

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel was held on Monday, 4 December 2023.

PRESENT: Councillors E Clynch (Chair), D Jackson, J Kabuye and S Platt.

OFFICERS: R Brown, T Dunn, C Lunn and J Tynan.

APOLOGIES FOR

ABSENCE: Councillors S Hill, L Hurst and J Walker.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Name of Member	Type of Interest	Item/Nature of Interest
Councillor E Clynch	Non-Pecuniary	Teacher - Macmillan Academy.
Councillor D Jackson	Non-Pecuniary	Chair - Park End Primary School.
Councillor J Kabuye	Non-Pecuniary	Governor - Sacred Heart Primary School.

MINUTES - CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL - 30 OCTOBER 2023

The minutes of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 30 October 2023 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE - FURTHER EVIDENCE

The Head of Access to Education and Alternative Provision was in attendance to deliver a presentation to Members. The Executive Director of Children's Services and the Director of Education and Partnerships were also present to provide information to the panel.

The presentation covered the following topics:

- The importance of good attendance.
- Headline Attendance Data for the current and last year.
- Headline Persistent Absence Data (last year).
- Attendance of Vulnerable Groups (last year).
- Special Schools.
- Actions.

The Head of Access to Education and Alternative Provision identified the current attendance position across Middlesbrough. Following discussion around broader themes at the previous scrutiny meeting, it was explained that Middlesbrough's performance was of interest to the Department for Education (DfE). Members heard that weekly meetings were currently taking place to discuss attendance matters with the DfE, including the work being undertaken to address concerns, the direction of travel, etc.

Good attendance mattered because when children did not attend school, not only were their longer-term life chances impacted, but they were more vulnerable and open to exploitation. The importance of education was not to be underestimated.

Statistical data showing attendance performance for the current and previous school year was provided to Members. It was indicated that attendance was always higher in the autumn term, before figures started to reduce in January/February, followed by a large drop towards the end of the school year as families went on holiday. The worst term for attendance was summer.

The Headline Attendance Data for this year, to 20 November 2023, was provided as follows:

	Overall Attendance % (01.09.23 to 20.11.23)		
	Middlesbrough	Persistent Absence	Severe Absence
All Pupils	92.1	25.4	2.4
Secondary	89.7	29.7	4.5
Primary	93.9	22	1
Special	87.8	34.2	6.5

It was indicated to the panel that, as the government's expectation for attendance nationally was 95%, Middlesbrough was behind and did require improvement.

In terms of Secondary attendance, it was explained that when performance dipped below 90%, this was regarded as a concern. Middlesbrough was currently just under that.

In terms of attendance at Special Schools, Middlesbrough performed well in comparison to the national average.

Persistent Absence was a DfE term and referred to any child with a 90% attendance or less. Severe Absence referred to any child with a 50% attendance or less, or attendance at school equated to 2.5 days, on average.

In terms of the Headline Attendance Data (last year), this was provided as follows:

	Overall Attendance % (September 2022 to July 2023)		
	Middlesbrough	National	Regional
All Pupils	90	92.4	92.2
Secondary	87	90.8	89.9
Primary	92.9	93.8	94.1
Special	89.9	87	87.6

Members noted that the comparison data placed Middlesbrough behind regional counterparts by just under 2.5 percentage points; Secondary and Primary attendance data was also low and behind others. However, attendance at Special Schools was performing well in comparison to others, although this was still below 90%.

In terms of the Headline Persistence Absence Data (last year), this was provided as follows:

	Overall Attendance % (September 2022 to July 2023)		
	Middlesbrough Persistent Absence	National Persistent Absence	Regional Persistent Absence
All Pupils	33	24	24
Secondary	51	28	29
Primary	29	20	19
Special	23	40	36

It was explained to Members that the lower the number the better; 33% of Middlesbrough children were missing 10% or more of their education. In terms of Secondary figures, more than half of Middlesbrough children were missing 10% of their education, in comparison to one third of children elsewhere. This was of particular interest to the DfE, as there was more chance that these children could become more vulnerable or subjected to exploitation.

A Member queried whether the figures included Academy Trust schools. In response, it was confirmed that this was the case, with all of the schools in the town being included.

In response to a query from a Member as to whether it was specific schools skewing the figures, it was explained that all were struggling, though one or two were not performing as well. In terms of Primary Schools, it was a similar picture: at one end of the scale virtually all Roman Catholic Schools had a 97%-plus attendance rate, whereas at the other end, a small number of Primary Schools were really struggling; all other schools fell in-between. There were currently five maintained Primary Schools remaining in Middlesbrough. In terms of Secondary Schools, as there were only eight it was more obvious to ascertain where the

issues were. Acklam Grange had the best attendance at 91%, whereas the school with the poorest had an 87.6% average attendance. It was highlighted that this was a town wide issue and was not a case of simply targeting schools to carry out support / remedial work.

Members discussed demography and the different geographical settings of the Council's maintained schools within the town.

With regards to Special Schools and Persistent Absence, Middlesbrough performed better than the national average. However, in terms of Secondary Schools, the DfE had raised concerns and provided additional funding and running of projects based around support provision for secondaries. It was indicated to Members that attendance patterns appeared to emerge in Primary age children, e.g., attendance may have started to slip in Year 5/Year 6 and the trend would continue in those children and get worse. It was felt that if those children could be identified and support provided to families at the earliest point, attendance would improve. This was a longer-term investment, but immediate results were often preferred.

Regarding the Attendance of Vulnerable Groups (last year), the data was provided as follows:

EHCP – Educational Health Care Plan

SEN – Special Educational Needs

FSM – Free School Meals

CiN – Child in Need

CP – Child Protection

CLA – Child Looked After

	Overall Attendance % (September 2022 to July 2023)					
	EHCP	SEN Support	FSM	CiN Plan	CP Plan	CLA
All Pupils	87	87	88	83	81	89
Secondary	84	84	84	70	69	85
Primary	86	90	91	89	89	95
Special	88					

The following points were made:

- Pupils with an EHCP had stated SEN needs and received appropriate support.
- Pupils that received SEN Support had identified SEN needs, but not severe enough to warrant attendance at a Special School. These children attended mainstream schools and received appropriate support.
- Receipt of free school meals was viewed as a deprivation marker.
- Families of children with a CiN Plan received support, on a voluntary basis, from Social Care. Generally, in these circumstances, the child was not deemed to be at risk.
- Children with a Child Protection Plan in place were at a serious safeguarding risk. It was indicated that children could move between the CiN and CP categories if matters escalated. These children were the most vulnerable.
- In terms of Secondary attendance and children with a CiN Plan, 30% of those were not attending school, which was of significant concern to the Local Authority.
- Positive action needed to be taken around the data. A plan was in place for CiN and CP children, with lots of professionals involved. The Local Authority had an Attendance Team that focused specifically on these children to ensure a clear line of sight amongst professional partners, and to ensure the safety of those respective children.
- Age and circumstances did have an impact. The table showed the overall attendance rates; it was difficult to engage teenagers and get them to school if they did not want to attend.

In response to an enquiry regarding the number of children in the identified categories, these were guesstimated as follows:

- EHCP – 1,600-1,700.
- SEN Support – 2,000.

- FSM – 10,000.
- CiN Plan – 1,000.
- CP Plan – 400-500.
- CLA – 300.

Data detailing last year's rate of attendance (%) for Special Schools in Middlesbrough was provided as follows:

	Special School Attendance %		
	Attendance	Persistent Absence	Severe Absence
Hollis Academy	63.1	70	32
Priory Woods School	87.9	35	6
Beverley School	91.4	25	2
Holmwood School	94.1	15	2

The following points were made:

- Priory Woods School had a lower attendance, but this was reflective of the children that attended and their level of need; absence was medically related.
- Hollis Academy was located on the same site as Beverley School in Saltersgill.
- Discovery Special Academy had very good levels of attendance.

A Member queried the substantial difference in the statistics between Hollis Academy and Beverley School, given that both were located on the same site. In response, it was explained that although both were on the same site, they were effectively two separate schools operated by different Trusts, which catered for different types of children. Provision was different because the cohort was different. Whereas Beverley School supported children with autism, Hollis Academy supported social, emotional and health needs, which presented different behaviours. Children attending those schools will not have been excluded, but instead diagnosed with additional support requirements. Each child had a Health Care Plan in place, which ensured the appropriate provision based on their needs.

A short discussion ensued in relation to school transport. Following a query, Members were advised that school transport was provided to Hollis Academy. It was indicated that, generally, transport did pose an issue in terms of achieving an effective delivery. There was a legal requirement to provide transport to those children entitled to receive it, which was based on individual assessment and identified need.

In relation to Hollis Academy and the statistics presented, Members were informed that the school had recognised that there was an issue with attendance. It was a small school with approximately 80 children on roll.

In terms of actions, it was explained that attendance was the responsibility of schools in the first instance; the Local Authority had very little input into attendance matters, though the Local Authority did have a small Attendance Team that was growing. It was indicated that over the last eight/nine years, the team had focused mainly on prosecution work and processing/managing associated processes, such as the issuing of Fixed Penalty Notices as a last resort. Details of the punishments available, which included significant fines and custodial sentences, were provided.

The panel heard how disagreements between parents and schools were not uncommon, with intermediary support being required to achieve compromise. School policies often featured as a part of this; the example of noncompliance with 'no body piercings' rules was provided. It was felt that, since the pandemic, the view of some parents on the need for children to attend school, and the importance of education, had changed – with some parents letting their children decide. This issue, alongside others, had been very frustrating for schools. To assist, officers had collaborated with a DfE Attendance Advisor to create a 'road map' strategy for school professionals, to utilise and work through issues as they were presented. This document had been well received. Working with the DfE Attendance Advisor had allowed for the work being undertaken at Middlesbrough to be evaluated and for best practice to be shared.

Members were informed that two additional Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) had been employed by the Local Authority to work with parents and schools to help overcome barriers and ensure continued education for children. It was highlighted that culture around school attendance was very important.

A Member made reference to the 'road map' strategy and queried the process/timeline between identification of an issue and subsequent exclusion of a pupil. In response, it was explained that children could not be excluded for low attendance. It was often found that children with the most erratic attendance were the most challenging when in school. When pupils were excluded, those exclusions counted as absence, which made statistical processes worse. It was noted that the last school year had had a particularly high number of suspensions, due to efforts made to restore order post pandemic.

A Member made reference to Fixed Penalty Notices and queried the next if fines were unaffordable for the parents concerned. In response, it was explained that in that situation, the case would likely be referred to Magistrates Court and a payment plan established if deprivation was evident. Reference was made to the Education Act 1996, Section 444, and the responsibilities of both parents and Local Authorities in respect of school attendance/absence. It was indicated that, at Primary School level - less so at Secondary, most fixed penalties were for holidays taken in school time. Such instances required Headteachers to decide whether the absence be deemed an exceptional circumstance or not, and there were often disagreements between parents and Headteachers as to what was considered exceptional. Primary Headteachers were often reluctant to take legal action because it broke down positive relationships between parents and schools, and would therefore only likely pursue in extreme circumstances.

Other action work highlighted to Members included:

- Utilising a £300,000 grant from the DfE to employ a further five Attendance Officers.
- Further supporting children with CiN and CP need through the Vulnerable Children Attendance Project (VCAP) initiative.
- Barnardo's mentoring programme/project, the aim of which was to make attempts to change ethos in families and encourage attendance.
- In relation to mental health issues, Educational Psychologists had produced guidance and a toolkit for parents and schools.
- Immediate attendance data was now accessible by Social Workers.
- An attendance conference was held on 7 November 2023, which had received a very positive reception.

Following a Member enquiry on the topic of transience, the panel heard that certain areas of the town did have a greater level of this. It was explained that it was difficult for knowledge and relationships to form between schools, children and families if pupils were only present for six months before moving on. Anecdotally, Members heard that turnover in one school was so significant, i.e., 50% of the children had changed between the start and end of term, it was impossible for relationships to develop. Schools tried to create a culture of good attendance with rewards and prizes, but it was difficult to establish that culture if there was significant movement in the school.

A Member commented that parents should have been instilling the importance of education, and queried how professionals were assisting with this. In response, it was acknowledged that it was difficult for the Local Authority to influence parents. The DfE wanted the Local Authority to run a campaign explaining why attendance was important, to solve issues, etc., and although this had been attempted previously with little impact, the exercise would be repeated as a way of reaching out. It was commented that previous work had identified that, for public messages to be successful, they needed to come from a trusted source, such as police or neighbours - the media did not work. One-to-one, personal messages delivered directly from schools/Headteachers would make a difference, although broader work would also be carried out.

A Member referred to the overall strategy and the positive foundations on which it was built, but queried whether the same messages were of equal importance to every school. In response, reference was made to the recent conference and this being the reason for

organising that event. It was felt that, following the pandemic, the good work undertaken previously around attendance had been forgotten and that, because there had been so much else to consider, focus on attendance matters had slipped. The Local Authority could help put attendance back into the focus. In terms of schools, some had robust systems in place whereas others did not. They were at different stages and it was important to support them in bringing them onto an even keel.

A discussion ensued regarding the importance of attendance and it being the top priority. Children could not learn if away from education; presence in school could provide that and also guarantee a meal for children. Members discussed communication strategies and channels that could be used to drive the message around the importance of attending school. It was recognised that this should be being communicated at all meetings but was often crowded out as there were lots of other matters to consider. Consideration was given to cultural differences and the view of education in other parts of the world.

Councillor Kabuye left the meeting at this point.

The panel discussed demography and the potential impact on attendance levels. Members considered:

- The role of parents and the level of support provided.
- Religious background and subsequent choice of school, which may or may not have reflected one another.
- The home learning environment and how this facilitated education, e.g., was study space available for children at home.
- Rewards and incentives provided by both parents and schools.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

NOTED

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE - DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE

Members were invited to consider several tabled terms of reference that had been proposed for the School Attendance review; the Chair conveyed these to the panel.

After discussion, Members agreed the following:

- a) To examine the current position regarding school attendance in Middlesbrough, including performance data and how this compares locally and nationally, and in different areas of the town.
- b) To review school attendance for children with additional vulnerabilities; the support available to improve attendance; and how this compares to mainstream school attendance.
- c) To identify best practice and ideas from other local authorities that have good school attendance rates.
- d) To examine the work that schools, the Council, and its partners are currently undertaking to improve school attendance in Middlesbrough, and identify any potential future work projects.

Members discussed progress of the review to date and potential next steps. Consideration was given to Task and Finish Group activity, which could include site visits to schools to discuss policies and action plans; Focus Group work; and inviting school and other professionals/ representatives to provide evidence at future meetings.

AGREED that the terms of reference be agreed as follows:

- a) **To examine the current position regarding school attendance in Middlesbrough, including performance data and how this compares locally and nationally, and in different areas of the town.**

- b) To review school attendance for children with additional vulnerabilities; the support available to improve attendance; and how this compares to mainstream school attendance.**
- c) To identify best practice and ideas from other local authorities that have good school attendance rates.**
- d) To examine the work that schools, the Council, and its partners are currently undertaking to improve school attendance in Middlesbrough, and identify any potential future work projects.**

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided a verbal update on the matters that were considered at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 15 November 2023.

NOTED

DATE OF NEXT MEETING - 15 JANUARY 2024

NOTED

ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.

None.