

EDUCATION, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Education, Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel held on Wednesday, 1 February 2023 at 5.30 pm at Guildhall, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Ryan Brent (in the Chair)
Leo Madden
Dave Ashmore
John Smith
Judith Smyth
Charlotte Gerada (Standing Deputy)

1. Apologies for absence (AI 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Tom Coles, Councillor Charlotte Gerada was present as his standing deputy. Apologies were also received from Councillor Horton, who had been invited to the meeting as Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education.

2. Declarations of interest (AI 2)

Councillor Brent declared a personal interest in that he is employed by Portsmouth College.

Councillor Gerada declared a personal interest in that she is a governor at Brambles and Infant School and nursery.

3. Minutes of previous meeting - 30 January 2020 (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 30 January 2020 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

The panel requested a brief update on Beechside from Sarah Daly, Director of Children, Families and Education. She advised that Beechside was currently closed following a safeguarding incident. A police investigation had concluded and the authority was now undertaking an internal investigation. There is a process ongoing to recruit to an interim manager however there is a national shortage of children's home managers. Once a new manager was appointed the plan is for the home to re-open. Ofsted were reassured by the action plan that the Council had put in place, which included meeting with every member of staff and every family.

It was therefore not appropriate at this time to continue the review into support for children with disabilities in the city. There is a robust set up in the city with Enableability to provide a number of short breaks in the city and alongside the HAF arrangements running in the school holidays, it was felt that the need is being well met currently. A SEND pilot inspection had taken place and the

feedback received had been very positive on the local offer. Every Local Area will be subject to a formal inspection under the new Ofsted CQC framework.

4. Review into school attendance - draft scoping document (AI 4)

Mike Stoneman, Deputy Director Education, Sarah Daly, Director of Children, Families and Education and Liz Robinson, Head of Inclusion were present and gave a background of school attendance in Portsmouth.

Attendance has been a concern in Portsmouth for some time although there has been an improvement in primary attendance over recent years which was pleasing. The covid pandemic clouded the situation and attendance figures were not back to that of 2019 although they are improving. There is a drop in attendance levels from primary to secondary school and this tends to increase over time through the course of their secondary education.

Attendance at secondary school was more of a challenge and in addition to this there are suspensions and children on reduced timetables. There are not many permanent exclusions within Portsmouth schools. With regard to reduced timetables, there are more children on these in secondary schools, than officers would like; the aim is that children would not be on a reduced timetable for longer than six weeks. Children on reduced timetables are tracked by the local authority very closely. There has also been a rise in the number of children who are electively home educated over the past few years. There is a protocol in place whereby a meeting with the parents, local authority and school takes place before a child is deregistered to ensure that the child is being home educated as a positive choice made by families and not because a family feels that their child's needs are not being met in school. If it is a case of the latter then the LA and the school would want to try and address those concerns before the parents/carers make a decision to home educate. Parents/carers are advised of their responsibilities for home educating.

For years 11-12, secondary to further education, there are good participation rates post 16 but there is still too high a proportion of students who are not in employment, education or training (NEET). The number of NEETs was at one time above 10%, this has now reduced to 3-4%, but remains above the SE average and there has been a small rise over the past year. The authority compares well however against its 10 statistical neighbours. The increase is partially due to the pandemic and work is taking place with the FE colleges to improve this. The authority has a statutory responsibility to track all 16 and 17 year olds and work with young people and follow them into post 16 education - been very effective in bringing the NEET figure down. The figure in Portsmouth of unknowns is 0.5% compared to the national average of 3%.

It was felt that due to the amount of time involved for the review that a focus on attendance in years 6-7, from primary to secondary transition, would be of most value. Officers advised that they know from a survey of parents and the SEND strategic review that this is where parents are most concerned. When children start secondary school it is a big change; the structure of the day, the

school culture and size of the school can be overwhelming for children. This is not a new issue and there have been a number of improvements over the years. It is important to get attendance right at year 7. In terms of transitional days, the first two working days in July are earmarked for transitional days where year 6 pupils visit their secondary school. There are also the school open days in the Autumn and the HAF activities during school holidays.

In terms of the council's resources for school attendance, Neil Stevenson heads up the school admissions and attendance team and there are about 6 FTEs in this team. There are link coordinators who work with all schools and will follow up with schools if attendance figures start to fall. The attendance team has developed guidance for schools on attendance so they are aware of what the trigger points are for reduced attendance. The council and schools do not have the capacity to knock on doors of children who are not attending school. The Mental Health in School Team supports schools, working with children experiencing anxiety in school to try and improve attendance.

The city-wide multi-agency strategy to improve school attendance and reduce exclusions has been scrutinised by the DfE and they felt it was very comprehensive. There are many strands and partners involved within the strategy, as all have a responsibility to improve attendance.

Councillor Gerada fed back some comments from Councillor Coles who said that children with disabilities attending mainstream schools may have a legitimate reason for being absent so they should not be being penalised. Councillor Coles also raised the issue that many children were suffering from mental health issues and anxiety, and these were also reasons for missing school. She added that in her role as governor they had noticed several children were missing school due to delayed holidays due to covid. Mr Stoneman said that covid had created a huge impact on attendance and confirmed that many children are anxious to attend school and there is also parental anxiety due to covid. Officers are looking at how to educate parents to resolve this. He added that if parents take children out of school for holidays this is recorded as an unauthorised absence and the parents are served a fixed penalty notice from the local authority should the Headteacher request such action. In terms of the mental health side, the Emotional Health and Well-being group monitor support to schools and senior mental health leads meet to share good practice.

In response to a question, Mr Stoneman said there is always a particular cohort of children with persistent absence, the most common reason for this is health related absences and this affects the overall figures. If 10% of sessions are missed these are labelled as persistent absences and these are the most concerning. It is early intervention which is key. It is a mixed picture in terms of if parents/carers want to engage. There will always be parents who do not appreciate the importance of attendance.

In response to a question regarding the recent Judicial Review on home education, officers said that some parents had felt it unjust that, after sending

the authority a report it was not in every case considered to be sufficient. Sometimes more information was required as evidence of suitable education. Officers offered the view that the a home visit is very helpful. The judge agreed and the case was won.

In response to a question from the Chair on what officers would like to see if money were of no concern, officers said to bring back education welfare officers, to look at alternative provision to get the curriculum right for all children and an increase in pastoral support in schools.

Additional information for the panel to be circulated as soon as possible before the next meeting:

- Definition of an absence
- Attendance data
- School attendance strategy
- Relevant Ofsted reports
- Good practice of attendance

Suspensions

Mr Stoneman said that the number of suspensions in schools are a concern, particularly at secondary level. Schools can issue a fixed period suspension and there is a responsibility on the school to ensure that the child returns. Those children who are suspended are often the most vulnerable and there is a policy in place where the local authority will challenge schools on high suspension rates. The presenting reason for suspensions is behaviour but the school need to understand why the child is behaving in that way.

Scoping document

Following the above discussion, the chair proposed making two changes to the draft scoping document:

Under purpose of enquiry the first objective be amended to read:
To understand the main reasons for an increase in school absence in transitional years, particularly Years 6 to 7 and to review the Council's and wider Portsmouth Education Partnership strategies to improve school attendance and decrease persistent absence.

Under 'reason for enquiry' delete reference to suspensions so it reads 'to consider the drop in school attendance following transition to year 7'

It was also suggested that a mental health representative could be a useful witness for the panel to hear from.

The panel agreed these amendments.

5. Proposed dates of future meetings (AI 5)

Proposed meeting dates were confirmed as Wednesday 22 February at 5pm and Wednesday 8 March at 5pm.

The next meeting the panel agreed it would be helpful to hear from Neil Stevenson, Admissions, Exclusions and Reintegration Manager; Tina Henley, Virtual School Head and Debbie Anderson, Head of School Improvement and Early Years.

The meeting concluded at 6.35 pm.

Councillor Ryan Brent
Chair