



Children and Young People Services Committee

24 April 2023

Report Title	Improving School Attendance Spotlight Review
Cabinet Portfolio	Children and Young People
Cabinet Member	Councillor Nova Charlton
Exempt Report	No
Reason for Exemption	N/A
Key Decision	No
Public Notice issued	N/A
Wards Affected	All
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Borough Priorities	Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life	X
	Promote good health, independence, and care across our communities	
	Create safe and strong communities and neighbourhoods for all	
	Support a strong, thriving, inclusive and well-connected local economy	
	Create green and vibrant places that reflect our heritage and culture	
	Be a responsible Council	

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report is a summary of the evidence that was submitted to the Children and Young People Services Task Group, Improving school attendance in St Helens. It concludes with five recommendations to ensure that a culture of **“Attendance Matters”** is developed as a *borough* wide obsession linking into the priority contained within the Council Strategy of **“Ensuring Children and Young People Have a Positive Start in Life.**

2. Recommendations for Decision

The Children and Young People Services Committee is recommended to:

- (i) Approve the Task Group Report and recommendations as set out in Appendix 1.**
- (ii) Submit the recommendations to Cabinet for response.**

3. Purpose of this report

- 3.1 This report presents the Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee with the findings from the spotlight review ‘Improving School Attendance’.
- 3.2 Based on its findings, the committee’s main objective is to contribute to strategies to improve school attendance rates in St Helens, thereby improving pupil achievement, well-being, life chances and reducing the potential of children and young people’s vulnerability to harm.

4. Background/Reason for recommendations

- 4.1 At the Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee Work Programme Workshop on 6 July 2022, it was agreed to hold a spotlight review on 3 November 2022 to contribute to wider work to improve school attendance in St Helens.
- 4.2 This focus was agreed because overall absences in St Helens for the 21/22 Autumn and Spring Term are higher than regional and national averages.
- 4.3 The primary school absence rate in St Helens is 6.7% compared to the northwest average of 6.0% and 6.2% in England. The secondary school absence rate in St Helens is 10.2% compared to the northwest average of 8.8% and 8.6% in England.
- 4.4 St Helens also has higher rates of persistent absences for this period than regional and national averages. The primary school absence rate in St Helens is 21.3% compared to 17.7% and 18.2% in the northwest and England respectively. St Helens' secondary school persistent absence rate is 31.6% compared with 27.3% and 26.7% in the northwest and England respectively.
- 4.5 Absenteeism affects learning, attainment, social and emotional well-being, and the life chances of those children and young people. For some, it is also a safeguarding concern relating to criminality and various forms of exploitation. It was agreed to scrutinise examples of work being carried out in three St Helens schools and to look at how the Council supports the work on improving attendance across the borough.
- 4.6 Members of the Children’s and Young People Scrutiny Committee were invited to participate in the spotlight review. The members were as follows:
- Councillor Trisha Long (Chair)

- Councillor David Banks
- Councillor Donna Greaves
- Councillor Terry Maguire
- Councillor Anne McCormack
- Councillor Bisi Osundeko
- Councillor Michelle Sweeney

The following officers attended the Task Group meeting held on 3 November 2022

- Joanne Davis - Assistant Director for Education and Learning
- Jason Pickett – Head of Access and sufficiency
- Helen McCabe – Team Manager, Education Welfare Service
- Karl Allender – Scrutiny Support Officer
- Justin McCauley – Deputy Headteacher, St Cuthberts Secondary School
- Andrew Maley – Headteacher, Carr Mill Junior School
- Katie Alexander – Carr Mill Junior School
- Rachael Guyer – Interim Headteacher, Alternative Education Provision

Overview of reports presented to members and discussion.

- 4.7 The Task Group was provided with an overview of the importance of school attendance. School attendance is a legal requirement because children and young people are entitled to an education. Being in school also means that children and young people are safe, are nurtured and are being prepared for their adult life.
- 4.8 It was outlined that the law entitles every child of compulsory school age to a full-time education suitable to their age, aptitude, and any special educational need they may have. It is the legal responsibility of every parent to make sure their child receives that education, either by attendance at a school or by education otherwise than at a school, for example, suitable provision of home education.
- 4.9 It was noted that where parents decide to have their child registered at school, they have an additional legal duty to ensure their child attends that school regularly. This means their child must attend every day that the school is open, except in a small number of allowable circumstances such as being too ill to attend or being given permission for an absence in advance from the school.
- 4.10 However, absence from school is a significant issue in St Helens since the pandemic. In primary school, there is a churn of children with an attendance record of below 90% whereas in secondary school, there is a significant number of entrenched poor attenders. There is also a challenge with “part day” absence as well as whole day absence, and persistence absence. A further recent challenge relates to holidays being taken during term-time.
- 4.11 The committee heard about the significant safeguarding risks linked to school absenteeism which include sexual and criminal exploitation.
- 4.12 It was agreed that high levels of attendance are essential for pupils to get the most out of their school experience, including for their attainment, social and emotional well-being, and wider life chances; and that poor attendance is a significant factor in reducing life chances. The latter is particularly the case for children from areas of deprivation where, according to a DfE report published in 2016, persistent absence is more common: “Nearly half of persistent absentees live in the 30% highest areas of child poverty”.
- 4.13 The link between absenteeism and attainment was discussed in detail.

The committee heard that nationally, pupils with the highest attainment at the end of key stage 2 and key stage 4 have higher rates of attendance over the key stages compared to those with the lowest attainment. At KS2, pupils not meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths had an overall absence rate of 4.7%, compared to 3.5% among those meeting the expected standard.

4.14 Moreover, the overall absence rate of pupils not meeting the expected attainment standard was higher than among those meeting the higher attainment standard.

At KS4, pupils not achieving grade 9 to 4 in English and maths had an overall absence rate of 8.8%, compared to 5.2% among those achieving grades 4 and 3.7%. The overall absence rate of pupils not achieving grade 9 to 4 was over twice as high as those achieving grade 9 to 5 (8.8% compared to 3.7%).

4.15 The committee explored reasons for school absence, which are multi-faceted and often complex.

4.16 Discussion points on absence from school included the following:

- Unhappiness in school arising from additional needs not being met for some children
 - Home routines being disrupted following the pandemic
 - Children struggling to re-engage with school, preferring home learning they have become used to during the pandemic, due to anxiety
 - The increase in poor mental health arising from Covid, including an increase in anxiety and, particularly for girls, a rise in eating disorders
 - Non-essential appointments being made in school time
 - Holidays being taken in term time
 - A lack of understanding generally that a 90% attendance is *not* good and means that a child is absent from school lessons for the equivalent of one-half day every week. Over five years, this is the equivalent of about one half of a school year.
 - A lack of value ascribed to education and its relation to life chances by some parents, carers and young people
 - An increase in the number of parents and carers choosing to provide home learning for their child or children, over which the Council has very little legal power to oversee
 - Potential insufficiency of aspirational and motivational careers education with children and young people preventing them, and their parents and carers, from understanding career opportunities, the underpinning personal qualities for progression - such as attendance, the qualifications and pathways needed to progress into those careers, and the difference to their lives that a career can have.
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- Linked with the concern about careers education, the committee was concerned that staff working with children and young people may not all have the training or knowledge to provide children and young people with the basic careers research skills to enable them to manage their own learning about current and future careers.

4.17 The Assistant Director for Education and Learning provided an overview of the work carried out by the Local Authority to support attendance including:

- The tracking of pupils whose attendance falls below 90% and who have other associated vulnerabilities. For example, those who have an Education Health and Care Plan or have a social worker
- Multi-agency work to identify appropriate interventions

- Conversations with social workers to emphasise the importance of their role in identifying and resolving barriers that parents, carers and children may face in relation to attending school
- Tracking children who are NIROFTE (not in receipt of full-time education) and challenging schools to return these children to a full-time timetable; and tracking children with a social worker and those with an EHCP (Education and Health Care Plan)
- The introduction of Youth Engagement Officers based within the Education Welfare Service. This resource works with children disengaged from education with their focus being on building relationships with children and families to understand the reasons for poor attendance and to deliver interventions to reduce and remove the barriers to attendance
- Fining and prosecuting parents and carers whose children who do not attend and where issues have escalated.

4.18 However, she also explained that due to staffing challenges, the Authority was struggling to complete EHCPs and that support for children with SEND was under great strain.

4.19 The Committee heard about the ongoing and extensive work that schools are doing in tackling absenteeism through presentations provided by

- Mr Justin McCauley, Deputy Head of St Cuthbert's Secondary School
- Mr Andrew Maley and Mrs Katie Alexander, Head and Deputy Head Teacher respectively of Carr Mill Primary School
- Mrs Rachael Guyer, Head of Alternative Education in St Helens.

4.20 The presentations identified several strategies being deployed to address absenteeism and to support cultural and behaviour change in the borough towards good attendance:

- A clear and consistently implemented School Attendance Policy, regularly promoted to parents and carers
- Strategies to ensure clear and consistent information to parents and carers, and children and young people, about the importance of school to attainment, social and emotional well-being, life chances and safeguarding
- The provision of clear and consistent information to parents and carers about their child or children's attendance rate or rates
- The recruitment of Attendance Officers responsible for building effective relationships with families and children, carrying out home visits and working closely with partners including the police and children's services
- Increased mental health support in schools. At Carr Mill, this includes a dedicated Deputy Head Teacher role dedicated to safeguarding, mental health, and pastoral support alongside support from a dedicated team of staff. In Carr Mill, and other schools, the PATHS programme which teaches children mental health resilience and positive behaviours is delivered. Many schools have mental health support workers in place
- Implementing strategies to encourage children to be excited about going to school so that they are self-motivated to attend
- A consistent response to parents and carers regarding term time holidays.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The committee agreed that improving attendance is "*everyone's business*" and that Attendance Matters.

5.2 It was clear that the barriers to accessing education are wide and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individual pupils and families. It was also clear that the pandemic

has had a significant impact on some children and young people and their families in St Helens. Improving attendance cannot therefore solely be the preserve of schools and instead, must be a concerted effort by everyone who works with families in St Helens.

- 5.3 The committee therefore agreed that multi-agency working to improve attendance rates in St Helens is key to ensuring all partners who work or engage with children and young people, and their parents and carers, are aware of the impact of school absence on the safeguarding, well-being, attainment and life chances of children and young people and that they take steps to support good attendance. This includes ensuring that everyone is clear that even a 90% attendance is not good and will impact on a child's progress.
- 5.4 The Committee commented that School Governors had a huge role in improving school attendance. A dedicated session on improving attendance has been delivered to the Borough's Governors' Forum. The contribution made by the LA and how Governors are supporting this improvement so that good practice between Governors could be shared, would be an effective action.
- 5.5 The committee agreed that a clear, accessible, and widely shared School Attendance Policy, based on pupil and parent and carer consultation, and which was consistently implemented, was at the heart of positive attendance.
- 5.6 The committee was clear that the foundation of securing good attendance is that school is a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils want to be, ensuring additional activities to encourage children to want to come to school are very effective in motivating children to improve their attendance and not stay off for insignificant reasons.
- 5.7 The Committee was clear that the development of children and young people's resilience and that good and effective support to help children and young people with their mental health challenges were essential and were glad to learn of the positive impact of PATHS and mental health support workers in school. However, members were concerned about how resourcing coupled with staff recruitment and retention challenges were impacting on the timely completion of EHCPs which would result in delays in the provision of appropriate support for children with additional needs.
- 5.8 The committee felt strongly that aspirational, motivational age-appropriate careers education, starting in primary school, was essential to ensure children and young people were clear about the impact of attendance on their employability and their career options. Members questioned whether children and young people knew about different sectors, the careers within each sector, the qualifications, skills and personal qualities needed for specific careers and the pay and progression. One member reported that in regular discussions she had with children and young people that there was a clear deficit in their knowledge. This included a recent care leaver who expressed sadness that she had not been given this information to inform her choices.
- 5.9 Members discussed the usefulness of <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk> which is a government careers information tool. The website provides easy access to information on careers in every sector, the educational qualifications, skills and personal qualities (e.g. good attendance) needed to progress into those careers and pay and progression opportunities.
- 5.10 Members felt that if children and young people were introduced to this website, they would have a wealth of free, accessible, and up to date information to be informed about current and future opportunities. It was felt that this would contribute to enhancing and improving aspirations, may well impact on the motivation of some pupils to attend school and gain qualifications, and give young people the information they need when making choices and decisions which impact on their future lives.

5.11 Members discussed the importance of **developing a borough-wide culture and expectation that “Attendance Matters”**. This would entail, for example, everyone who works with families, as well as parents and carers themselves, working to promote and support school attendance e.g., by not organising appointments within school time; using opportunities when speaking to children and young people to discuss the importance of attending school; and, when unaccompanied children are seen outside school in school hours, taking action, if possible and as appropriate.

5.12 In promotion, and extension of the above. Members discussed the potential, and delivery **of a “Attendance Matters” campaign** The campaign would focus on clear messaging about the importance of school attendance and the consequences of school absence and emphasising everyone’s role to promote and support good attendance at school. This would be linked to key times when attendance is compromised e.g., parents booking annual holidays, keeping children off before holidays, students not returning after holidays. This would include:

- Council media stories, website material
- Council supplying to all schools a termly attendance chart for all schools to identify common themes as a means of providing peer support
- Council working with health partners to secure support for Attendance Matters
- Continuing collaboration on attendance between the Council’s Education & Learning service and Children and Young People’s social care service.

5.13 Members discussed the importance of collaboration and to **Establish a Multi-Agency ‘Behaviour and Attendance Board’ and an annual Governors’ Forum “Attendance Matters” agenda item.**

The group would:

- Review attendance trends and develop training and support for improving attendance
- Develop a model Attendance Policy.
- Develop and promote Governors’ training on improving attendance
- Support an annual Governors’ Forum item on attendance covering challenges and sharing good practice

5.14 Discussion extended to careers education and **raising the profile of Careers Education and its ability to raise young people’s aspirations and motivate them to attend and value school** by:

- Ensuring all staff who work with children and young people know about the national careers service website and use it in conversations with them and their parents or carers, so that all our children, young people and their parents and carers have access to this information.
- Identifying how careers education is delivered in our schools
- Sharing and celebrating good practice

5.15 Members suggested a **focus on children’s mental and emotional wellbeing** by

- Continue to monitor schools accessing PATHS and share good practice
- CYPs scrutiny to request a report on the efficacy of the mental health offer for children and young people in St Helens

5.16 Members discussed the need to continue to monitor attendance and for Scrutiny to receive reports, including a focus on persistent absenteeism and the work of the Council and partners do to support families who experience this issue.

6. Legal Implications

6.1 This supports the authority's responsibility to promote and ensure school attendance.

7. Community Impact Assessment (CIA) Implication

7.1 Improving school attendance may have a positive impact on anti-social behaviour, improved attainment and safeguarding from harm.

8. Social Value

8.1 The social value of improving school attendance will mean that inequalities are reduced through improved safeguarding, attainment, well-being and life-chances of children and young people in St Helens.

9. Sustainability and Environment

9.1 None

10. Health and Wellbeing

10.1 **Actions** to improve school attendance is intended to have a positive impact on the physical and mental health of children and young people in St Helens.

11. Equality and Human Rights

11.1 To reduce inequalities through improving attainment and well-being

12. Customer and Resident

12.1 Improving attendance will make a significant contribution to safeguarding, attainment, social and mental wellbeing and therefore life chances of the children and young people who do not have optimal school attendance.

13. Asset and Property

13.1 None

14. Staffing and Human Resources

14.1 The recommendations may include further work.

15. Risks

15.1 Failure to improve school attendance would have a detrimental impact on children's lives through lower attainment and may impact on their wellbeing and safety.

16. Finance

16.1 None

17. Policy Framework Implications

17.1 None

18. Impact and Opportunities on Localities

18.1 Priority 1. Ensuring Children have a positive start in life

19. Background Documents

19.1 PowerPoint presentations

20. Appendices

Appendix 1. Improving School Attendance Spotlight Review Recommendations