

Committee: **Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting: **Tuesday 30th November 2021**
Report Subject: **School Attendance**
Portfolio Holder: **Cllr Joanne Collins, Executive Member for Education**
Report Submitted by: **Luisa Munro-Morris, Head of School Improvement and Inclusion**
Lynn Phillips, Corporate Director of Education

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
11/11/21	18/11/21	19.11.21			30/11/21	15.12.21		

1 Purpose of the Report

The purpose of the report is to provide opportunity for Members to scrutinise attendance data for Blaenau Gwent at Primary and Secondary school level for the academic year 2020-21 and the first half-term of the academic year 2021-22.

2 Scope and Background

2.1 This report will provide Scrutiny Members with key attendance data relating to Blaenau Gwent schools and relevant comparisons to the all Wales data, where available.

2.2 The key attendance guidance is the Welsh Government Guidance entitled: 'All Wales Attendance Framework' (November 2012). The document provides standards and guidance for practitioners to ensure greater consistency of practice throughout Wales. It also aims to enable the Education Welfare Service and schools to deliver services that are consistent, accessible and of a high standard. Most importantly, it is intended to be a practical resource toolkit for use by staff working within the Education Welfare Service.

2.3 The Education Welfare Service works closely with schools and other services to promote the need for regular school attendance and to embed working practices which support this aim. In 2015 'Callio' was introduced and the 'Callio' strategy had clear processes which escalated referrals to the Education Welfare Service as necessary. The Education Welfare Service works closely with schools to identify barriers to attendance. Once these barriers have been identified they work with schools, pupils, parents and other agencies to put in the support needed. This can be referrals to other agencies such as Families First, developing reintegration plans, running attendance panels, meeting pupils in schools to give them reassurance at the start of the day and making home visits. In addition to

this Education Welfare officers also offer advice, support and training to school on attendance and other related issues. As a last resort, when all other options have been exhausted, the Education Welfare Service also undertakes statutory intervention.

- 2.4 In April 2018, reducing persistent absenteeism was made an Education Directorate priority and a plan was put in place to address this.

In March 2020, the COVID pandemic forced schools to close for most pupils and the Education Welfare Service worked closely with schools to ensure that pupils were seen and support was given to parents. Due to the pandemic, the focus has been mainly on wellbeing and many statutory interventions have been suspended such as Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs).

3 **Options for Recommendation**

The options for Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee to consider are:

- 3.1 **Option 1:** Members are asked to scrutinise the information detailed within the report, thereby contributing to the continuous self-evaluation of the service prior to making appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee.

- 3.2 **Option 2:** Accept the report as provided.

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

- 4.1 The Education Welfare Service supports the Corporate Plan priorities of the Council and Education Directorate, specifically to improve pupil outcomes, progress and wellbeing through regular school attendance.

- 4.2 The Education Welfare Service also contributes to all five areas of the Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan. Promoting good attendance supports improved pupil outcomes, progress and wellbeing of pupils, particularly our most vulnerable, enabling pupils to maximise their potential. Whilst being a statutory responsibility we also know that good attendance is a fundamental pre-requisite of ensuring future local and national prosperity through the provision of an informed and well-educated workforce.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

There are no direct financial implications for the local authority related to this report. The Education Welfare Service is funded through the Education Directorate's revenue budget.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

There is an ongoing need to improve school attendance so that pupils are attending school on a regular basis and are able to maximise their

potential. Failure to ensure that there is robust monitoring of attendance in schools to support school improvement carries with it a number of significant risks:

- Undetected and unaddressed decline in school performance and the quality of provision;
- Students do not achieve to acceptable levels;
- Lack of overall improvement in schools' performance; and
- Negative impact on the reputation of the Council.

5.2.1 Similarly, ineffective monitoring of Council services also poses a range of risks including:

- Reducing standards and quality of provision in schools;
- Poor value for money;
- Ineffective support for schools which hinders their improvement; and,
- Negative impact on the reputation of the Council.

5.2.2 The risks are mitigated effectively and attendance in all schools is monitored on a fortnightly basis by Officers working within the Education Welfare Service that are based in each cluster. Support, advice and appropriate challenge is provided to all schools with bespoke support provided to schools with lower attendance. Specific areas of focus such as encouraging parents to make medical appointments out of school time, minimising the use of exclusions and working with schools regarding the use of reduced timetables continue alongside thorough data analysis to identify trends and sharing aspects of good practice across the school estate.

5.3 ***Legal***

There are no legal implications for this report, but Legal colleagues are engaged when FPNs are utilised on occasions.

5.4 ***Human Resources***

There are no direct staffing implications associated with this report.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

Since reporting to Scrutiny in October 2019, Welsh Government has not issued any further annual statistical releases. Data is, however, released on a weekly basis where Blaenau Gwent's position against the Wales average can be ascertained.

6.1.2 **Persistent Absentees (PA) and BG's Relative Attendance Levels**

There is no current comparative data to report on persistent absenteeism as the last publicised data relates to 2018/19. However, locally actions that have been taken to reduce persistent absenteeism include:

- regular monitoring of data so that support could be put in place for pupils;
- A media campaign and Headteacher toolkit was also developed so that key messages could be given to parents;

- Partial timetables are better monitored and reduced;
- Parenting contracts and orders policy are being embedded;
- Families First work to deliver bespoke parenting for parenting orders;
- Education Supervision Orders to be used as necessary;
- Educational Neglect Pathway to be developed;
- Reducing the number of exclusions as this impacts on attendance; and,
- Reducing absences, which are as a result of in-year transfers as this also impacts on attendance.

6.1.3 Unfortunately, due to COVID there has been an increase in persistent absenteeism due to a number of factors including anxiety, isolation periods and vulnerabilities within the household. The overall position of BG's attendance since April 2021 set against the Wales mean average is shown in Table 1 below.

Week beginning	Attendance (%) Blaenau Gwent	Attendance (%) Wales
19.4.21	91%	91.9%
26.4.21	88.6%	90.5%
3.5.21	88.9%	89.8%
10.5.21	90%	89.6%
17.5.21	90.6%	90.1%
24.5.21	88%	87.8%
7.6.21	90.8%	89.3%
14.6.21	89.3%	88.4%
21.6.21	87.3%	87.4%
28.6.21	85.1%	84.2%
5.7.21	84.5%	81.3%
12.7.21	79.8%	77%
6.9.21	92%	91.4%
13.9.21	86.9%	88.5%
20.9.21	82.4%	84.7%
27.9.21	83.5%	85.5%
4.10.21	85.9%	87.4%
11.10.21	85.7%	87.8%

6.1.4 BG's in-house data shows that attendance at October 2021 half term has increased from the previous year. This data is cumulative from the first day of the Autumn term.

Secondary	
2020/21	81.7
2021/22	85.6

Primary	
2020/21	89
2021/22	89.2

6.1.5 The Welsh Government are shortly due to commence a review to look at the barriers to school attendance and the impact COVID has had on this.

With COVID impacting on school attendance, the Education Welfare Officers have had to adapt to new ways of working. During school closures the Education Welfare Service was a valuable link between schools, pupils and parents, especially for those families that were not engaging with schools. During this period, numerous home visits were undertaken to check on the welfare of families and to support with remote learning and access to digital devices. Since schools fully reopened, Education Welfare Officers have continued to work with parents and schools to encourage pupils back into the classroom, but there are many presenting challenges, with mental/emotional wellbeing being one of the main concerns.

Education Welfare Officers continue to make home visits where pupils are absent, especially when there has been 3 days with no contact. Referrals are made to external agencies for support and daily contact is made with families where there are ongoing concerns around mental health issues. A number of reintegration plans have been established and advice has been given to schools.

In order to understand the long term effects of the impact of COVID the majority of the Education Welfare Service are doing their Diploma in Trauma Informed Schools and the Senior Education Welfare Officer is also working with the CAMHS In-Reach Service to develop trauma informed practices and a draft policy has been developed on Emotionally Based School Avoidance.

6.2 Expected outcome for the public

Improved attendance will result in pupils being able to access an education which will support them to achieve better outcomes reducing the future financial implications on other services.

6.3 Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)

Attendance data is regularly shared with schools as well as forming a part of the evidence base for other teams' work within the Directorate, the EAS and other services. A Members' briefing on the work of the Education Welfare Service is planned for the spring term.

6.4 *Thinking for the long term (forward planning)*

A focus on improving school attendance aligns to the Education Improvement Plan and Corporate Improvement Plan. Improved attendance levels will have a positive impact on the life chances of children and young people, better preparing them for their future beyond their time in school.

6.5 Preventative focus

Good attendance reduces the likelihood of a pupil becoming NEET, increases the likelihood of a pupil achieving well and supports pupils to reach their potential. The work of the Education Welfare Service is preventative in nature supporting pupils to engage in education and supporting schools in their management of attendance.

6.6 Collaboration / Partnership Working

Attendance has a regional profile and supports the work of the EAS. Strong links exist with neighbouring LAs as well as within Blaenau Gwent services such as with Children's Services. Working in partnership with other services is fundamental to providing a co-ordinated, effective service to children and young people as well as schools.

6.7 Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions

Any physical works planned and undertaken within education settings are planned in order to take account of decarbonisation and reducing carbon emissions.

6.8a Socio Economic Duty Impact Assessment

An assessment will be carried out in relation to each priority area during the autumn-term review process.

6.8b EqIA

There are no adverse impacts in relation to the data in this report.

7. Monitoring Arrangements

Under normal circumstances, attendance is monitored fortnightly and data shared with schools. On a half-termly basis data is presented to the Education Departmental Management Team (DMT) meeting as well as to the Inclusion Monitoring, Evaluation and Review group and Wider Group. Annual FADEs for primary and secondary attendance are prepared and data is provided to Welsh Government. However, in light of the COVID response, attendance data has not been routinely shared across the Education sector, apart from the weekly collection from Welsh Government.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

The All Wales Attendance Framework is available from the Welsh Government:

<https://beta.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/all-wales-attendance-framework.pdf>

List of Acronyms

EAS:	Education Achievement Service
NEET:	Young people not in education, employment or training
SEWC:	South East Wales Consortium