

People and Health Overview Committee

19 December 2022

Attendance Strategy and Plan

For Recommendation to Cabinet

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

Local Councillor(s): All

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

This report provides information about the national focus on increasing attendance in educational settings to improve safeguarding, attainment and inclusion. The report presents the picture for Dorset and the proposed strategic direction to ensure that we meet new Department for Education statutory requirements and ensure we deliver the vision that attendance is everyone's business.

Recommendation:

To support the implementation of the new Dorset Attendance Strategy and associated plan to make attendance in educational settings a key feature of all frontline council services and partners' work.

Reason for Recommendation:

New attendance statutory guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) took effect in September 2022. An expectation from the DfE's guidance is to make attendance a key feature of all frontline council services. This report seeks to respond to this guidance with a new Attendance Strategy for Dorset which has been developed with our schools and partners.

1. National Context

1.1. In May 2002, the Department for Education (DfE) published *Working together to improve school attendance*. The publication is guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities to follow which took effect in September 2022. The main messages from the guidance are that attendance cannot solely be the preserve of a single member of staff or organisation – **improving attendance is everyone's business**. Absence from school is often a symptom of wider issues a family is facing. Local authorities, schools and wider partners need to work together to understand the barriers to attendance and provide support. Legal interventions should be a last resort and should only be used when they are likely to lead to a behavioural change. The guidance sets out expectations on schools, academies and local authorities.

2. Why does attendance matter?

- 2.1. Attending school can be a passport to a child's future into adulthood, independence and achieving one's ambition.
- 2.2. If a child has an attendance level of 90%, they will have missed one day a fortnight in school. Over a school year this will represent four weeks of absence. If this level of absence were maintained for a five-year period, it would mean that half a school year would have been missed which can lead to considerable lost learning.
- 2.3. Importantly, attending a school is not just about it being a place to learn, schools are incredible places for children to develop their relationships with friends, take opportunities to try new and different activities and are also safe places where children can get the support they need.
- 2.4. For the most vulnerable pupils, regular attendance is an important protective factor and the best opportunity for a child's learning needs to be identified and support provided. Research has shown associations between regular absence from school and a number of extra-familial harms. This

includes crime (90% of young offenders had been persistently absent from school) and serious violence (83% of knife possession offenders had been persistently absent from school in at least 1 of the 5 years of study). Other vulnerability factors will have been at play for some of these young people in the study, but attendance at school was highlighted as an area of focus.

- 2.5 The pupils with the highest attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 4 (KS4) have higher rates of attendance over the key stage 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. Moreover, the overall absence rate of pupils not meeting the expected standard was higher than among those meeting the higher standard (4.7% compared to 2.7%). 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 grade 4.
- 2.6 The most recent comparative attendance data we have is from the autumn and spring terms in the 2021/22 academic year. This shows Dorset's absence rate had increased to 8% which was in line with the South West average and slightly above national average (7%). 25% of children and young people were persistently absent from school in Dorset compared to 22% nationally and 25% in the South West. The severe absence rate in Dorset was 1.9% compared to 1.5% nationally and 1.8% in the South West. However, during this period the South West experienced high levels of absence due to covid-19 and also high levels of illness absence. Dorset's covid rate was 1.8% compared to 1.3% nationally and there was a higher illness rate in Dorset of 5.5% compared to 4.7% nationally.

3. Local Context

- 3.1. In 2022, 61% of children with 95% or above attendance achieved the Key Stage 2 expected standard in reading, writing and maths; compared to 47% of children with between 90 and 94.9% attendance; 38% with attendance between 85 and 89.9% attendance, 23% for children with between 80 and 84.9% attendance and 16% for children with below 80% attendance.
- 3.2. At Key Stage 4 in 2019, 72% of children whose attendance was 95% or above achieved a grade four or above in English and Maths, compared to 56% whose attendance was between 90 and 94%, 40% for children whose attendance was between 85 and 89.9%, 41% for children whose

attendance was between 80 and 84.9% and 35% for those children whose attendance was below 80%.

4. Our local response to the guidance

- 4.1. The Education service held a multi-agency Dorset attendance workshop which was attended by over 80 colleagues from Dorset Council, our schools, police, youth justice, parents and carers and health. We used the information gathered to write Dorset's attendance strategy and plan.
- 4.2. The following were identified as strengths in schools: Relationships, community links, care, values, clear policy and processes, communication, curriculum, creativity and tracking.
- 4.3. The strengths identified in localities were: Whole family working, communication, specific support, relational practice, parental support, contextual safeguarding and data.
- 4.4. The strengths identified in communities were young people, family and neighbours, volunteer groups and health.
- 4.5. The workshop identified the following Dorset wide priorities:
 - Consistent Dorset wide policy and practice
 - Knowledge sharing and communication
 - Early identification of causes lead to development of targeted interventions
 - SEMH/Emotion Based School Avoidance support packages
 - Parent support packages from birth
 - Consistent approach to transition
 - Transport solutions
- 4.6. In addition, each locality has developed their own priorities based on locality needs.
- 4.7. The team leading inclusion have also delivered training to education and early help staff as well as social care teams. We have completed a dip sample of educational outcomes for children identified as Children in Need (CiN) or supported through a Child Protection (CP) plan which will be used to inform further professional development so that all CiN and CP plans have attendance targets where a child's attendance is below 96%.

- 4.8 In addition, we are using Orchestra (a management information software) to collect live attendance data from school's information systems which feeds an inclusion dashboard allowing practitioners and leaders to prioritise their work based on live trends of data coming directly from schools.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. The attendance strategy can be delivered within the current resources budgeted for in Children's Services. The new requirements from the DfE do place new responsibilities on local authorities.

6. Environmental Implications

- 6.1. None.

7. Well-being and Health Implications

- 7.1. In September 2021, the Public Health Advice, Guidance and Expertise (PHAGE) function of Public Health England's (PHE's) COVID-19 response published a paper summarising the existing evidence of the health and wellbeing benefits of school-age education. It reported:
- Children from the most deprived backgrounds have experienced the most adverse impact of the pandemic.
 - Schools provide opportunities for physical activity, the benefits of which for mental and physical health are well established. Active children are more likely to become active adults.
 - Sleep patterns and diets have been shown to be worse when children are out of schools. Children in receipt of free school meals are disproportionately impacted.
 - As well as improved individual health outcomes, school attendance provides inter-personal, social and occupational opportunities essential to health and development.
 - School attendance can impact on children's mental health. Schools play an important role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children.

8. Other Implications

None

9. Risk Assessment

9.1. HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

10. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Dorset Attendance Strategy and Plan Version 1.0

Appendix 2 - Equalities Impact Assessment

11. Background Papers

None