



Report of the Cabinet Member for Education and Learning

Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 13 July 2023

Vulnerable Learners Service School Attendance Policy

| | |
|--|--|
| Purpose: | To consider the progression of the attendance action plan and the draft Schools Attendance Policy. |
| Content: | An overview of the work undertaken to improve attendance. |
| Councillors are Being asked to: | Consider the information provided and give views. |
| Legal Councillor: | Cabinet Member for Education and Learning |
| Lead Officer & Report Author: | Kate Phillips, Head of Vulnerable Service Kate.phillips2@swansea.gov.uk Helen Howells, Team Manager for Pupil Support Helen.howells@swansea.gov.uk |

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Swansea Council is committed to providing an 'excellent education for all by working together'. It is widely recognised that regular school attendance has a positive effect on children and young people and a strong impact on learner outcomes, standards, and progression. We recognise that attendance supports the development of literacy and numeracy skills, and on the conceptual understanding needed for further study and success in the workplace. Analysis shows that examination outcomes link strongly to attendance rates. Additionally, good attendance also has a positive effect on wellbeing, therefore establishing good attendance patterns from an early age is vital for social development.
- 1.2 Improving behaviour and attendance is an integral part of our wider educational initiatives set out in our Inclusion Strategy. These initiatives aim to ensure that children and young people do not become disengaged from education by ensuring that provision is suitable to their individual needs.

2. Attendance in Swansea

- 2.1 Traditionally attendance percentages have been above 93% in a 5 year trend 2014-2019. During the 2021/22 academic year the average attendance in Swansea Primary schools was 90.1%, Secondary school average attendance was 86.6%. For our current academic year to date figures show that primary school average attendance increased slightly to 91.2% and secondary schools to 88.4%. This is still below where we want it to be. A few schools have made improvements and we want to learn from what they have achieved and share this practice. For other schools' attendance has not improved as we would have hoped and so we need to secure more targeted support to support improvement.
- 2.2 Low attendance in schools is a national picture. For a few learners and parents, the barriers to learning they face have been exacerbated since the pandemic. In some cases, previous habits of good attendance may not have been re-established, and more casual attitudes to learning and school attendance have increased. In addition, campaigns for promoting good attendance were disrupted during the pandemic.
- 2.3 NSPCC findings in 2021 have shown that post pandemic there is an increase in children and young people's vulnerability. Older children and adolescents reported higher and more severe rates of depressive symptoms. Our secondary schools have been especially affected and we can see this in their attendance.
- 2.5 Higher anxiety amongst our youth, coupled with waiting lists for services such as Neuro-developmental (ND) pathways, Children and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHs) and mental health support are challenging. There is higher demand on Early Help Hubs (EHH) and Youth Offending Services (YOS) prevention. The cost of living crisis has caused further challenges for families and attendance at schools has not recovered as we'd hoped.
- 2.6 While recognising these considerable pressures the Education Directorate recognises our approaches to promoting attendance needs to change and respond to the new challenges. We also acknowledge that a review of process within the Education Welfare Service (EWS) is needed to enable a proactive approach to improve the current situation.

2. Attendance Action Plan

- 2.1 In response to levels of attendance dropping for the fourth consecutive year a clear, concise action plan was created to improve processes, and introduce a smarter way of working within the EWS. The Action plan has been RAG (red, amber, green) rated to visualise progress.
- 2.2 The plan has five key priorities:

- Ensure every school has an attendance policy which is regularly reviewed but which also reflects a holistic approach to behaviour, attendance, wellbeing, and welfare thus setting the ethos where every learner can succeed.
- Produce a clear, concise guide to the work of the Education Welfare Service and embed the recommendations of the 2019/20 consultation outcomes.
- Consider the increase in Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and ensure this informs developments to support the Whole School Approach (WSA).
- Analyse attendance data and use proactively to target need and set targets.
- Ensure prevention and early intervention strategies linked to other priority areas to ensure children want to attend school.
- Communicate expectations to partners and stakeholders, particularly governing bodies.

- 2.3 An attendance policy has been drafted and all stakeholders have had the opportunity to contemplate its content. A head teacher's pack is in development to complement the policy and to ensure consistency of practise throughout Swansea.
- 2.4 An attendance audit has been undertaken at Maes Derw PRU, with recommendations for improvements and a change to process. The newly allocated Education Welfare Officer (EWO) is now supporting home visits to help gauge pupil voice. This has had a positive effect on attendance at Maes Derw PRU, as their attendance is now 3% higher than last year. Attendance audits will now be rolled out to the special schools in the first instance.
- 2.5 Through the appointment of the Lead Officer for Education Safeguarding and Welfare, the team are now working for more strategically. Communication has been improved within the team, the Lead officer has implemented regular weekly meeting with a consistent agenda focusing on individual schools and sharing of good practise. A brochure is in development listing strategies and interventions that have proven outcomes in increasing attendance, this will be a toolkit of good practise.
- 2.6 Collation of data has been improved, request forms have now been digitalised and moving forward the team will be able to analyse requests and identify areas of need. Using techniques from the toolkit, EWOs will be able to advise appropriately, and use targeted intervention strategies.
- 2.7 An officer is focussing solely on Elective Home Education (EHE), to ensure the continuation of effective work with parents to support all education needs, especially at the transition points of becoming EHE and with those who wish to return to school.

3. Further strategies to improve attendance

- 3.1 Welsh Government have recognised that further funding is necessary to strengthen the support to schools provided by the EWS. As such they have provided a small grant to increase the capacity within the EWS. This is timely as core budgets have decreased since 2019, and the funding will help us to trial new ways of working.
- 3.2 The grant will also allow temporary arrangements to promote better attendance through the focus on creating closer relationships with families. It also ensures capacity for the team to become integrated in the Community Focussed Schools initiative, which builds upon the understanding that 'it takes a village to raise a child' and embeds the idea that attendance everyone's responsibility.
- 3.3 Professional development for EWOs has improved. Training has already been undertaken in a number of areas, most notably in EBSA. Additionally, a new bespoke training programme is being developed from September to ensure all educational processes are understood by every EWO. Furthermore, all EWOs are also taking part in a National EWS development day in July, to discuss new guidance, and share practice across local authorities.
- 3.4 Data is being collated to identify school avoidance (also known as school refusal). Firstly, to understand the scope of the problem and secondly to identify an EBSA specialist from within the team to work with schools and families to implement strategies to support reintegration to school.
- 3.5 The EWS will work more closely with the Inclusion team, to support early intervention strategies, preventing dis-engagement from school through a number of interventions.

4. Legal Implications

- 4.1 There are no legal implications within this report.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 There are no financial implications within this report.

6. Equality & Engagement Implications

- 6.1 The report is for information and discussion.

Background papers:

Appendices:

Appendix A – Attendance Action Plan

Appendix B – Draft Attendance Policy