

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Education, Skills and Wellbeing Cabinet Board

8th December, 2022

Report of the Head of Education Development - Chris Millis

Matter for information

Wards Affected: All

PUPIL ATTENDANCE UPDATE

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Members with information and data in relation to Neath Port Talbot pupil attendance.

Background

2. This report provides Members with details of pupil attendance data for the academic year 2021/22.

Attendance Data

The primary sector attendance rate was 89.17%, whilst the secondary sector attendance rate was 85.31%. [Note: for the purpose of statistical reporting, the data for Ysgol Bae Baglan, Ysgol Cwm Brombil and Ysgol Gymraeg Ystalyfera - Bro Dur as all-through schools have been disaggregated into both the primary and secondary sectors.]

3. There is a negligible difference in attendance between boys and girls in either the primary or secondary sectors, and similarly between CLA and non-CLA pupils (Children Looked After) and again between white British and non-white British pupils. However, there is a significant attendance gap between pupils who are categorised as eligible for free school meals and non-free school meals, and again between pupils designated as having SEN/ALN and those non-SEN/ALN. This is a

pattern identified pre-Covid and areas where the local authority provides additional support to narrow these gaps in terms of identifying and intervening with vulnerable pupils and families at an earlier stage before persistent absence becomes an issue; working far closer with other service areas both within and external to the Council in order to provide a more cohesive and interconnected level of support, and acting as an advocate for pupils where there are issues between school and home preventing regular attendance.

4. This was the first complete academic year without a period of national Covid lockdown, therefore, it is not possible to compare any elements of the attendance data with the previous two years.
5. Members will be aware that since the Covid pandemic Welsh Government withdrew the statutory requirement for schools to set attendance targets and publicly report on attendance progress. Therefore, currently no national data is available to make any comparisons against. What is known though from discussions with colleagues in other local authorities is that attendance within both the primary and secondary sectors are currently several percentage points lower than pre-Covid periods in nearly all, if not all, local authorities across Wales.
6. It has been widely reported that some pupils have struggled to re-connect with school and return full-time since the pandemic, whilst others have detached from education altogether and are presenting as school refusers. There is no single reason for an increase in pupil absence rather a range of reasons including complex and multiple causes, anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues and allegations of bullying. Some learners established a pattern of not attending school during the pandemic that they and their families have found difficult to revert from. Many of these challenges existed before the pandemic, but some have deepened since, and as a result some families have become harder to reach and engage. A number of pupils were school refusers' pre-Covid and have continued with their poor attendance.
7. The Education Welfare Service (EWS) supports parents and carers to fulfil their statutory responsibility in ensuring that children attend school regularly. The Education Welfare Service works in partnership with schools, parents and other professionals to reduce pupil absence and to raise achievement, enabling pupils to maximise their educational opportunities. The service works closely with schools and parents to identify the cause of individual pupil absence with the aim of early intervention when and where needed. Schools are encouraged to correctly code absences to allow for effective data tracking. Pupil

illnesses are monitored and challenged by Education Welfare Officer where there appears to be patterns of absence. Regular meetings are scheduled between Education Welfare Officers and key school staff to discuss individual pupil cases and provide advice, support and to determine appropriate course of actions. Education Welfare Officers will often attend at the home of the pupil to make enquiries as to the reason for the absence from school in an effort to assist and facilitate an early return to school and discuss with parents various strategies to encourage and improve regular attendance.

8. During the 2021/22 academic year Education Welfare Officers undertook 6,731 forms of communications with pupils and families (5,605 telephone calls/text messages/emails, and 1,126 house visits). During the period of the pandemic 14,587 contacts were made to support children and families with Education Welfare Officers undertaking garden visits delivering food parcels, sanitary products for girls, laptops, books and pencils to aid learning at home as part of their welfare role.
9. Where support has been unsuccessful though and, strictly as a last resort, the Council has the available option of issuing parents with a fixed penalty notice or the commencement of prosecution via Court. These options were paused throughout the pandemic, however, have recently been reintroduced. Several parents have recently been issued with final written warnings regarding their child's attendance, however, no penalty notices have been issued as yet and no Court proceeding have commenced.
10. Having previously undertaken two exercises to evaluate the effectiveness of fixed penalty notices and Court action in terms of whether these measures improve attendance, the evidence clearly demonstrates an increase in attendance in nearly all instances. In a number of cases attendance was seen to rise by 40-50 percentage points per pupil.
11. It has previously been reported to Members that there is overwhelming evidence supporting the use of penalty notices where two-thirds of those issued with a penalty notice resulted in improved attendance rates amongst pupils with some pupils' attendance rising to 100% in the weeks/months following the issuing of the notice. Penalty notices also provide for a punitive step short of what otherwise would have been prosecution via the Court system where, if convicted, parents would receive a criminal record and a level of punishment up to and including a possible custodial sentence. Actions such as this are

always taken as a very last resort after all other options of support have been attempted and failed.

12. The Education Welfare Service has close links with local Police who together regularly carry out truancy patrols to discourage absence from school. These have recently recommenced with a patrol in Neath town centre having been done and another patrol to be undertaken shortly in Port Talbot town centre. A number of pupils were identified as being absent from school without a valid reason and both pupils and parents appropriately warned.
13. In terms of pupil de-registration; all local authorities across Wales have seen an increase in the number of pupils being electively home educated since the beginning of the Covid pandemic. There are a number of reasons for this including the success for some from the experience of home learning during the lockdown periods to the consequences of attempts towards others to re-engage and return to school. It is the latter where officers in Neath Port Talbot are experiencing the greater number of de-registrations.
14. Members will continue to be provided with regular reports on pupil attendance and the work being undertaken to improve the operation of the Education Welfare Service.

Financial Impact

15. There is no financial impact associated with this report.

Integrated Impact Assessment

16. There is no requirement to undertake an Integrated Impact Assessment as this report is for information purposes only.

Valleys Communities Impacts

17. The attendance data contained within this report and support provided by the Education Welfare Service covers all schools across Neath Port Talbot.

Workforce Impacts

18. There are no workforce or staffing issues directly associated with this report.

Legal Impacts

19. There is no legal impact associated with this report.

Risk Management

20. There is no identified risk in relation to this report.

Consultation

21. There is no requirement under the Constitution for external Consultation on this item.

Recommendations

22. That Members note the update provided within this report.

Appendices

23. None.

List of Background Papers

24. None.

Officer Contact

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