

Scrutiny Board (Children's Services)

Attendance Working Group

21 April 2009

MEETING NOTES

Scrutiny Board Members

Councillor Bill Hyde (Chair)

Mr Tony Britten

Mr Ian Falkingham

Prof Peter Gosden

Education Leeds

Carol Jordan – Strategic Manager, Behaviour and Attendance

Jane Hurst – Interim Head of Service, Behaviour and Attendance Strategy

Sandra Pearson – Attendance Manager

Background

As part of their work programme for 2008/09, the Children's Services Scrutiny Board agreed that attendance was a key area on which to undertake some detailed work during the year. As a result the working group was established to consider current performance levels alongside existing strategies in relation to school attendance, and to determine whether to recommend that the Board carries out any additional work.

To help the working group fulfil its role, the following information was provided prior to the meeting:

- Executive summary of '*Just a symptom of confusing lives*'¹
- Attendance Strategy team structure January 2009
- Leaflet for parents and carers
- General leaflet
- 6 stage process for managing irregular school attendance – guidance document for schools and attendance strategy team officers
- Quarter three performance information on attendance (presented to April Scrutiny Board)
- DCSF attendance figures
- Extracts from Executive Board report dated 1 April 2009 on JAR/APA progress

In addition, the following information was provided at the meeting:

- Attendance and Exclusion Report 2007/08²
- Draft Attendance Strategy

Strategy development

The working group was advised that an Attendance Strategy (as a sub-strategy of Leeds Inclusive Learning Strategy (LILS)) was currently being developed and should be completed by the end of July 2009.

It was reinforced that school attendance should not be considered in isolation from other factors that impact on pupils learning. It was reported that Sir Alan Steer Behaviour

¹ Education Leeds attendance strategy persistent absence research report (2008).

² A copy of the Executive Summary report was provided, with the full report available on request.

Review, Interim report 4 (February 2009) again emphasised the relationship between behaviour and attendance. Specifically, the report [\[available here\]](#) commented on:

- how school behaviour and attendance partnerships might be developed so as to maximise their effectiveness;
- the impact on pupil behaviour of consistently applied school policies on learning and teaching; and
- the links between behavioural standards, special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities.

The working group was advised that while many secondary schools (nationally around 98%) currently participated in behaviour and attendance partnerships on a voluntary basis, the existence and operation of such partnerships was to become mandatory through new statutory guidance. The guidance is planned to be introduced through the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill, with a significant development being that all secondary schools (including Academies) would be required to be part of such arrangements.

It was recognised that such partnerships were likely to have a key role in continuing to improve school attendance and help to identify and share best practice. The role and involvement of other partner agencies in maintaining a clear focus on pupil attendance was also recognised.

Managing irregular school attendance

It was reported that currently there were 5000 (approx.) persistently absent pupils across the City, however, as part of the regular progress monitoring, in April 2009, 18 of the 22 targeted schools were showing positive performance in relation to PA.

The working group was made aware that historically school attendance had been measured and monitored using truancy levels (unauthorised absences). However, in more recent years there had been a shift in emphasis towards examining the level 'persistent absence (PA)' – which recorded levels of pupil non-attendance at 20% or more. It was highlighted that analysis had continued to demonstrate that persistent absentees attained significantly less than those with better attendance.

Reference was made to the Attendance and Exclusion Report 2007/08, with the following key points being highlighted:

- School attendance (primary and secondary) had improved by 0.2% – representing an additional 23,000 school days attended.
- Attendance in Leeds secondary schools was at its highest ever level, with the 0.71%* improvement representing the largest single increase in any one year.
- The Attendance Strategy Team had worked closely with other agencies to provide intensive targeted support and challenge to target PA in secondary schools.
- The number of PA students across all Leeds secondary schools had fallen by 22%*.
- Levels of PA in targeted schools had reduced by twice the amount across Leeds schools overall.
- Permanent exclusion rates had fallen by 69%* since 2003/04.
- Fixed term exclusion rates had fallen by 38%* since 2003/04.

It was outlined that for 2007/08 where more than 9% of pupils at a secondary school were persistent absentees, the school was classified as a persistent absence target school.

* NB confirmation of the actual numbers these percentages represent has been requested and will be provided to members of the Scrutiny Board.

It was further reported that in future years the level of PA whereby a secondary school would be classified as a persistent absence target school would be as follows:

- 2008/09 – 7%
- 2009/10 – 6%
- 2010/11 – 5%

Using the levels of PA enabled the Attendance Strategy Team to adopt a targeted approach in the provision of intensive support and challenge in secondary schools. The approach was summarised as follows:

- Early engagement with the school's senior management team.
- Support tailored to needs of the school – based on actual attendance figures.
- Attendance advisers visit the school and observe the approach to attendance.
- Ensure schools take a collaborative approach to behaviour, attendance and attainment.
- 6-weekly monitoring meetings where progress of targeted schools is reviewed.

Despite the progress made, it was reported that a revised approach from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS) – which now also targeted primary schools where 2.4% (or more) of the pupils had absence rates of at least 20% – had resulted in Leeds having 91 primary and 22 secondary targeted schools. This was in the context of a total of 265 schools citywide.

6-stage process

Reference was made to the flowchart provided with the agenda and a brief explanation of the various stages was provided. In recognising the importance of regular attendance at school, alongside the well-documented negative impact on attainment that can occur due to persistent absence, the working group sought assurances over the timescales associated with each stage of the process. The working group were keen to ensure that all interventions were occurring in a timely fashion.

The working group also raised some concern that an ever widening brief, within the context of a fixed resource within the Attendance Management Team, could have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the approach in recent years.

It was confirmed that careful targeting of resources (between primary and secondary schools) was key to the overall success of the Attendance Management Team. It was also stressed that in order to maintain the success of recent years, it was essential that pupil attendance was taken seriously at a leadership level within a school

The role of schools

The working group were reminded that it was important to recognise the significant role and responsibility of individual schools in promoting attendance. Approaches should include:

- Ensuring behaviour and attendance are school priorities;
- Targeting interventions, with a move towards more personalised learning;
- Engaging more with pupils lives – recognising that poor attendance is often a symptom (rather than a cause) of wider issues;
- Providing a broad and varied curriculum (including an alternative curriculum)

However, it was recognised that while schools clearly had an important role some issues remained significant barriers for many schools across Leeds, including:

- Extended family holidays – despite the availability of guidance in this regard.
- School aged children ‘not on role’.

Outcome and conclusion

The working group was appreciative of the details provided and the discussion at the meeting. Specifically, the working group acknowledged the information presented in relation to the following:

- Current operational arrangements in place to promote good behaviour and high levels of attendance across the City’s schools, in particular the targeted support for designated primary and secondary schools.
- Progress in developing an Attendance Strategy (as a sub-strategy of Leeds Inclusive Learning Strategy (LILS)) was also welcomed.
- Impact on resources/ support resulting from the DCSF’s revised approach to persistent absence.

After considering all the information presented at the meeting, the working group requested:

- Comparative information from Core Cities in relation to attendance
- Additional information on the various timescales associated with the 6 stage process for managing irregular school attendance.

Recommendation

That, subject to the receipt of additional information requested, the Children’s Service Scrutiny Board consider progress of the Attendance Strategy and development of the Behaviour and Attendance Partnership by the end of the current calendar year (2009).

Steven Courtney
Principal Scrutiny Adviser