Division(s): All

EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 13 DECEMBER 2017

SCHOOL ABSENCE

Report by Director for Children's Services

Introduction

1. The aim of the report is to provide data to inform The Education Scrutiny Committee of the rates of absence from schools across Oxfordshire.

2. The County Attendance Team has recently recruited and will consist of 3 County Attendance Officers, 2 School Liaison Officers, led by the Senior County Attendance Officer. The Pupil Tracking Officer and The Elective Home Education Team work as wider members of the team.

3. The information in Annex 1 shows the rates of persistent, unauthorised and authorised absence across Oxfordshire Secondary and Primary Schools as requested.

Links with safeguarding

4. A pathway is being developed with Locality Community Support Service (LCSS) to ensure that the response to safeguarding is consistent and clear for schools, LCSS and Education Inclusion. Early Health Assessments can be used to identify any safeguarding issues which may need further assessment or agency involvement.

5. The current focus on Attendance and the development of the LCSS has led to identifying new pathways to share information through multi-agency working.

6. Schools should have processes/policies which they need to follow to address any safeguarding issues they may have. This includes named Safeguarding/Child Protection leads who are trained to deal with and react appropriately to issues raised.

7. Children who have left a school and where the incoming school is not known should be referred to the Pupil Tracking Officer, who will try to establish new education provision for the child. This will involve contacting other Local Authorities if appropriate. If 20 days has passed, schools can remove the pupil from their roll, but should do this in consultation with the Pupil Tracking Officer.

8. The Pupil Missing Out (PMO) working group is reviewing its current format and continues to identify a system which highlights pupils missing out of education, therefore potentially increasing the level of vulnerability. This group will include attendance, Special Educational Needs Officers (SEN), Social Care, the Virtual School, LCSS and others which may be required. The aim of the group is to

initially work together to resolve the issues preventing access to education, but also to take any strategic issues to senior managers.

9. MISPERS – this is a formal meeting held on a monthly basis for internal and external agencies to identify strategies and ensure agency involvement to support children who are reported missing at least 3 times over a 3-month period. The agencies involved are, Police, Social Care, Attendance, Health, the Virtual school, Youth Offending and some representations from Residential Edge of Care (REoC).

10. There is some concern about the ease of access to information given the different systems used by different agencies. Not all staff in children's services have direct access to attendance data. There is work being carried out to determine the impact of the new government data-sharing protocols which will be introduced early next year.

Prevention activity

11. Data analysis is key to identifying the gaps and patterns with regards to school absence and the implementation of a targeted approach. In sharing this information with other agencies, vulnerable groups such as Persistent Absentees, Looked After Children, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, Pupil premium, those with multiple Fixed Term Exclusions or at risk of Permanent Exclusion, can be supported in order to improve and support life chances.

12. All present members of the County Attendance Team take a multi-agency approach and liaise with agencies on a regular basis. All staff have regular Safeguarding training.

13. The newly employed Liaison Officers will be working directly with the schools that have been identified as having the worst persistent absentee rates, both primaries and secondary's. This will be in partnership with LCSS so that Early Help Assessments can be implemented early and support put in place.

14. In working with schools, we aim to ensure that they have good processes in place to monitor the attendance and react swiftly to any welfare issues that arise.

15. Community Around the School Offer (CASO) – this is being developed to provide each school with a list of agency names and contacts to assist in supporting when there are areas of concern. This will include Health, Police, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), SEN, School Health Nurses, OXIT (Oxfordshire School Inclusion team) and others.

16. Senior officers have been collaborating with the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board (OSCB) to address how Reduced Timetables are being used in schools. Data has been requested but only a third of schools responded. Paul Burnett, Independent Chair, OSCB, will be writing to schools which failed to

respond in order to collate information that is valid and can be relied upon to identify further action.

17. We are looking to develop or adopt mechanisms to ensure the voice of the child is heard, and approaches to other agencies are being made for advice.

Enforcement

18. Those who fail to ensure their child's attendance at school can be prosecuted under the Education Act 1996 section 444 (1) -see Annex 2.

19. Prior to making a referral to the County Attendance Team for prosecution, schools should follow an identified process which includes questioning safeguarding needs such as Prevent, Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Drug Exploitation. The attendance referral form requests this information.

20. An alternative tool for schools is the Penalty Notice process, The County Attendance Team have a Code of Conduct to which schools are expected to adhere to and this is reviewed on a regular basis. Fines are currently £60 per parent, per child, rising to £120 if not paid within timescales. Oxfordshire is one of the very few Local Authorities which issue warning letters to parents prior to a Penalty Notice fine. In many cases, this prevents the attendance declining and the need for further action. See Annex 3.

21. School Attendance Orders (SAO) are used to enforce enrolment at school where education is not being sufficiently provided i.e. Elective Home Education.

22. Education Supervision Orders (ESO) are used to ensure the multi-agency plan is adhered to and are governed by the family court process.

Financial and Staff Implications

23. We have recently recruited four members of staff, two of these are funded independently of the team to address the level of persistent absentees in Oxfordshire and will work closely with the Exclusion and Reintegration team, Elective Home Education Team, LCSS and any other agencies as appropriate.

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