this has diminished significantly. Once again this reflects the significant impact of the COVID-19 lockdown and the subsequent reopening in June 2020 during which holidays were not available to families on the usual terms.
1.04	Parents/carers are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their children attend school. Headteachers understand the importance of attendance on pupil engagement and attainment and have in the main, developed a range of systems to encourage attendance and also seek timely information regarding pupil absence. The Council employs a range of teams to support schools in their attempts to improve attendance. These include the Education Welfare Service (EWS) which has a statutory responsibility around attendance along with others teams such as Additional Learning Needs, Education Psychology, Young Person Counselling, Personal Support, TRAC, English as an Additional Language and Gypsy/Traveller services which offer specialist support to schools, families and individual pupils to improve their engagement levels. These services had significant roles to play during the lockdown period in particular. Officers adapted their delivery methods to support remote learning where relevant and also worked hard to maintain contact with pupils and families offering a range of welfare support. Services also had a key safeguarding role during this period, with the home visits being undertaken where concerns were evident.
1.05	The EWS implements the legal challenge to parents/carers on behalf of the Council in collaboration with the legal team where appropriate/necessary. However, the full range of legal powers that are usually available to support an improvement in attendance were suspended by Welsh Government during the lockdown period. Such challenges can usually only be applied in cases where there are levels of unauthorised absences. Given that levels of this are usually extremely low, future work will need to be undertaken with schools to review the levels of authorised absence to ensure that there is sufficient scrutiny and challenge of the information provided if we are to secure an improvement in attendance levels across our schools.
1.06	The main factor impacting on attendance continues to be illness. Across the secondary sector, there has been increasing levels of absence being attributed to mental illness. The sustained lockdown period has resulted in

	<p>loss of routine as a consequence of school closure or due to restricted opening. This could further affect pupil wellbeing adversely until normal timetables are re-established. The Council has a number of services which support children and young people with mental health needs and further work needs to be undertaken with local health services to ensure that the range of support available can respond appropriately to this increasing need. Welsh Government have indicated that additional funding will be made available to local authorities in the next financial year to enhance their own provision to support this area of need.</p>
1.07	<p>The level of fixed term and permanent exclusion across our schools had generally been increasing, with the main reasons cited for exclusion being Physical assault against a pupil, Verbal/threatening behaviour against an adult, Persistent and disruptive behaviour and Other. As with attendance, central services work in partnership with individuals, schools and families to offer support and intervention to prevent exclusion. The increasing complexity of need and wider contributing factors such as County Lines continues to make this increasingly difficult. Levels of exclusion in 2019/20 have reduced overall but much of this can be attributed to the lengthy school closure as a result of the initial lockdown.</p>
1.08	<p>The need to support an improvement in attendance and a reduction in the level of exclusion had already been identified as a priority within the Education & Youth Improvement Plan. A new Senior Learning Advisor for Engagement (SLA) was appointed in January 2020 to lead and to address the Estyn Recommendations. A Headteacher conference took place in March 2020 to introduce the new SLA and to raise awareness of the situation. Progress on the actions will be outlined in subsequent reports however, the SLA has already undertaken an audit of the services and is implementing a range of changes to improve service consistency and accountability. A revised Mission Statement now underpins the EWS and working partnerships have been formed with targeted secondary schools to review and improve systems and practice. A revised approach to data analysis is also part of the new approach to enable resources to be targeted proactively, rather than in response to crisis situation. An internal audit is also taking place to ensure the LA meets the terms of the Estyn Recommendations.</p>
1.09	<p>The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has continued into 2020/21, with school closure featuring again. Services are continuing to engage closely with schools, pupils and families to try and maintain levels of engagement and also secure a broad range of interventions to re-engage those who have been adversely impacted by the pandemic.</p>

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	<p>The increasing levels of disengagement and exclusion continue to have a financial impact on schools and the Council. This is due to the additional</p>

	resources required to engage those with more complex needs, such as officer capacity and bespoke provision programmes. This is currently being funded via a combination of school budgets, grant funding and Council service budgets. This is particularly evident in the increasing levels of expenditure around Home Tuition and for non-maintained placements referred to as 'Out of County', where the expenditure against education and social care is exceeding the allocated budget.
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3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT & RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	There are a number of risks associated with increased levels of disengagement and pupil exclusion, including safeguarding, pupil wellbeing, pupil outcomes and financial expenditure. The regular monitoring of the Education & Youth Portfolio Business Plan along with the annual reports on attendance and exclusion to the Overview and Scrutiny committee will ensure that progress is checked and action taken to mitigate the identified risks.
3.02	Additional work to improve data analysis and to profile statutory services is also on going. Individual Risk Management strategies have also been put in place to identify and contact vulnerable pupils during lockdown. The lockdown period was used to identify a list of vulnerable pupils in collaboration with Senior Managers within Children's Services. These pupils and the children of Key Workers were placed in local Hubs for the duration of the initial lockdown. In addition, audit protocols were employed across support services to ensure that vulnerable pupils were identified and contacted regularly. Laptops and learning materials were also deployed to attempt to minimise the disruption to individual's education as much as was possible. Local Authority panels continued to meet regularly and to discuss pupils placed on EOTAS packages to ensure these pupils too were engaged or contacted.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
4.01	None undertaken as a result of this report.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – FCC Attendance and Exclusion Data for 19/20 Appendix 2 - Attendance Codes

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	WG All Wales Attendance Toolkit WG Guidance - Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	Contact Officer: John Grant, Senior Learning Adviser - Engagement Telephone: 01352 704066 E-mail: john.grant@flintshire.gov.uk

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	<p>Authorised absence - an absence with permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school. This includes instances of absence for which a satisfactory explanation has been provided (e.g. illness, family bereavement or religious observance).</p> <p>Unauthorised absence - an absence without permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school. This includes all unexplained or unjustified absences.</p> <p>Persistent absenteeism: absent for at least 20 per cent of the sessions that schools were open to pupils.</p> <p>County Lines: a term used when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, often using violence to drive out local dealers and exploiting children and vulnerable people to sell drugs.</p> <p>Out of County Placements – provision that is not maintained by Flintshire county Council. This is usually highly specialist and is commissioned where the Council is not able to meet the pupil’s needs through its own internal provision.</p>