

Scrutiny Statement

Attendance

Scrutiny Board (Children's Services)
March 2010



Introduction and Scope

Introduction

1. The Children's Services Scrutiny Board originally identified school attendance as a key area on which it wished to undertake some work at the start of the 2008/9 municipal year.
2. Levels of school attendance in Leeds have been a cause for concern for a number of years. Although progress has been made, and the gap between attendance levels in Leeds and nationally has reduced, the issue remains a priority area for improvement.
3. As a result the Scrutiny Board appointed a small working group to consider current performance and strategies in relation to school attendance, and to determine whether the Board should carry out any further work.
4. The working group met in April 2009 and subsequently reported back to the full Scrutiny Board, where it was agreed to receive a further report on the progress of the Attendance Strategy and development of the Behaviour and Attendance Partnership by the end of the calendar year.
5. This further meeting took place in November 2009. The working group's findings, which were endorsed by the full Scrutiny Board, are presented below.



Conclusions and Recommendations

Persistent absence

6. One of the first things that we learned in carrying out this piece of work was that the focus in tackling attendance is increasingly directed towards reducing persistent absence – defined as those pupils who miss an average of at least a day per week of school.
7. 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 has been a shift in emphasis towards examining the level of persistent absence, which records levels of pupil non-attendance at 20% or more. It was highlighted that analysis has continued to demonstrate that persistent absentees attain significantly less than those with better attendance.
8. In the autumn and spring terms of 2006/7, 4,055 (9.8%) of secondary school pupils in Leeds were persistent absentees. This reduced to 7.9% in 2007/8. However attendance overall was still 2.5% below the national average.
9. It was outlined that the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) introduced national thresholds, above which a school would be classified as a persistent absence target school in 2007/08. The thresholds are:
 - 2006/07 – 10%
 - 2007/08 – 9%
 - 2008/09 – 7%
 - 2009/10 – 6.1%
10. In 2007/8 there were 18 target secondary schools in Leeds and the levels of persistent absence in these schools fell by double the amount of the reduction seen in Leeds overall.
11. In 2008/9 there were 22 target secondary schools in Leeds, and the authority was classified as an intensive authority which would receive support from the DCSF. The Attendance Strategy team worked closely with other agencies to provide intensive targeted support and challenge to target persistent absence in secondary schools.
12. Primary school attendance levels in Leeds are only slightly below national levels. However persistent absence is also an emerging focus in the primary sector. In 2008/9 the DCSF introduced primary school persistent absence targets. 91 Leeds primary schools which had persistent absence rates above the national level of 2.4% were designated by the DCSF as target schools. The inclusion of primary target schools has increased pressure on resources. This was in the context of a total of 265 schools citywide.
13. It was reported that currently there were approximately 5,000 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 reducing persistent absence.

The aim of these thresholds was to secure a trajectory for local authorities to achieve the national target of 5% by the end of 2011.



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14. Reference was made to the Attendance and Exclusion Annual 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;
- Permanent exclusion rates had fallen by 69% since 2003/04;
- Fixed term exclusion rates had fallen by 38% since 2003/04.

Strategy development

15. At the time of the first working group meeting in April a new Attendance Strategy was being developed. We were told that it should be completed by the end of July 2009.

16. The importance of multi-agency working was stressed, to address the underlying reasons for persistent absence and bring about improvements in attendance.

17. 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's Behaviour Review Interim report published in February 2009 emphasised the relationship between behaviour and attendance. Specifically, the report 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.

18. The working group was advised that 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 the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act, with a significant development being that all secondary schools (including academies) would be required to be part of such arrangements.

19. 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

20. Attendance Advisers make regular visits to high schools and review data, policy and practice using a variety of tools, and agree action plans for the school to tackle problems with persistent absence.

21. We learned about the 6-stage process used for managing attendance in Leeds. In recognising the importance of regular attendance at school, alongside the well-documented negative impact on attainment that can occur due to



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persistent absence, the working group sought assurances over the timescales associated with each stage of the process. We were keen to ensure that all interventions were occurring in a timely fashion.

22. We also raised some concern that an ever widening brief, within the context of a fixed resource within the Attendance Strategy team, could have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the approach in recent years.
23. It was confirmed that careful targeting of resources (between primary and secondary schools) was key to the overall success of the Attendance Strategy 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

24. 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).

25. However, it was recognised that while schools clearly had an important role some issues remained significant barriers for many schools across Leeds, including term-time holidays and, to a lesser extent, extended family holidays.

Areas for development

26. We noted that the 2007/8 annual attendance and exclusion report detailed priorities for the coming year. In addition to the issues already discussed, the following areas were highlighted:
- Work with School Improvement Partners (SIPs) to ensure all schools set aspirational targets for attendance and persistent absence;
 - Explore with schools and Performance Management the possibility of collecting pupil level attendance data regularly at an area/cluster level in order to target multi-agency support at an earlier stage;
 - Work with partners to establish local multi-agency panels with a clear remit of analysing pupil level data and targeting resource, and realign available resources to create multi-agency support teams;
 - Identify Attendance Champions in all services to deliver improved outcomes;
 - Develop local service referral and delivery models to meet the Children and Young People's Plan outcomes and priority 4 LILS – Locality working;
 - Increased resources had been made available to support the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme for primary schools with particular emphasis on schools with high levels of persistent absence;



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- Further development of the National Programme for Specialist Leaders of Behaviour and Attendance (NPSLBA) to build capacity in the leadership of behaviour and attendance at school and local authority level.

Progress review – November 2009

27. The working group meeting in November received a brief written update on progress and key developments in relation to the Attendance Strategy since the previous meeting, as well as future plans for development.
28. We particularly noted that improving attendance and reducing persistent absence is a key priority in the new Children and Young People's Plan agreed in the summer of 2009.
29. We considered the revised Attendance Strategy which includes a pledge for partners to sign up to, in order to demonstrate their commitment and contribution to encouraging school attendance in Leeds.
30. We welcome this idea and we also strongly endorse the introduction to the Attendance Strategy which states:

“Given that the evidence clearly tells us that non-attendance at school is mostly only one symptom of other, often complex, problems, the Children's Services Attendance Strategy aims to secure the commitment of all those who work with children and families to contribute to improving school attendance and therefore improving the life chances of young people in the city. The responsibility for reducing persistent

absence from school cannot reside with one service and demands a multi-faceted response.”

31. The working group particularly welcomed the Attendance Strategy team's commitment to the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process, with all Attendance Improvement Officers trained to use CAFs. We felt that this was particularly important as persistent absence could in some cases be related to a safeguarding issue.
32. We learned that persistent absence rates increased in the primary sector by 101, from 1,323 in 2007/8 to 1,424 in 2008/9.
33. In contrast 2008/9 saw a marked improvement in the levels of persistent absence rates in secondary schools where the rate fell by 28% from 4,625 in 2005/6 to 3,322 in 2008/9.
34. Despite this improvement more progress is needed at a faster pace in order to match national expectations and to meet our aspirations in Leeds.
35. We discussed the support available from the DCSF and the National Strategies Adviser. DCSF monitoring meetings include the sharing of good practice, for example Leeds were talking to Newcastle about their success with tracking of individual pupils. The National Strategies Adviser had also offered a full day 'deep dive' support session with individual schools to consider all aspects of the school's approach to attendance and school level data, in order to identify immediate and longer-term ideas for improvement. A number of schools have already taken up this offer.



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36. One of the members of the working group, who is also the children's champion for his Area Committee, has already arranged a successful 'deep dive' session at the high school where he is a governor.

Holidays

37. The working group discussed term-time holidays and confirmed that Education Leeds is not in a position to impose a single policy on this issue, although the authority is clear that they are discouraged. Each school is responsible for setting and owning its own policy on considering requests and deciding whether these are recorded as authorised or unauthorised absence.

38. We noted that enforcement action has been taken in some cases of unauthorised term-time holidays including warning letters and penalty notices.

39. We also discussed extended leave. We were told that there is a policy on extended leave, for example to allow families to visit their home country. This includes agreeing a date for return to school. If a pupil fails to return within ten school days of the agreed date, then the school is entitled to remove the child from the school roll.

40. There is a specific DCSF code to be used in the register for extended leave, so that it can be identified in analysing the reasons for absence. We were told that extended leave does not have a major impact on attendance figures in Leeds.

41. We were also concerned about children missing education, who are not on the roll of any school and will not appear in persistent absence figures.

Parental engagement

42. We asked about the role of the home school contract that parents and pupils sign up to when a child starts at a school. We wondered whether these made reference to the importance of attendance, and also whether they were renewed during a pupil's time at school to reinforce expectations.

43. We discussed the impact of a school's approach to parental engagement and personalised learning for pupils on promoting attendance and tackling persistent absence. We felt that this was an area where good practice could usefully be shared.

44. We were also provided with data on the enforcement action taken by the Attendance Strategy team for the 2008/9 year, which included over 130 cases. 128 fines had been issued, 11 education supervision orders, two parenting orders, one community order and one custodial sentence had also resulted from this enforcement action, with a number of cases still ongoing at the end of the year.

Area Inclusion Partnerships

45. The Area Inclusion Partnerships were formed in 2008/9 to transform the previous Area Management Boards (No Child Left Behind) into new broader partnerships focused on the wider inclusion agenda. They also fulfil the



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functions of the statutory Attendance and Behaviour Partnerships in each wedge.

46. The Area Inclusion Partnerships now oversee the adoption of local targets for reducing persistent absence as well as continuing to improve on their excellent track record of reducing exclusions across the city. We were pleased to note that the Attendance Strategy team is represented on all areas.

Recommendation 1 – That the Chief Executive of Education Leeds works with Area Inclusion Partnerships to ensure that attendance and behaviour targets are embedded in all area plans.

Examples of good practice

47. We heard about the success of the Well-being Panels, started in the south of the city. These are a partnership exercise with school health to help tackle the biggest reason for absence – illness (47.4% of absences in 2008/9). These panels have resulted in increased attendance, as well as increasing parental engagement, as often parents were unaware of the help available via school for their child's health needs.
48. We were also interested to learn about the success of the Horsforth and ESNW clusters in implementing a joint policy on holidays in term-time. This has ensured a consistent approach, particularly where parents and carers may have children attending more than one school. The schools in these clusters reduced the number of days lost to

holidays by 19.3% or 1,160.5 more days in school.

49. We welcomed the information that termly attendance leaders' networking days take place.

Recommendation 2 – That the Chief Executive of Education Leeds ensures that parents, schools and governors continue to be reminded that term time holidays are discouraged.

Recommendation 3 - That the Chief Executive of Education Leeds reports back to us on the range of mechanisms used to ensure that local and national good practice in tackling persistent absence is systematically disseminated and replicated across the authority.

Conclusion

50. We welcomed the progress being made in improving rates of school attendance and we were pleased to hear that the DCSF recognises many of the initiatives being employed in Leeds as best practice.
51. However we are concerned that attendance figures still remain stubbornly below national levels, indicating that there is still further work to be done by all concerned, in particular to stem the worrying rise in primary school persistent absence.



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52. We will continue to track progress through our regular quarterly performance monitoring regime. We would also encourage all Children's Services Scrutiny Board members and all other councillors who are school governors to consider how their respective schools are addressing attendance.

Recommendation 4 – That the Chief Executive of Education Leeds ensures that all governors are reminded of the importance of focusing on attendance.

Recommendation 5 – That the Scrutiny Board's statement is circulated to all councillors who are school governors to encourage them to look at their own schools' approach to attendance management.



Monitoring arrangements

Standard arrangements for monitoring the outcome of the Board's recommendations will apply.

The decision-makers to whom the recommendations are addressed will be asked to submit a formal response to the recommendations, including an action plan and timetable, normally within two months.

Following this the Scrutiny Board will determine any further detailed monitoring, over and above the standard quarterly monitoring of all scrutiny recommendations.

Reports and Publications Submitted

- Executive summary 'Just a symptom of confusing lives' – Attendance strategy persistent absence research report 2008
- Attendance Strategy Team structure January 2009
- Attendance Strategy Team brief guide and leaflet for parents and carers
- Education Leeds 6 stage process for managing irregular school attendance
- 2008/09 quarter 3 performance information on attendance
- DCSF attendance data
- Extracts relating to attendance from Executive Board report dated 1 April 2009 on Joint Area Review/Annual Performance Assessment (JAR/APA) progress
- Attendance and exclusion report 2007/08
- Draft Attendance Strategy
- Attendance working group – progress report November 2009
- 2008/09 Attendance data for secondary schools
- Prosecutions data 2008/09
- Attendance and exclusions report 2008/09

Witnesses Heard

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Working Group Members

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Dates of Scrutiny

21 April 2009

16 November 2009

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