

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT

Date Written	22 nd January 2024
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Service Area	Education Inclusion
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Attendance in Schools

1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides Members with an update on the attendance at primary and secondary and the use of available grant funding.
- 1.2 The report specifically addresses:
- attendance data.
 - persistent absentees.
 - use of grant funding.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 The content of this report is discussed and noted.
- 2.2 Members consider if there are other aspects of attendance they wish to scrutinise.

3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Our key attendance guidance is the Welsh Government Guidance entitled: 'All Wales Attendance Framework' (November 2012). The document provides standards and guidance for practitioners to ensure greater consistency of practice throughout Wales. It also aims to enable Councils and schools to deliver services that are consistent, accessible and of a high standard.
- 3.2 In October 2023, the Welsh Government also provided additional guidance entitled: 'Belonging, engaging, and participating'. This guidance has been developed to support maintained schools, PRUs, parents/carers and local authorities with improving learner engagement and attendance.

- 3.3 As Members will be aware, improving attendance has been a consistent focus for the Council. The link between good attendance and learning is clear. Good attendance supports pupils having the best possible chance in life and maximising their potential, both in terms of academic achievement and future employability.
- 3.4 Significant work has been undertaken to improve attendance and the Raising Aspirations; Raising Standards strategy (RARS) highlights the need to ensure a clear focus on improving attendance.
- 3.5 However, whilst there has been an improvement over time, there is much work to be done to close the gap further and to consolidate improvements in a positive attendance trend, including particularly a reduction in persistent absenteeism.

4.0 WHERE WE WERE

- 4.1 In April 2021, when schools fully reopened following the pandemic, attendance was lower than prior to the pandemic. The whole year trend data is below.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Secondary	93.32% - Feb 20	87.01%	82.78%	84.90%
Primary	94.33% - Feb 20	91.23%	89.69%	91.05%

- 4.2 There was no Welsh Government comparative data for 2019/20, 2020/21 or 2021/22. At the end of 2018/19 Merthyr Tydfil was ranked joint 21st with Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) for secondary attendance. The Wales average was 93.8%. For primary attendance, Merthyr Tydfil was ranked joint 20th with Neath/Port Talbot and Carmarthenshire.
- 4.3 The gap between Merthyr Tydfil and the Welsh average continued to close and our rate of improvement was the third best in Wales. However, improvement remained a fluctuating picture and the profile of improvement did not support a consistent sustained improvement.
- 4.4 At the end of academic year 2019/20 (to the point of lockdown) persistent absenteeism was improving. Figures during, and post-lockdown have been impacted significantly by COVID conditions.

	2019/20 (to February 2020)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Secondary	4.18%	20.37%	24.29%	24.04%
Primary	2.47%	10.09%	9.72%	7.67%

5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW

- 5.1 In September 2023 Welsh Government released the statistical return data for 2022/23 secondary attendance. This data shows that Merthyr Tydfil secondary attendance was 17/22 of Welsh LAs. The national average was 87.5%, Merthyr Tydfil was 86.3%. In addition, when considering the percentage drop across LAs from 2018/19 to 2022/23 as a result of COVID Merthyr Tydfil had the 11th smallest drop (impact).
- 5.2 In February 2024, Welsh Government released the statistical return data for 22/23 primary attendance. This data shows that Merthyr Tydfil primary attendance was 19/22 of Welsh LAs. The national average was 91.5%, Merthyr Tydfil was 91%. In addition, when considering the percentage drop across LAs from 2018/19 to 2022/23 as a result of COVID Merthyr Tydfil had the 8th smallest drop (impact).

5.3 Current Attendance

Attendance comparison for the autumn term 2021-23 is as follows:

	Sept-Dec 2021/22	Sept-Dec 2022/23	Sept-Dec 2023/24
Secondary	85.31%	85.80%	86.50%
Primary	89.73%	90.59%	92.08%

The table below shows the attendance by year group for the autumn term 2023/24 and highlights the year groups that are lower in attendance than the Merthyr Tydfil school average of 92.08% for primary and 86.50% for secondary.

NCY- primary	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Percentage	91.43%	92.38%	92.31%	92.41%	91.92%	91.96%
NCY secondary	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	
Percentage	91.22%	86.32%	85.72%	84.54%	84.66%	

More effective use of data at both school and LA level has enabled discussions to take place to look at where best to target resources.

5.4 Persistent Absenteeism

Welsh Government has changed the definition of persistent absenteeism. It now defines it as pupils whose absence level is more than 10% (less than 90% attendance). This came into effect from September 2023.

Below is a data comparison for the autumn term data 2022/23 and 2023/24 for 80% persistent absentee and 90% data for the autumn term 2023/24.

- Overall percentage for persistent absentees for Primary schools is 7.48%, a decrease of 2.71% for the same period 2022/2023.
- Overall percentage for persistent absentees for secondary schools is 19.26% a decrease of 3.56% for the same period 2022/2023.
- Overall percentage for persistent absentees at 90% threshold for Primary schools is 27.59%.
- Overall percentage for persistent absentees at 90% threshold for secondary schools is 42.93%.

- 5.5 Bespoke action plans are in place to support this area of focus. These plans are monitored by school staff and Education Inclusion Officers (EIOs) for those schools that have a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the Education Welfare Service and for those schools that do not have an SLA, the schools will monitor progress.
- 5.6 EIOs liaise with the schools Family Liaison Officer (FLOs) during their allocated weekly school visit and the persistent absentee action plans form part of the weekly meeting where persistent absentee data is analysed and actions agreed. Feedback on this process at the FLO Network group regarding implementing action plans has been positive in supporting the school approaches to tackling persistent absenteeism.
- 5.7 During this academic year progress has been encouraging and we have seen a reduction in persistent absenteeism. The Senior Education Welfare Officer has met with schools that have a persistent absentee percentage above the LA average and discussions have taken place around processes, reasons for actions, areas of focus, and actions agreed.
- 5.8 The Education Welfare Team and the Community Focused Schools (CFS) team have worked closely and in a joined-up way to support schools, relating specifically to work to reduce persistent absenteeism. A CFS project was carried out with a group of pupils transitioning into Pen Y Dre High School in the summer term 2022-23 into the autumn term 2023-24. Further work is in place for similar activity with our other secondary schools. In addition, work to look at persistent absenteeism at the family level is also underway.
- 5.9 The persistent absentee data remains a fluctuating picture as more families are booking holidays again since COVID and anxiety and social issues are also a cause for low attendance. With the revised threshold of 90% this will have a significant impact on support and challenge for schools and the LA due to the volume of pupils and staff capacity.
- 5.10 Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) for school non-attendance were reintroduced in the summer term 2021/22. Schools communicate to parents/carers via their Attendance Policy where they intend to use FPNs and reiterate the importance and expectation of school attendance with parents/carers at the start of each term. The LA has encouraged a cluster approach to the use of FPN's and to date two clusters has adopted this approach.

- 5.11 Further work to align school attendance policy is underway, building on work by Welsh Government guidance.
- 5.12 Children Looked After (CLA) attendance for 2022/23 was 90.12% in comparison to non CLA attendance of 88.23%. Attendance for the autumn term 2023/24 was 88.88% in comparison to non CLA attendance of 89.52%.

Each child looked after is allocated a looked after children's education officer (LACES) who is responsible in conjunction with the school, carers, and social worker for offering support and challenge to schools to ensure pupils are making expected progress against their individual targets. There is regular liaison between the allocated LACES officer and the CLA Designated Person in each school, affording regular opportunities to review CLA pupils progress, attendance, targets, and support needs in line with their Personal Education Plans (PEPS). Attendance is collected through the Personal Education process and regular liaison between the team, schools, social workers, and foster carers ensures that attendance issues are addressed without delay. For pupils with persistent absenteeism or other difficulties that may impact on progress, regular multi-agency education progress reviews are coordinated by the team.

5.13 Fixed Penalty Notice

The table below shows FPN information for the academic year 2022/23 and the autumn term 2023/24. Information includes number of fines sent and reason, split by FSM and non-FSM, number paid, unpaid, how many proceeded to prosecution, and impact on attendance. From this information there has been a higher number of pupils with improved attendance after the FPN as opposed to declined attendance.

School year	Total number of fines for unauthorised absence	FSM	Non-FSM	Total number of fines for term time holiday	FSM	Non-FSM	Total number of prosecutions for non payment of fine	FPN's paid	FPN's unpaid	FPN's withdrawn	No of pupils att: improved after FPN	No of pupils att: declined after FPN
2022/23	208	136	72	323	63	260	48	307	135	89	287	144
2023/24	75	35	40	144	34	110	6	27	6	19	173	46

5.14 Attendance Audit

An attendance self-evaluation audit is provided to schools for completion in the autumn term each year, produced in line with relevant legislation.

The Audit tool is important to help identify issues within school and to target and prioritise action to improve attendance. A response to each school highlighting any areas for improvement as well as any good practice is provided. The self-evaluation audit and the LA response is also sent to the Improvement Partner for the school as part of information sharing and good practice.

5.15 Attendance Grant

The WG Attendance Grant has enabled us to support a range of activities aimed at improving attendance. The focus being around persistent absenteeism and targeted support to schools. Most of the work has been focused at the secondary age.

These have included:

- Increased hours of a current member of staff by one day a week to support with work on persistent absentees.
- Employed one additional member of staff to support with family engagement work on persistent absenteeism, specifically in the PRU and targeted secondary school.
- Employing a FLO to work specifically with pupils on reduced timetables or tuition (for anxiety/attendance reasons) to support their reintegration and re-engagement back into more structured education.
- Additional EIO capacity to work specifically with schools with low attendance, including the PRU.
- An attendance project in Afon Taf High School focusing on a targeted approach to those with low attendance, mobilising nine TAs to provide additional support to contact parents and encouraging attendance as part of a first day response.
- Rewards and incentives for schools have been procured particularly the use of vending machines filled with books for use as rewards.
- Additional use of the Family Engagement Officer element of the CFS grant has enabled work to be undertaken in specific schools identified through deprivation factors and supported the above work in the PRU.

5.16 Attendance Action Plans

Since its implementation of the action plan in the autumn term 2021 there have been a number of key successes.

- The EWS structure has been reviewed and permanent contracts have been put in place for the EIOs resulting in a more stable team and more consistency for delivery of service to schools.
- Support through an attendance champion role has enabled targeted support to the lower performing schools to support internal processes and improve attendance.
- Enhanced data scrutiny. The EWS team has worked closely with the data team to develop an appropriate data set to support monitoring.
- Increased hours for a current member of staff by one day a week to support with work around persistent absentees.
- Employed an additional member of staff to support with family engagement work around persistent absenteeism, specifically in the PRU and targeted secondary school.
- All four secondary schools have now bought into the EWS-SLA.

6.0 WHERE WE WANT TO BE

- 6.1 Our ambition for attendance in Merthyr Tydfil to be at least in line with the Welsh average. For secondary in 2022/23 the average is 87.5% and for primary 91.50%. To achieve this, the performance of all pupils in respect of attendance needs to improve.
- 6.2 Following consultation, from September 2020 the Welsh Government revoked the School Performance and Absence Targets (Wales) Regulations 2011. As a result, there has been no statutory requirement for schools to set attendance targets for future years or report on those previously set. Welsh Government reinstated the requirement but on a non-statutory basis from the academic year 2022/23. Therefore, the LA analysed the attendance trend data of schools over the last five years, associated targets, and proposed attendance targets for all schools for 2023-24. School governing bodies have discussed and agreed the proposed targets.
- 6.3 Targets need to be both aspirational and realistic. High expectations are central to the target setting process and to providing the conditions that enable all pupils to realise their potential.

7.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT

- 7.1 Clearly there is significant ongoing work to be done. This includes, but is not limited to:
- Build on existing good practice with utilising existing staff capacity to support targeted schools.
 - Promote a more consistent cluster to cluster approach for the utilising of FPN's. continue to develop the use of data to support strategic and operational responses;
 - to reduce levels of persistent absenteeism by continuing to utilise persistent absentee action plans for schools;
 - appropriate challenge to all schools;
 - specific additional challenge and support to identified schools.
 - ensure a mature and pragmatic working partnership between CSC;
 - utilise any further WG funding to improve attendance;
 - continuing to provide guidance on attendance matters e.g. code usage, especially on the level of authorised absences;
 - enabling timely engagement consistent approach to the prosecution process, including FPNs.

8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO RARS

- 8.1 The contents of this report relate to the following themes and goals within the RARS:
- Partnership & Collaboration and Post Pandemic Recovery
 - Supporting Learners' Health and Wellbeing

9.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

9.1 The Contents of this report relates to the following Wellbeing Objectives:

- An Aspirational Merthyr Tydfil focused on learning.

SUE WALKER
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CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
Belonging, Engaging and Participating		Attached
All Wales Attendance Framework		Attached
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		No