

EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 25 MARCH 2019

SECONDARY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE WORKING GROUP REPORT

Report by Cllr Michael Waine, Chairman of the Working Group

RECOMMENDATION

The Education Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to:

- (a) ask officers to highlight the important role that governors have in constructively challenging schools around attendance figures to continue to drive improvement as part of upcoming governor training courses;**
- (b) endorse the development of an Alternative Provision Commissioning Strategy and requests that officers brief the Committee on the development of the Strategy prior to implementation in November 2019;**
- (c) support the direction of the Fair Access Protocol and ask to receive a report from officers on the implementation of the Protocol in advance of the next academic year;**
- (d) ask the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee to add the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) pilot project to their work plan and request a progress report from Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust;**
- (e) ensure that the deep dive into school readiness investigates the pathways that are being established between schools and Early Help Assessments to support vulnerable families.**

Executive Summary

2. A working group was setup by the Education Scrutiny Committee to understand why secondary school absence figures are higher than the national average and work that is being undertaken to address this. The working group has met with officers to consider government guidance, performance information and visited schools.
3. The key message identified through the deep dive is the importance of embedding a culture in schools that promotes inclusion and good attendance practices across staff, pupils and parents. The working group has been able to highlight a number of examples of this good practice in secondary schools across Oxfordshire.
4. The working group has also identified common themes around access to alternative provision, In Year Fair Access Panels and access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as areas which could assist in improving school attendance figures. The working group are recommending

that the Committee endorses work that is underway develop an Alternative Provision Commissioning Strategy and a revised IYFAP Protocol with involvement from schools.

Introduction

5. The Education Scrutiny Committee received a report about school attendance figures and identified that secondary school attendance was above the local and national average. The Committee established a working group to investigate the reasons for this. The working group sought to understand the trends associated with secondary school absences in the county; highlight areas of good practice and identify barriers that exist to improving attendance including how the local authority is working with schools to overcome this.

Background

6. The Education Scrutiny Committee selected three areas of activity that it wanted to undertake deep dive activities: exclusions, attendance and educational attainment. The Committee recognised that these three areas are strongly linked to improving educational outcomes and wanted to gain a greater understanding of how these areas were being addressed across the County.
7. The Committee decided to focus on secondary school attendance rates as it found that primary school absence rates in Oxfordshire had historically been in line with or below the national average, yet rates for Oxfordshire secondary schools have been consistently above the regional and national average since 2013-14. In 2016-17, 5.7 half days were lost to absences at Oxfordshire secondary schools compared to 5.2 in the South East and nationally. 13.5% of these absences were classed as 'persistent absences. Whilst the figure has been decreasing since 2013-14, it was still one of the higher rates in England with the national average being 13.1%.

Terms of reference and working group membership

8. The working group has been chaired by Cllr Michael Waine with support from Cllr John Howson, Cllr Emma Turnbull, Cllr Jeannette Matelot and co-opted member Ian Jones. Officers who supported the working group included the Head of Learner Engagement, the Education Inclusion Manager and a Policy Officer.
9. The overall aim of the deep dive was to gain a greater understanding of trends associated with absence and attendance at secondary schools across Oxfordshire; identifying the pathways that exist to tackle unauthorised and persistent absence and to develop recommendations that enable the sharing of good practice to reduce absence rates across Oxfordshire.
10. In order to achieve this, the deep dive group agreed the following objectives:
 1. Undertake analysis of absence and attendance data for secondary schools in Oxfordshire to identify:

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- (1) Secondary schools with low/high levels of absenteeism and persistent absenteeism
 - (2) Greater understanding of the reasons for authorised absence, particularly illness and medical/dental appointments across schools in Oxfordshire
 - (3) Pupil groups with the highest levels of persistent absence
2. Identify and share examples of best practice in managing absence and persistent absence rates
 3. Investigate why absence rates for illness and medical/dental appointments are higher than the national average and to explore the role that school nursing and partners in health could play in addressing these statistics
 4. To investigate the reasons for high levels of absence for certain pupil groups
 5. To gain a greater understanding of the methods used to address unauthorised absences e.g. the prevalence of warning letters, school attendance orders, attendance panel meetings and issuing of fixed penalty notices.

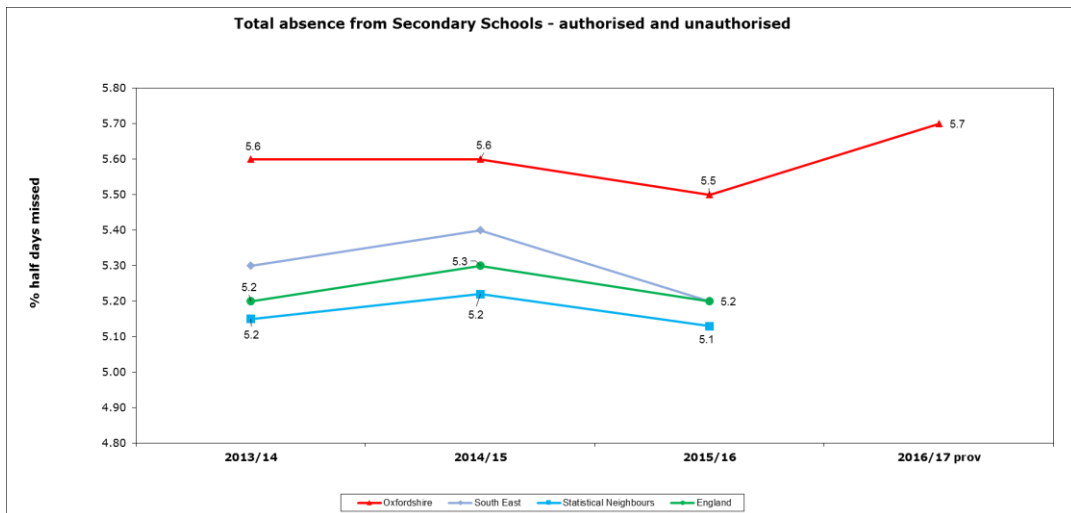
Method of investigation

11. Whilst the initial scoping of the deep dive was undertaken at a Committee meeting in December 2017, the Committee allowed time for the previous deep dive into school exclusions to be completed. The working group used desk research to understand policy and legislation, meetings with officers to review performance information and meetings with four secondary schools across the county.
12. The first meeting with officers was held in May 2018 to review existing performance information to identify trends in absence data and potential schools to visit. Following this, the Education team underwent a period of restructuring. Visits to schools were undertaken between November 2018 – January 2019 with a wash-up meeting taking place in February 2019 to review the findings from the visits. A final meeting was undertaken with the Head of Learner Engagement in early March 2019.
13. The four secondary schools selected for visiting had shown improvements in school attendance and ensured a good geographical and social representation from across the county.

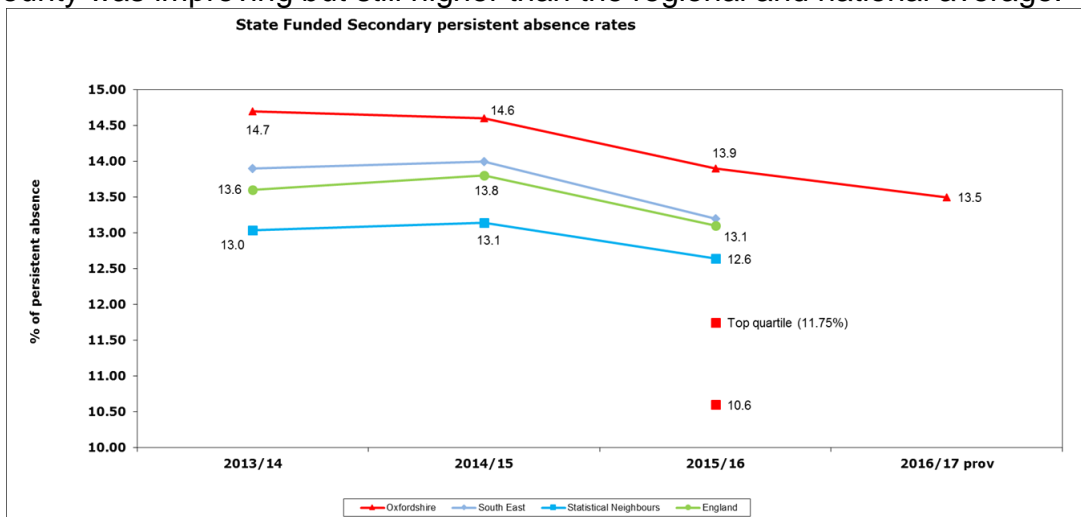
Findings

14. The working group initially undertook an analysis of school attendance figures from 2016-17. The total number of secondary school absences for Oxfordshire in 2016-17 was 5.7 half days, compared to 5.2 days nationally and regionally and 5.1 days for our nearest statistical neighbours.

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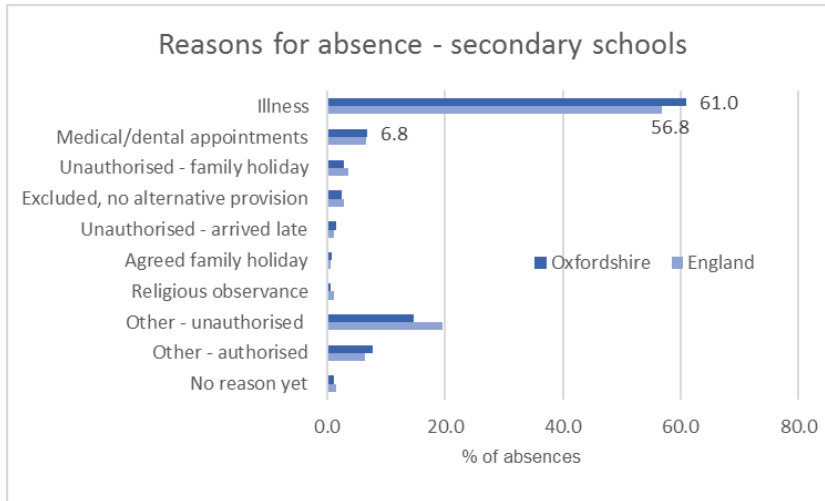
15. When looking at the statistics for persistent absence¹, the overall figure for the county was improving but still higher than the regional and national average:



16. The overwhelming reason given for authorised absences was illness, followed by medical/dental appointments:

¹ The Department for Education defines persistent absence as overall absence equating to 10% or more of eligible sessions missed at school in the Pupil Absence Statistics Guide: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/absence-statistics-guide> access March 2019

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17. The deep dive group used the performance information to identify questions and schools to visit.
18. The deep dive group met with the Head Teachers and staff who were involved in addressing school attendance figures. This varied from assistant head teachers, designated school attendance officers, pastoral leads or representatives from the school's multi academy trust (MAT). In advance of each meeting, the deep dive group requested copies of the school's attendance policies and reports to governing bodies and shared a list of questions with the school. A copy of the questions is attached at annex 1.

Leadership

19. The overarching theme that has emerged from the deep dive is that improving school attendance requires long-term culture change across the whole school. All of the schools that the working group visited have shown a commitment to improving school attendance figures and were in agreement that quick fixes do not produce long term results. School leaders set the climate and culture that promotes inclusion and establishes school attendance as a key factor in improving outcomes for pupils. Each school understood the complexities of their school population and as a result had taken different approaches to improve attendance. The working group saw good evidence in places that governors (or equivalents) were engaged in reviewing attendance figures and that the County Council is due to deliver training to governors in the upcoming months. The working group would recommend that the training highlights the important role that governors have in constructively challenging schools around attendance figures. **Recommendation: The Committee asks officers to highlight the important role that governors have in constructively challenging schools around attendance figures to continue to drive improvement as part of upcoming governor training courses**
20. The working group heard several examples of inclusive and innovative practice which ensured that all members of staff, pupils and parents are engaged in improving attendance.

Good Practice

21. All four schools had examples of good practice, the working group wanted to highlight one example from each school.
22. *School attendance 'diamond'*: Whilst all schools had made great efforts to promote attendance, one of the schools visited has developed an attendance diamond diagram which clearly sets out the school's expectations about what represents good attendance. This is used in posters around the school, student planners, school reports and termly assemblies. The working group felt the consistent use of the visual aid throughout the school was typical of the culture that has been created at the school which has driven up attendance rates.
23. *School league table*: A school has developed a school league table where each 'house' competes to have the highest levels of attendance. An awards assembly is held at the end of each term to reward those with the highest or most improved levels of attendance. This, along with other methods, has seen a reduction of 40% in persistent absence rates in the summer term.
24. *Staff engagement*: A school has designated teaching staff who have additional roles as attendance monitors. These members of staff will meet with every student who has absent from school when they return to understand the reasons for the absence and to reinforce the school's attendance expectations. The school also has attendance co-ordinators who meet with the Vice Principal lead for school attendance on a weekly basis to identify patterns of absence and agree strategies to address these patterns.
25. *Working with vulnerable learners*: A number of schools visited have also developed strategies to support vulnerable learners. One school has consciously decided to offer a broad curriculum with a strong focus on the arts to appeal to a wider range of learners. The school has also identified where vulnerable learners may benefit from working in smaller groups with fewer changes in teaching staff so that pupils feel supported and able to attend school.
26. Whilst the working group found that there were issues that were particular to each school, there were a number of common areas that presented barriers to improving school attendance figures. These included access to alternative provision, In Year Fair Access Panels (IYFAP), access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and working with families to complete Early Help assessments.

Attendance Orders and Warning Letters:

27. Every school has to register pupils twice a day; first thing in the morning at the start of the school day, and again in the afternoon session. If a pupil fails to attend or arrives late they can be marked as an absence for that session.

28. If a pupil of compulsory school age is absent, the register must show whether the absence was authorised (acceptable) or unauthorised (where no acceptable reason is given for absence). Only the school can approve the reason for absence.
29. The County Attendance Team have an agreed Code of Practice which schools should follow and is reviewed on a regular basis. Unauthorised or persistent absences can result in a Penalty Notice being issued. Fines are currently £60 per parents, per child and this can rise to £120 per child if this is not paid within the correct timeframe. As a last resort, the authority also has the power to prosecute parents for poor attendance, but this will only be used after following appropriate safeguarding processes.
30. The local authority is one of the few that opts to use a warning letter prior to the issuing of a penalty notice. The working group found that schools approached during the deep dive preferred to take a collaborative approach with parents to find out the reasons behind low attendance and sign post to sources of support.

Alternative Provision:

31. The previous deep dive into school exclusions looked in more detail at alternative provision but it was also raised by schools as part of this deep dive. The Council funds 106 places at the alternative provision academy, Meadowbrook College. Whilst school leaders were positive about the work undertaken at the College, there was a desire for greater locality based provision. It was noted by some schools that vulnerable pupils may need to travel longer distances to access alternative provision which presented an additional barrier to school attendance. One of the schools visited is part of a multi academy trust (MAT) and the Trust is investigating the possibility of establishing its own alternative provision site.
32. The deep dive group found that the Council has recognised the need to take a more strategic view of commissioning alternative provision. This will enable the Council to reduce spot purchasing for alternative provision and consider where places are most needed in the county. The development of an Alternative Provision Commissioning Strategy is in the early stages with a view to completing this work by November 2019.
33. **Recommendation: The Education Scrutiny Committee endorses the development of an Alternative Provision Commissioning Strategy and requests that officers brief the Committee on the development of the Strategy prior to implementation in November 2019.**

In Year Fair Access Panels (IYFAP)

34. IYFAPs exist so that outside of the normal admissions process children, particularly vulnerable children, can be offered a school place. DfE advice

states² that schools should work collaboratively taking into account the needs of the child and those of the school. In Oxfordshire there are four panels covering the south, north, centre and west of the County.

35. Schools highlighted the importance of comprehensive information sharing about pupils through the IYFAP process, particularly if a pupil has SEND or may require an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). If information is not shared, it is often difficult for the pupil to attend the new school initially as the correct support may not be in place.
36. Schools also noted that it was important that IYFAP process considers the home address of families applying through the process because pupils living near the borders of IYFAP's may be geographically closer to a school in a different panel area. Allocation to a school that is within the panel's area may result in longer travelling distances that could make it more challenging for pupils to attend school.
37. The working group were reassured that the Fair Access Protocol had recently been revised by a task and finish group that included representatives from six schools in the county. The Protocol is currently out for consultation with all schools who will use the Protocol. The revised ways of working will allow a home address to be taken into consideration including working across IYAP areas. **Recommendation: That the Education Scrutiny Committee supports the direction of the Fair Access Protocol and receives a report on the implementation of the Protocol in advance of the next academic year.**

Access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS):

38. The working group identified that the most common reason for persistent absences was illness with the second most common reason being medical appointments. Schools expanded on this and noted that the most common reason for persistent absences at the time of writing were mental health related illness and this was compounded by the waiting time to access CAMHS in the county. Between 2011-12 and 2016-17, the overall number of patient referrals to this service has increased by 22%.
39. In December 2018, it was announced that Oxfordshire had been chosen to be part of a government pilot scheme to reduce CAMHS waiting lists. The county received £5.4mn for the scheme and it will be delivered by Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust in partnership with Response and the Council's Mental Health Support Teams. The aim of the pilot project is to reduce waiting times from an average of 12 weeks to 4 weeks by 2021, the working group is keen to see whether reduced waiting times would also reduce persistent absence figures.
40. The role of scrutinising health services across Oxfordshire is delegated to the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) and so the

² Fair Access Protocols in schools admissions: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fair-access-protocols-in-school-admissions> accessed March 2019

working group recommends that HOSC be asked to review progress of the CAMHS pilot scheme as it develops and to keep the Education Scrutiny Committee Chairman informed. **Recommendation: That the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee be asked to add the CAMHS pilot project to their work plan and request a progress report from Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust.**

Early Help Assessments and Locality Community Support Services (LCSS):

41. The schools that the working group spoke to noted that families who struggled with persistent absence were more likely to be engaged with LCSS or Team Around the Family (TAF). Schools stated that although they worked with families to complete Early Health Assessments, not all families wished to cooperate with them. Whilst the working group noted these concerns and the link between vulnerable families and school attendance, it is aware that the Committee has previously stated that it would like to undertake a deep dive into school readiness and LCSS and recommends that this is considered as part of this work. **Recommendation: That the Committee ensures that the deep dive into school readiness investigates the pathways that are being established between schools and Early Help Assessments to support vulnerable families.**

Conclusion

42. The deep dive into secondary school attendance has highlighted that addressing school attendance requires a long-term commitment to culture change at schools. The working group commend the work being undertaken at all of the schools visited, each school demonstrated that they understand the needs of their local school populations and are each developing ways to instil a culture that recognises the link between improved attendance and improved outcomes for young people.
43. The working group have been able to highlight that where issues currently exist for schools around alternative provision, IYFAP and CAMHS, work is already underway to address these issues. The working group supports the direction being taken by the Council's Education Team to develop an Alternative Provision Commissioning Strategy, enhancing our IYFAP Protocols and is keen to see that the wider Education Scrutiny Committee is kept informed of progress being made on these workstreams.

Acknowledgements

44. The working group is grateful to all those who shared and presented information as part of its investigation into school attendance across Oxfordshire. In particular, the working group would like to thank the headteachers, pastoral leads and governors at the schools visited by the working group.

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Councillor Michael Waine
Chairman of the Secondary School Attendance Deep Dive/Chairman of the
Education Scrutiny Committee

Contact Officer: Lauren Rushen, Policy Officer
March 2019

Annexe 1 – School Visit Question Plan

1. Can you explain your approach to school attendance, particularly in relation to persistent absence?
2. What have been the key challenges facing the school in improving attendance and how have you addressed these?
3. How is your Attendance and Improvement plan monitored?
4. How do you work with young people/their families experiencing persistent or unauthorised absences?
5. What training is available for governors to understand their role in performance monitoring in relation to school attendance?
6. Are there any areas of good practice you would like to share with us?
7. What support do you have in place for vulnerable learners who may have difficulties attending schools? In particular we are interested in support for those with SEND, Children in Care and Young Carers
8. How have you worked with the local authority to address persistent absence issues?
9. How many pupils do you have on part-time timetables and how/why might these be used?
10. With regard to students on part-time timetables, how regularly are pupils on part-time timetables reviewed?
11. Is there anything that the local authority could be doing differently in terms of supporting efforts to reduce absences?