

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Thursday 11 th May 2023
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

The report provides information with regard to the levels of attendance and exclusion across Flintshire schools for the academic year 2021/22. The main reasons cited for pupil absence and exclusion have been included within the report.

The period reported on reflects the first full year following the COVID-19 pandemic and the legacy of this exceptional event continues to impact on the levels of attendance and exclusion. Schools across Wales have struggled to re-engage learners and families following the lengthy periods of isolation brought about by the pandemic. In addition, many of the learners returning to full time education have found it difficult to resume the routine and expectations of school life. This situation has once again prevented meaningful comparison with the data from years prior to the COVID pandemic for Flintshire, but it does provide an initial opportunity to provide some insight into its legacy.

Attendance across Flintshire schools remains lower than pre-pandemic levels, with illness accounting for the majority of absences. The levels of permanent and fixed-term exclusion remain on an increasing trend, particularly across the secondary sector. Meetings on a regional and national level suggest that similar trends with regards to attendance and exclusion are evident across other authorities and concerns continue to be flagged to Welsh Government. Comparative data had not yet been fully reinstated by Welsh Government during the period covered by this report and the use of COVID absence marks remained an option for use by schools, being finally withdrawn for use for 2022/23.

Services continue to review and develop in response to the need to support an improvement in attendance and overall reduction in exclusion as per the recommendation from the 2019 Estyn Inspection and the report outlines some of the changes implemented.

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.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING ATTENDANCE AND EXCLUSIONS
1.01	Prior to the pandemic, school attendance and exclusion comparative data had been published by Welsh Government (WG) retrospectively on an annual basis. During the pandemic, data publication and performance measurement was suspended and has not fully resumed. This report, similar to last year, is once again constructed utilising Flintshire County Council unverified data extracted from local databases. The data covers both the primary and secondary sectors and relates to the academic year 2021/22.
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 data, whilst below pre-pandemic levels is showing an improvement on the previous year at 92.4% indicating some signs of recovery. Attendance in secondary schools reduced to below 90% during the pandemic and this situation remained unchanged for 21/22 with overall attendance sitting at 87.8% for the year.
1.03	Headteachers have the discretion as to whether to authorise a child's absence or not based on the information provided by the parent/carer. The high levels of authorised absence outlined in Table 3 suggest that parents/carers were continuing in the main, to provide schools with acceptable reasons for absence. It is evident that illness remained the predominant reason for absence across the year in both sectors with this significantly surpassing all other reasons. The COVID absence code remained available for schools to use until August 2022 and the use of this reflects the continued impact of the COVID virus on school communities during 2021/22. Holiday absences increased significantly in the primary sector for 21/22 as travel restrictions eased. Once again this reflects the significant impact of the COVID-19 lockdown with many families keen to resume holiday bookings after the lockdown ceased.

1.04	<p>Parents/carers are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their children attend school regularly. Headteachers understand the importance of attendance on pupil engagement and attainment and implement a range of strategies to promote and secure attendance in collaboration with Council Services. The challenges of recent years have resulted in schools developing a range of alternative offers to re-engage those who are struggling to attend. These include the following examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-site targeted KS3 small group provision offering a range of intervention to catch up and facilitate a supported phased return to mainstream provision. • On-site small group provision for KS4 providing an alternative curriculum offer to maintain interest and engagement. • On-site Community Hub created to facilitate multi-agency working. • Offsite community-based centres providing access to core subjects and more vocationally targeted opportunities and accreditation for those who are unable to access their education on the main school site. <p>In some cases, there have been collaborative approaches between the school and Council Services such as Youth Services to enhance the provision on offer. These options have also been utilised to support individuals either at risk of, or those who have been excluded and are being further enhanced this year by the Community Focused Schools Service which has recently been established following access to WG targeted grant funding.</p>
1.05	<p>Other services across the Education & Youth Portfolio have key roles to play in supporting improved attendance and reducing levels of exclusion. These include the Education Welfare Service (EWS) which has a statutory responsibility with regard to school attendance matters along with other teams such as Additional Learning Needs, Education Psychology, Young Person Counselling, Personal Support, TRAC (ceased Summer 2022), English as an Additional Language and Gypsy/Traveller services which offer specialist support to schools, families and individual learners to improve their engagement levels. Attendance and exclusion data at both school and individual level is now circulated to service managers on a half-termly basis to support and facilitate targeted intervention.</p>
1.06	<p>A particular focus has been on Year 6/7 transition data for the EWS. A review of the data during 21/22 suggested that transition from Year 6 to 7 was a potential area of opportunity to assess and engage pupils where attendance had fallen below an 85% threshold in Year 6. After an initial pilot in one of our secondary schools which resulted in overall increased attendance in Year 7, each school-based EWO were provided with an identified cohort of pupils at the close of Year 6 to prioritise in Year 7. The aim was to intervene proactively and at an early stage. This group will be monitored to see if the revised approach can improve the attendance of this particular cohort during 22/23.</p>

1.07	<p>During 2021/22, further changes were made to the practice of the Education Welfare Service (EWS). A small number of Education Support Officer (ESO) roles were created to provide specific expertise to schools regarding attendance management systems. The strategic aim of this activity was to provide a two-tier structure within the EWS. ESOs engage predominantly with primary schools to support attendance administration processes with Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) being targeted at secondary schools and the more complex cases. The role of the ESOs is to ensure that the graduated response to attendance management is applied consistently across Flintshire and requires them to target schools based on data review. A draft model Attendance Policy was shared with all Flintshire Schools in January 2022 to seek Headteacher feedback and was circulated for use later in the year. This provides schools with an appropriate framework in relation to attendance and clarifies roles and responsibilities to support a more consistent approach across the county. These actions are part of the revised strategic approach to attendance management process across Flintshire in response to the Estyn recommendations.</p>
1.08	<p>Two ESO staff have also been appointed to provide dedicated support for families that choose Elective Home Education (EHE) as a way to educate their children. This revised approach allows the authority to provide a dedicated point of contact with such families and to utilise additional funding provided by WG to support/safeguard such families in an enhanced manner. In addition a dedicated ESO has taken a lead role as Children Missing Education (CME) lead to ensure any pupils that fail to arrive in their school or leave the locality are placed on the central Lost Pupil Database. These service revisions ensure that the Local Authority meets its duty to work with other councils when children leave our schools and to promote safeguarding matters robustly.</p>
1.09	<p>The Education Welfare Service implements the legal challenge to parents/carers on behalf of the Council in collaboration with the FCC Legal Services Department 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 during 2022. Such legal action is only applied in cases where there are significant levels of unauthorised absences and where all interventions have failed to improve the situation. As outlined in Table 1, the levels of unauthorised absence are gradually increasing. Whilst the percentages overall remain low, it does indicate that Headteachers are presenting an increasing level of challenge to parents/carers where they feel there is insufficient evidence to support learner absence.</p>
1.10	<p>In response to the increasing level of challenge and the re-instigation of the full powers by WG, a revised process has been established to record and issue the Fixed Penalty Notice applications from individual Headteachers. This process now ensures that Fixed Penalty Notices are delivered by hand and confirms if any payment of the notices has been</p>

	<p>received. Where payment has not been received and absences remain unauthorised, the case now progresses to court proceedings. In 21/22 an initial batch of 10 fines were issued. Of these, 7 were progressed and upheld by the Magistrates Court resulting in 1 conditional discharge and 6 considerable financial penalties. This confirmed that the process being implemented was secure and it continues to be implemented. The impact of these initial actions was monitored and Headteachers were made aware of the outcome. Information was also published by the Council more generally to promote awareness of possible consequences associated with non-attendance. The aim was to promote a range of options to support schools with unauthorised absences as part of a whole school approach. This action was in its early stages in 21/22 but will develop and evolve.</p>
1.11	<p>As stated, the main factor impacting on attendance continues to be illness with mental health issues a concern for learners particularly in the secondary sector. Whilst there is regular engagement with health colleagues to consider the range of services available to Flintshire children and young people, access to appropriate services and intervention remains a challenge. The school medical process was re-implemented in 21/22 to consider cases of persistent absence but resource deficits with partner Health Services meant that these appointments would take up to 6 months to secure. The Council's EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) services provide medical home tuition for learners with appropriate medical evidence to support this. Demand for this intervention increased greatly during the COVID and has continued to rise in 2021/22 resulting in significant expenditure for the Council with regards to individual tuition for those unable to engage in school.</p>
1.12	<p>The level of fixed term and permanent exclusion across our schools had generally been increasing in the period prior to the initial lockdown. The main reasons cited for exclusion were physical assault against a pupil, verbal/threatening behaviour against an adult, persistent and disruptive behaviour and 'other'. Council 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 children at risk of exploitation, substance misuse issues and anti-social behaviour continues to make this increasingly difficult. Levels of exclusion in 2021/22 increased with permanent exclusions and occasions of fixed term exclusion over five days in secondary being recorded at a significantly higher level.</p>
1.13	<p>The primary reasons for exclusion recorded during the period 21/22 remained within the categories stated earlier within this report. However, one noticeable increase recorded was in relation to substance related issues mainly associated with cannabis usage. A partnership approach has been developed in such cases to provide support with agencies such as the Drug and Alcohol service 'Sorted' being key to these interventions. North Wales Police are consulted or engaged as appropriate but this trend was recognised as a matter that required a revised strategic approach to meet this increasing trend with the locality during 21/22. The promotion of</p>

	<p>trauma informed practices remains a priority for the Education & Youth Portfolio to support a greater understanding of the presenting behaviours of some learners and the potential consequences of exclusion.</p>
1.14	<p>There has been an agreement this year to engage with Headteachers to explore the challenges that schools and experiencing with a view to reviewing and developing practices to reduce the levels of exclusion particularly within the secondary sector. Whilst the challenges remain, there is a willingness to engage with officers in some instances to secure an alternative outcome for the learner as outlined in the case study below.</p> <p>Case Study: A Year 9 learner (male) was permanently excluded for persistent and extreme aggression/defiance towards staff. A multi-agency meeting was held to discuss the exclusion. The parent was very supportive of the school and recognised the challenge placed on them by the learner's behaviour. When asked, the learner identified that he wanted to remain in the school. In response, an Earn Your Way Back plan was agreed and implemented which included an appropriate curriculum offer from the school, short term tuition provided by the Council along with regular monitoring of learner engagement and work output. At the end of the review period, there was evidence of full engagement from the learner and the permanent exclusion was suspended and the learner re-engaged fully in school. The placement has been maintained with the learner being fully entered for GCSEs.</p>
1.15	<p>The improvement of attendance and reduction in the levels of exclusion remain as Council priorities. The Senior Learning Advisor for Engagement (SLA) has undertaken a strategic revision of the Engagement services to implement a number of changes to improve both service consistency and accountability. As stated, an enhanced approach to data analysis was implemented in 21/22 to ensure all actions are evidence based and targeted. A regular internal audit update is also taking place to ensure the LA meets the terms of the Estyn recommendations of 2019. The data suggests that there is limited impact of the actions outlined in the report however, many of these were initiated in the reporting period thus providing limited time for effect. These have become more established into the current academic year and, whilst attendance and exclusion rates remain an area for improvement, there are examples of positive practice against a very challenging backdrop; recent WG data publications also places attendance across Flintshire schools in the upper quartile nationally.</p>
1.16	<p>A further part of the strategy being implemented in the current academic year is the promotion of the concept of 'Belonging' across our schools and services to support and promote engagement. Trauma informed practice is a key stone of our approach and fits in line with WG priorities. Senior officers and managers across the Portfolio have accessed training along with a number of Headteachers and further Flintshire specific training is planned for the Autumn Term. The short-term aim is to identify schools</p>

	<p>where this is already a priority and support them to embed this within their practice, with the view that these can then become centres of effective practice and share/support others alongside officers and schools where this is already an integral part of their approach. It is hoped that by adopting 'Belonging' as an umbrella strategy, this will resonate with both schools and officers alike to bring about important changes for all.</p>
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2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	<p>The increased level of demand for home tuition on medical grounds is placing an increasing financial pressure on the Council. This is currently being funded via a combination of school budgets, grant funding and Council service budgets and has been identified as a potential budget pressure going forward into the next financial year. There are also a small number of learners for whom more bespoke educational packages are required, either due to the lack of capacity within the specialist sector or the lack of suitable provision to meet their complex needs. The Council has a duty to provide education and this also brings with it an increased level of cost which is being subsidised by grant funding which will cease in 2 years' time.</p>

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	None undertaken as a result of this report.

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	<p>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 increased use of data across services along with the regular monitoring of the Council/Education & Youth Portfolio Business Plan and 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.</p>

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 FCC Attendance and Exclusion Data for 18/19 to 21/22
5.02	Appendix 2 Attendance Codes

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	<p>WG All Wales Attendance Toolkit WG Guidance - Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units</p> <p>Contact Officer: John Grant, Senior Learning Adviser - Engagement Telephone: 07785695823 E-mail: john.grant@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	<p>(1) 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>(2) 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>(3) Persistent absenteeism - absent for at least 20 per cent of the sessions that schools were open to pupils.</p>