

Title of meeting: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 5 February 2019

Subject: Response to the Education, Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee report into school attendance and reduced timetables in Portsmouth

Report from: Alison Jeffery, Director of Children, Families and Education

Report by: Alison Jeffery

Wards affected: All

Key decision: No

Full Council decision: No

1. Purpose of report

1.1 The Education, Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee conducted a review in 2018 into school attendance and reduced timetables in Portsmouth. This report sets out the response of the Children, Families and Education Directorate to the committee's recommendations.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet:

- **Thanks the Scrutiny Committee for its work in undertaking the review**
- **Notes and supports the recommendations set out on pages 6 and 7 of the report, taking into account the policy and financial implications of the recommendations summarised on page 35 of the report (section 12).**

3. Background

3.1 The key questions explored by the Scrutiny Panel, the evidence considered and the key conclusions it reached are set out in the Executive Summary section of the report, on pages 4-6.

3.2 A high level of school attendance is crucial for raising standards in the city. Good attendance, together with high quality teaching, are the obvious essential requirements for an effective education system.

- 3.3 The Directorate welcomed the decision of the Scrutiny panel to review the position in Portsmouth in relation to attendance, including the use of reduced timetables to restrict attendance and the extent of and basis for decisions by parents to educate their children at home. Our response to the recommendations is set out below, taking each recommendation in turn.

Recommendation 1:

That the Council's attendance campaign is endorsed and officers consider a segmented marketing strategy tailored for different groups of parents. The Council should also include in its literature that it is parents' legal responsibility to ensure their child attends school.

- 3.4 The council initiated a new attendance campaign in September with two key campaign concepts: one aiming to raise aspirations by showing a range of different engaging employment possibilities open to children who are successful at school and the other emphasising the risks of poor attendance ("Your life depends on it"). The impact of the campaign to date is currently being reviewed, looking in detail at attendance by different groups of children and young people. If greater differentiation/market segmentation appears to be needed we will of course explore options. We do already make it clear in school admissions literature and on our website that parents are legally required to ensure their child is educated by attending school or "otherwise" (in other words education at home).

Recommendation 2:

That good practice taking place in schools should be shared through the Portsmouth Education Partnership website and this be used as a mechanism to pair good and poor performing schools with each other in order to share expertise across the city.

- 3.5 We agree that good practice should be shared through the PEP website on attendance as on other areas of school practice. Where we are concerned about levels of attendance in a school we will always signpost examples of good practice from which the school can learn. It is for schools to determine what measures they need to take to improve attendance - the council cannot insist on a particular approach - but we would certainly encourage approaches to other schools to learn from their practice.

Recommendation 3:

That practical ways to keep children in school should be used such as using minibuses to collect those not in school and schools be encouraged to consider this. The authority should also encourage businesses/partners to actively challenge any children they see out of school during the school day in term time

- 3.7 There are two separate recommendations here. We are aware that some schools use minibuses to collect children who are absent; we believe that has to be a decision for them given the resources available to them in terms of staff time as well as vehicles for this purpose. We agree that businesses and partners have an important role to play in challenging children and young people they see out of school. This links to the wider role of these partners in safeguarding children, for example those at risk of exploitation. We are currently considering with the voluntary sector, through the Bridge process, how we might best mobilise communities to combat the risks of exploitation and action in relation to children not in school will be part of that campaign.

Recommendation 4:

That the current review of alternative provision through the Portsmouth Education Partnership should explore how schools can keep children and young people engaged so that reduced timetables are only used when it is in the best interest of the child in exceptional circumstances, as this presents an increased risk to the child. Parents/carers should also be made aware that they do not have to accept a reduced timetable for their child. The panel supported the rigorous challenge provided by the department to schools around the use of reduced timetables.

- 3.8 Both through work on alternative provision and in other contexts we take every opportunity to underline to schools the risks for young people which are associated with reduced timetables. We have a clear protocol on the use of reduced timetables with tight monitoring of the rationale and expected timescale of any reduced timetables which continue for more than 6 weeks. We are pleased that the Scrutiny Committee recognised the rigour of this work. For the academic year 2018/2019 we have increased the administrative resources allocated to this work (at a cost of around £18,000) as it is so important to minimise the number of children whose access to education is restricted, albeit in principle in their own interests.

Recommendation 5:

That if alternative provision is necessary schools must ensure that there is meaningful educational provision, ideally on the school site. The number of children on reduced timetables should continue to be monitored and challenged by the local authority

- 3.9 It is vital that all schools work hard to maximise the engagement in learning of all students and we believe schools in Portsmouth do that. The council and all partners need to support schools in this work, as we do, for example, through early help and social care support to families and through support to schools in their pastoral work through our multi agency teams and locality networks. We agree that where children and young people need "alternative provision" they are usually best served by full time provision on the school site so that they remain very much within the oversight of the school and are kept safe for the whole of school day. We agree that close monitoring and challenge by the

council is essential and a key part of the exercise of the council's duty to promote the wellbeing of vulnerable children.

Recommendation 6:

That the Council strongly support the line taken by the Portsmouth Education Partnership on the private members bill on elective home education that the local authority should have that right and duty to ensure effective safeguarding of EHE children and also to the introduction of a compulsory register of EHE children

- 3.10 We welcome the support expressed by the Scrutiny Committee for a change in the law to allow councils effectively to safeguard children whose parents have opted to educate them at home. There are, of course, many children for whom home education is effective, in some cases very effective. We must learn the lessons of past Serious Case Reviews, however, which draw attention to the risks which children can be exposed to when their wellbeing is not open to the scrutiny which attendance at school provides for their peers.

Recommendation 7:

That the Council continues to help promote community projects or non-curriculum courses that look to raise the aspirations of children and encourage them to attend school

- 3.11 We agree that the Council should take opportunities where they arise to promote access to community projects designed to raise aspirations and encourage attendance. Community projects can, and do, make a significant difference to young people in the city, every day. Budget constraints mean that it is now extremely difficult for the council to provide funding itself for these activities. The Directorate works closely, however, with other organisations to increase opportunities, for example the recent successful work with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and Hampshire Council Council and Southampton City Council to bring in Government funding for action to combat serious violence.

Recommendation 8:

That the Council note and support the rigorous action which the department is taking to challenge schools who have a relatively high number of pupils who have been taken off roll to be electively home educated, and to make sure that parents are making a genuine choice

- 3.12 We welcome recognition from the Committee of the action the Directorate has taken in relation to elective home education. During the course of the Committee's review we have built on this work to agree a clear protocol with schools on the processes to be followed where parents express an intention to educate their child at home. These processes will now involve a meeting between the school, the parent and the council in which a transparent dialogue

can take place with opportunities both for schools to address issues which may have led to parents considering the elective home education offer (such as issues around response to special educational needs or relationships with peers) and for the council to explain clearly to parents their legal obligations and the risks which their children may run if they are not at school. Early experience of the implementation of the protocol is very encouraging, with schools welcoming a contribution from the council which they see as supportive and positive, and parents also feeling supported in ensuring concerns are addressed.

Recommendation 9:

That the Council note the context of people choosing to electively home educate for ideological reasons and should positively engage with these parents. However it was noted that some parents are choosing this option as they are not satisfied with the SEND provision provided in school. The panel noted the funding pressures in meeting SEND provision in schools and believe that schools are doing their best to offer a broad range of provision for children. The Council should support representations being made to government about the high needs area

- 3.13 We agree that some parents opt for home education because they feel that schools are unable to meet the special educational needs of their children. We share the view of the Committee that schools in Portsmouth work hard to address the wide range of needs which children in the city have and we take the view that parents can, as the vast majority do, have confidence in their ability to meet those needs. Across the country there has been significant lobbying of the Government on the level of funding for the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant, from which funding for those with Education, Health and Care Plans is provided. Just before Christmas the Government announced additional funding for the High Needs Block for the financial year 2019-2020. In the case of Portsmouth this welcome addition ensures that the High Needs Block will not carry forward a deficit from 2018-2019 and mitigates the need for some of the savings agreed in the Autumn by the Lead Member and endorsed by the Schools Forum. The final decision on how the additional funding will be deployed will be taken by the Lead Member later this month, taking into account the views of the Schools Forum and those of other head teachers.
- 3.14 Given the continued rise in the number of children requiring Education, Health and Care plans and in the complexity of their needs, it is unlikely that the new level of funding will fully meet needs in future years without further enhancement from the Government.

4. Reasons for recommendations

- 4.1. The Children, Families and Education Directorate believes that the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee will be helpful in continued efforts to increase levels of school attendance in the city and ensure that all children and young people achieve well at school.

5 Equality impact assessment

- 5.1 The recommendations are designed to improve access to education for children and young people who are vulnerable to under achievement . An equality impact assessment is not required as the recommendations do not have a negative impact on any of the protected characteristics as described in the Equality Act 2010.

6. Legal implications

- 6.1 The recommendations do not have any legal implications for the council.

7. Director of Finance's comments

- 7.1 The action of the Directorate in increasing the scrutiny of reduced timetables has led to additional expense of around £18,000 in administrative staff time, although this will need to be managed from within overall resources. This activity is linked to effective early intervention for vulnerable children and young people, however, with the potential to avoid later costs through "late intervention".

Signed by: Alison Jeffery, Director of Children, Families and Education

Appendices:

ECYP Scrutiny Panel report

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location

The recommendation(s) set out above were approved/ approved as amended/ deferred/ rejected by on

.....
Signed by: