

Report of Director of Children's Services

Report to Scrutiny Board (Children and Families)

Date: 26th July 2012

Subject: Directors Response Scrutiny Inquiry into Improving Attendance

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

1. The Children and Families Scrutiny Board conducted an investigation into how Children's services in partnership with schools are working together to improve school attendance. The purpose of the inquiry was to make an assessment of and, where appropriate, make recommendations on:
 - Multi-agency efforts to address persistent absence from school.
2. The Board intended that its findings would provide a timely and positive contribution to tackling this particular obsession within the Children and Young People's Plan.
3. Members of the board spent a morning in two cluster localities – Inner East and Rothwell – identified due to the high number of persistently absent pupils at schools in those areas.
4. Members met with school and cluster based staff, Attendance Improvement Officers and Advisers, youth services, children's centre staff and a range of agencies that work with children and young people who are vulnerable to poor outcomes because of their poor attendance at school.

Recommendations

1. The Board are requested to note the responses to the recommendations, based on their findings.

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1** This report sets out the detailed, formal responses by the Director of Children's Services to the recommendations of the Children and Families Scrutiny Board inquiry into school attendance.

2 Background information

- 2.1** The Scrutiny Board was tasked with carrying out a piece of work this year on each of the three Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) obsessions. The second of these related to school attendance.
- 2.2** The council has adopted an Outcome Based Accountability (OBA) approach to addressing the obsessions, drawing up plans to 'turn the curve' and improve performance. Each 'cluster' (local groups of schools and services that work closely together to meet the needs of children and young people through an integrated approach) has undertaken or committed to undertake an OBA exercise in relation to attendance, leading to a multi-agency action plan.
- 2.3** In relation to this inquiry, the Board agreed to follow a similar approach to that was successfully adopted for its inquiry last year on combating child poverty and raising aspiration. Two 'case study' areas of the city were identified with significant challenge and instead of convening a formal Scrutiny Board meeting, half of the members went to each area for a whole morning on the same day. In both areas, members had the opportunity to talk to local practitioners and to undertake some additional visits in smaller groups, including meeting local people, before reconvening for a round table discussion with senior officers about their findings. The board members reported this to be a very effective way of working.

3 Main issues

- 3.1** Following their activities in Inner East and Rothwell clusters across November and December 2011, the Board made the following recommendations. Please note the response to each.
- 3.2** **Recommendation 1 - That the Director of Children's Services continues to engage with all schools not under Leeds City Council Control, including Academies to ensure continued positive working relationships and continued persistent absence data collection.**
- 3.2.1** This recommendation is accepted by the Director of Children's Services. LCC and Children's Services continue to use tools such as the dashboards to drive ownership of data at cluster/partnership levels. The Targeted Services locality model requires clusters to reflect aspirations around the numbers of CAFs undertaken, school attendance etc which tie in the commitment of all schools in achieving those aspirations.
- 3.3** **Recommendation 2 - That the Director of Children's Services engages with School Governors to establish a special responsibility for one Governor in each school which includes challenging the attendance performance of the school and maintaining a focus on reducing absence levels.**

- 3.3.1** This recommendation is accepted by the Director of Children’s Services. There is a specific training briefing for governors on attendance, available through the governor support unit and guidance has been issued to governors about utilising the committee framework to monitor and challenge attendance throughout the course of the school year. The advantage of the committee framework is embedding a shared understanding of attendance across the whole of the governing body. In schools with good attendance, distributive leadership across the whole organisation generates shared ownership. Schools with poor attendance often place responsibility for attendance with one particular role e.g. assistant headteacher, head of pastoral etc.
- 3.3.2** Targeted Services regularly communicate to governors through the governors bulletin with respect to attendance and the role all governors can play in supporting their school improve policy and practice in order to raise attendance.
- 3.4 Recommendation 3 – That the Director of Children’s Services formulates a strategy for targeting and improving school attendance during year 1, whilst promoting pre-school the benefits of good attendance.**
- 3.4.1** This recommendation is accepted by the Director of Children’s Services. The reconfiguring of Children’s Services and the development of the Early Help teams offers opportunities for improving integration and communication between Targeted and Universal services, including Children’s Centres.
- 3.4.2** The development of Guidance and Support meetings in clusters is also engaging Children’s Centre managers in identifying families in need and planning appropriate assessments and interventions that build the “team around the family”. These processes drive approaches that go beyond the statutory school-age framework.
- 3.4.3** Work is on-going with commercial radio partner, Radio Aire and Magic in developing a package of key messages to, potentially, be broadcast across the city/region which reinforce the importance of attendance even in the pre-school/primary phase.
- 3.4.4** Analysis has also revealed that the rate of absence due to holidays in term time (whether the school has agreed or not) is 3 times higher in the primary phase, which requires a response that addresses parental attitudes to the early curriculum and its importance in sequential learning.
- 3.4.5** Data recently released by the Department for Education shows that primary attendance in Leeds matches national averages and exceeds that of our statistical neighbours. The on-going development and maturation of the newly reconfigured services is expected to consolidate and continue this positive trend.
- 3.4.6** In addition, the newly established 0-11 Partnership Board has identified this is a particular area for development. To develop a city wide strategy for all early years providers an OBA session is to be held on 6th July 2012 from which a plan of action will be drawn up in time for the new school year in September.

3.5 Recommendation 4 - That the Director of Children's Services works in collaboration with the clusters to identify the siblings of persistently absent children who are approaching school age in order to ensure support is in place from day one of their education.

3.5.1 This recommendation is accepted by the Director of Children's Services. The development of good Guidance and Support processes in clusters is enabling quality and appropriate information sharing about children in their family context. Representation at the meetings by Children's Centre managers, primary and secondary staff plus a range of services contributes to a "team around the family" approach.

3.5.2 The 0-11 Learning Partnership are also holding an Outcomes Based Accountability workshop across the directorate where a key strand for the focus for the population of 0-11 year olds in the city will be both school attendance and the engagement of parents and carers of younger children with their local children's centre. The increase in the childcare offer for 2 year olds also offers a cross-cutting strategic development where predictors of poor attendance are poverty and parental attitudes/aspirations.

3.5.3 Through the targeted services offer, clusters are also committed to increasing the number of Common Assessments completed. A quality assessment will identify siblings within the family and also whether or not the lead professional will need to draw in a wider range of services to bring about change for families in need.

3.6 Recommendation 5 - That the Director of Children's Services investigates if the impact of a zero tolerance policy to term time holiday absence has improved school attendance rates, and the potential for recommending such a policy (if successful) to governing bodies city wide.

3.6.1 This recommendation has been thoroughly investigated by the relevant officer on behalf of the Director of Children's Services.

3.6.2 The North West were the first area to adopt a whole-area policy (this involved agreed criteria as opposed to a blanket ban) and data indicated positive impact when analysed a year after the common policy was introduced in a reduction in the total number of days' school lost due to leave during term time.

3.6.3 It should be noted that during the Autumn term, a total of 11,086 days of school were lost due to both authorised and unauthorised holiday in Leeds' secondary schools. However, 34,142 days were lost due to "Other Unauthorised Circumstances". This poses the question of which type of absence should resources be directed to have the greatest impact on rates of overall attendance.

3.6.4 The recent report to the DfE by Charlie Taylor, "Improving School Attendance", recommends strengthening the registration regulations around leave during term time whilst retaining the right for headteachers to use their discretion.

3.6.5 Advice from neighbouring authorities is that zero tolerance policies are actually unlawful and can potentially expose schools/the authority to legal challenge. In one authority, fines have had to be paid back for this reason. The legislation is

clear that each case has to be considered on its own merits, whilst being explicit that time off school for holidays is not a right and parents should not expect it to be so. Children's Services will continue to promote this message and support schools and governing bodies develop clear policies which are communicated and understood by parents.

- 3.6.6** Targeted Services will continue to liaise with individual schools about the use of Penalty Notices for excessive, unauthorised periods of absence.
- 3.6.7** On balance, the figures with respect to absence due to holidays and the potential exposure to legal challenge would indicate that a city-wide, local authority-led blanket ban is undesirable. It is the view of the director that there should be on-going work to engage partnerships of schools to develop consistently applied criteria, whilst adhering to a strong central message that leave during term time is damaging to children's education and that the authorisation of such requests is not a right that parents should expect.
- 3.7** **Recommendation 6 - That the Director of Children's Services engages with National Health Service providers and General Practitioners in Leeds to identify how absence from school for health appointments could be reduced.**
- 3.7.1** This recommendation is accepted by the Director of Children's Services. A small scale information gathering exercise in the CATTS (Ardsley and Tingley) cluster was undertaken during the Easter term to investigate what types of medical appointments children are missing school for. The findings have been shared with School Health, the lead for Emotional Health and Well-Being in the West North West and the Head of Commissioning Children and Families in NHS Leeds.
- 3.7.2** Next steps planned are to repeat the investigation in a more inner-city/deprived area of the city and to try to expand the data captured to the number of appointments not attended, whether GP appointments were routine or responsive to illness and to establish if children returned to school in the afternoon – the greatest majority of appointments were during the morning.
- 3.7.3** An Outcome Based Accountability workshop with Children's Services and partners in health is planned for the next academic year. Preliminary discussions have already generated no-cost, low-cost ideas such as community paediatrics including text in their appointment letters advising parents that their child will be able to return to school following their appointment; for GP practice managers to be advised of school holidays to offer routine appointments during these periods which could also increase the likelihood of children attending the appointments.
- 3.8** **Recommendation 7 – That the Director of Children's Services works in collaboration with the Cluster Chairs to undertake a review of the attendance improvement and family support service configuration. The purpose of this review would be to identify if there is sufficient resource appropriately allocated to each cluster.**
- 3.8.1** Allocation of AIO resource is based on level of need which is a combination of the numbers of persistent absentees and the distribution of Targeted Services.

- 3.8.2** Therefore clusters with the highest need in terms of Targeted Services will have the correspondingly higher level of AIO resource. The status of the schools in the cluster also has a bearing as academies are funded directly for the provision of support services for attendance and therefore do not receive any non-statutory provision from the local authority.
- 3.8.3** Family Support Workers are school/cluster based staff and not a provision of service made by the local authority.
- 3.8.4** The Family Intervention Service (FIS) that is provided by Children's Services is accessed by the Children Leeds Panels, at present. All cases that have been through Guidance and Support where it is felt that this level of intensive family support is now required can be referred for consideration of support (which includes Multi-Systemic Therapy, Signpost, commissioned FIS and Children's Services FIS). This resource is not allocated to clusters but through the integrated processes, beginning with a CAF.
- 3.8.5** This service has also been restructured and its capacity increased.
- 3.8.6** In the past, the distribution of the attendance service has been reviewed annually to accommodate changes in patterns of absence across the city. However, this necessitated the movement of staff which schools and services reported to be highly disruptive to the development of working relationships and caused discontinuity in the service to families.
- 3.8.7** It is the view of the director that current arrangements need a significant period of time to embed and grow and that regular review of the dashboard and other data will continue to inform decisions about how resource is distributed.
- 3.9** **Recommendation 8 – That the Director of Children's Services establishes as part of the Youth Offer Review the possibility of providing Youth Service support for young people, who are persistently absent, from school from the age of 11 years.**
- 3.9.1** This recommendation is accepted by the Director of Children's Services. The Youth Service priority age range is 13-19 (25) However, support is available from 11+ where there is identified need. Addressing persistent absenteeism and increasing engagement with young people most at risk of entering care or being NEET are priorities for the youth Service from age 11.
- 3.10** **Recommendation 9 – That the Director of Children's Services engages with our neighbouring local authorities and schools within Leeds not in local authority control to explore the potential for co-ordinated planned school closure dates for holiday periods and teacher training days.**
- 3.10.1** This recommendation represents significant challenges to Leeds. Historically, different authorities set their key term and holiday dates around the manufacturing industry and factory closures, therefore, distinct patterns have emerged over time.
- 3.10.2** The DfE continues to move towards more autonomy for schools and the freedoms permitted academies and free schools to determine their own school calendar are

also factors which have an impact on maintained schools. For example, academies are not required to adhere to the minimum number of days that the school should be open to pupils (190), whereas maintained schools are bound by this.

- 3.11 Recommendation 10 – That the Director of Children’s Services works in collaboration with Cluster Chairs to identify gaps in specialist support and investigate which organisations are accessible to provide a comprehensive support network. In addition to also ensure that awareness is raised about supporting organisations in localities for relevant LCC and cluster based employees.**
- 3.11.1** Children Leeds have recently re-launched an updated Practitioner’s Handbook and the Family Hub which provides information on how to work with services and agencies, as well as identifying who the right service for a particular need might be.
- 3.11.2** Part of the role of the Targeted Service Leader is act as both broker of and developer of local services that can provide family support and the attendance of representatives from the voluntary sector at both cluster JCC and Guidance and Support is actively encouraged.
- 3.11.3** On analysis, the Outcomes Based Accountability workshops that have been undertaken in all clusters reflect a high degree of engagement with services beyond the Children’s Services directorate and show the level to which local intelligence is securing key collaborative partnerships.
- 3.12 Recommendation 11 – That the Director of Children’s services investigates the problems associated with transient neighbourhoods. In addition, investigates how the schools admissions system for Leeds could be adapted in our most deprived wards to ensure parents can place their children in schools close to their homes and siblings.**
- 3.12.1** The problem of transient neighbourhoods is one that is limited to a small number of localities in the city, Inner East being one of these. The cluster have undertaken an Outcomes Based Accountability workshop for a host of services/agencies to look at this issue in their locality, which has a particular focus on the impact and needs of the Roma community.
- 3.12.2** A pathfinder project has already begun to allow schools to accept applications directly from parents for in year admission transfers. The aim is to reduce the amount of time taken to find school places for children and young people. All schools will be managing admissions in this way by September 2013. There is a small working group of specialists within Children’s Services considering the impact of admissions on children missing education particularly in transient neighbourhoods where there is a high degree of mobility between schools.
- 3.12.3** We will continue to seek to provide additional permanent and temporary school places in areas where families are not always able to secure a place at a reasonable local school. We want all children to have access to a good local school.

3.13 Recommendation 12 – That the Director of Children’s service in collaboration with Cluster Chairs identifies the most effective way of sharing case information with stakeholders involved in the support of children and their families, whilst adhering to required data protection legislation and safeguarding requirements.

3.13.1 There is an on-going review of ESCR and investigation into the procurement of a suitable solution which will need to provide a consistent case management tool for services and practitioners which will maximise the effectiveness and timeliness of communication and understanding about children and families and those who are working with them.

3.13.2 The Targeted Service Leaders and Area Heads of Targeted Services are available to support clusters in developing robust information sharing agreements which safeguard children without causing unnecessary barriers to communication and intervention by services.

3.13.3 There have been preliminary discussions as to how access to the Children’s Services pupil database (not ESCR) could be extended to a range of practitioners that could include school SENCOs, Family Intervention Service and cluster based staff such as Family Outreach Workers.

3.13.4 The Troubled Families initiative will also map out and test the information sharing protocols between the authority and clusters/partnerships/services.

4 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

4.1.1 The scrutiny process underpinning this report meant that members were able to have face to face consultation with schools, services and children and families. The recommendations are based on their engagement in this process.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

4.2.1 The purpose of all strategic and operational activity around improving school attendance is to reduce the inequalities that both prevent children from being able to access the education to which they are entitled and that arise where children fail to achieve educationally because there are longer term effects on their adult life in terms of economic, physical and mental well-being. Children who are not in education, employment or training on finishing their schooling are far more likely to become end-users of adult services.

4.3 Council policies and City Priorities

4.3.1 Attendance is defined as one of children’s services three obsessions because of the links to poor attendance and poor outcomes in terms of educational attainment, safeguarding and adult life chances.

4.3.2 School attendance is therefore a cross-cutting strand of a range of other council policies e.g. Poverty Strategy, Safer and Stronger Communities etc.

4.4 Resources and value for money

- 4.4.1 The investment in Targeted Services is formed on a spend to invest model: when services are successful in 'turning the curve' on school attendance, children are more likely to be safe in their homes, less likely to need to be looked after and less likely to reach the end of their schooling with no on-going employment, education or training.
- 4.4.2 Successfully 'turning the curve' will reduce the need for spend in statutory services and external placements which will ultimately reduce costs and, most importantly, improve outcomes for children and young people.

4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

- 4.5.1 There are no relevant legal implications to this response to the inquiry.

4.6 Risk Management

- 4.6.1 There is considerable research evidence that highlights links between poor attendance and poor outcomes for children and young people. This is why attendance was identified as one of the three obsessions in the Leeds Children and Young People's Plan. This obsession is recognised and owned by all agencies working in Leeds and performance is monitored by the Children's Trust Board.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 The inquiry by the Board has generated a number of specific work streams such as the investigation into the use of medical appointments during the school day. Investigation into the use of a 'zero tolerance' policy to requests for leave during term-time has, however, revealed that this approach could be deemed to be unlawful and expose the authority to legal challenge. It is also worth noting that the amount of absence due to other unauthorised circumstances is more than three times higher than the rate of holidays in term time, whether authorised or not. This would suggest that to further the progress already made, efforts to address this area of absence would deliver greater impact.
- 5.2 Following the inquiry, the figures for attendance in Leeds during the Autumn term reached the highest levels ever. This progress is also reflected nationally in terms of our performance against national averages and statistical neighbours. The Board is requested to agree that current strategy is delivering marked improvements in attendance, meaning that more children are attending school regularly across the city.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 The Board are asked to note responses to the recommendations.

7 Background documents¹

7.1 Agreed terms of reference for the inquiry.

7.2 Report of the Scrutiny Inquiry into Improving Attendance.

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available for inspection on request for a period of four years following the date of the relevant meeting. Accordingly this list does not include documents containing exempt or confidential information, or any published works. Requests to inspect any background documents should be submitted to the report author.