EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Thursday, 14th July 2022
Report Subject	School Attendance and Exclusions
Cabinet Member	Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure
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 once again. Schools have experienced extended periods of closure during the academic year 2020/21 and Welsh Government suspended data collection and publication in 2020. This situation has once again prevented meaningful comparison with previous years' data for Flintshire and negated any accurate information that can be extracted from 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 remain comparatively high. The levels of permanent and fixed-term exclusion have been on an increasing trend, particularly in secondary schools but did show a reduction in 2020/21. Once again the data for the school year 2020/21 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.

Work has continued to review and develop service model and delivery to meet the Estyn recommendation in relation to increasing attendance and reducing the level of exclusion across the county.

	RECOMMENDATIONS
1	Members consider the attendance and exclusion data for Flintshire schools and the actions undertaken by officers to support increased engagement and the safety and wellbeing of our children and young people.
2	Members recognise that the data provided has been impacted by COVID-19 lockdown and school closures.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND EXCLUSIONS
1.01	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. The information provided in the appendices for 2020/21 relates to the period 1st September 2020 to the 23rd July 2021 when schools closed for the summer holiday.
1.02	Table 1 in Appendix 1 provides the overview of pupil attendance across both primary and secondary schools (mainstream and special) for the last 4 academic years. Primary attendance had remained fairly consistent over the previous 3 years however, local data confirms a further reduction for 20/21. Attendance in secondary schools dropped below the Welsh average in the years immediately prior to 19/20 and local data confirms that it fell to below 90% in 20/21. This was noticeable reduction, but it is in line with expectations given that WG implemented a new COVID-19 registration code that could be applied at schools' discretion. The levels of unauthorised absence remain relatively low but once again reflect the uncertainty about where to apply the bespoke COVID registration coding.
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 parental anxiety about the circulation of COVID-19. It can be seen in Table 3 that for 2020/21 the "I" mark (Illness as an explanation) surpasses all other marks approved by Headteachers. This suggests that Headteachers continued to work with their parents, taking account of their concerns about the impact the pandemic was

	having on their families. Holidays in the primary sector reduced for 2021 as a result of travel restrictions imposed nationally. 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 regularly. Headteachers understand the importance of attendance on pupil engagement and attainment. Headteachers have, in the main, developed a range of systems to encourage attendance and also seek timely information regarding pupil absence.
1.05	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 with regard to school attendance matters 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 home visits being undertaken where concerns were evident. As per the recommendations from the local authority Estyn inspection in 2019, the use of data is being increasingly used across services to facilitate targeted intervention at the earliest time possible.
1.06	The EWS implements the legal challenge to parents/carers on behalf of the Council in collaboration with the legal team where appropriate/necessary. 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 and have only been re-implemented in 2022. Such challenges can usually only be applied in cases where there are significant 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.
1.07	The main factor impacting on attendance continues to be illness. Across the secondary sector, there has been increasing level of absence being attributed to mental health issues. The sustained lockdown period in 20/21 has resulted in a loss of routine as a consequence of school closure or due to restricted opening. The Council has a number of services which support

	children and young people with mental health needs and there is regular engagement with health colleagues to consider the range of services available to Flintshire children and young people. The Welsh Government has made additional funding available to local authorities in the form of targeted grants to enhance provision to support this area of need, e.g. increased Counselling support and training/supervision for Emotional Literacy Support Assistants to deliver targeted intervention in schools.
1.08	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 2020/21 have reduced overall, but much of this can be attributed to the lengthy school closure as a result of national lockdown.
1.09	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 Business Plan. A Senior Learning Advisor for Engagement (SLA) was appointed in January 2020 to lead on this area and to address the Estyn recommendations. The SLA has 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 as opposed to the more reactive service model. A regular internal audit is also taking place to ensure the LA meets the terms of the Estyn recommendations of 2019.
1.10	The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has continued into 2021/22. 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. However, the legacy of the pandemic and disruption to school routines remains significant.

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

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND 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 ongoing. New strategic forums and a revised EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) structure are currently being implemented to attempt to address increasing demand for tuition and support for children with mental health and anxiety following the pandemic. Local Authority panels continue to meet regularly and to discuss pupils placed on EOTAS packages to ensure these pupils too were engaged or contacted. These activities ensure that the safeguarding of vulnerable pupils is paramount. In addition, key partnerships with schools have been established and projects put in place to attempt to engage pupils on their journey back to normal schooling. These partnerships have been supported by services across the Local Authority including the Youth Service.

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

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	**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). **Unauthorised absence** - an absence without permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school. This includes all unexplained or unjustified absences. **Persistent absenteeism**: absent for at least 20 per cent of the sessions that schools were open to pupils. **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. **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.