



## Report to Policy Committee

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**Report of:** *Meredith Dixon-Teasdale*

**Report to:** *Education, Children & Families Committee*

**Date of Decision:** *27<sup>th</sup> September 2023*

**Subject:** *A citywide approach to improving school attendance*

|   |     |                                     |    |                                     |
|---|-----|-------------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------|
| Has an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) been undertaken?    | Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | No | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| If YES, what EIA reference number has it been given? (2336) |     |                                     |    |                                     |
| Has appropriate consultation taken place?                   | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/>            | No | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Has a Climate Impact Assessment (CIA) been undertaken?      | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/>            | No | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/>            | No | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

### Purpose of Report:

To raise with committee the current challenges related to school attendance in the city and to provide an update on current activity and future planned work to support and improve school attendance across the city.

To seek commitments from elected members on the importance of enabling good school attendance.

**Recommendations:**

That the Education Children and Families Policy Committee

1. commit to play a role as system leaders on improving school attendance across the city working across Sheffield City Council and with partner organisations.
2. commit to continue to support activity to improve school attendance.

That the Committee will continue to work with officers to agree further actions which it can take which will positively impact on attendance outcomes in the City in line with the attendance charter and campaign.

**Background Papers:**

*None*

**Appendices:**

*Appendix 1 – 2022/23 Annual Report – Attendance*

*Appendix 2 – Attendance Charter*

| <b>Lead Officer to complete:-</b> |   |  |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| 1                                 | I have consulted the relevant departments in respect of any relevant implications indicated on the Statutory and Council Policy Checklist, and comments have been incorporated / additional forms completed / EIA completed, where required.  | Finance: <i>Kayleigh Inman</i>   |
|                                   |   | Legal: <i>Nadine Wynter</i>  |
|                                   |   | Equalities & Consultation: <i>Bashir Khan</i>  |
|                                   |   | Climate: <i>N/A</i>  |
|                                   | <i>Legal, financial/commercial and equalities implications must be included within the report and the name of the officer consulted must be included above.</i>   |  |
| 2                                 | <b>SLB member who approved submission:</b>  | <i>Meredith Dixon-Teasdale</i>   |
| 3                                 | <b>Committee Chair consulted:</b>   | <i>Dawn Dale</i>   |
| 4                                 | I confirm that all necessary approval has been obtained in respect of the implications indicated on the Statutory and Council Policy Checklist and that the report has been approved for submission to the Committee by the SLB member indicated at 2. In addition, any additional forms have been completed and signed off as required at 1. |  |
|                                   | <b>Lead Officer Name:</b><br><i>Tim Armstrong</i>   | <b>Job Title:</b><br><i>Head of Access &amp; Inclusion, Education &amp; Skills directorate</i> |
|                                   | <b>Date:</b> <i>08/09/23</i>  |  |

## 1. PROPOSAL

### 1.1 What the data tells us:

School absence in Sheffield is a substantial and growing barrier to the success of our children as they move towards adult life.

The national picture of school attendance is a significant concern. Data shows that whilst a lot of work is taking place across the country to address the reasons for school absence, too many children are missing too much of their education.

National data estimates based on governments data feeds from 80% of all schools, shows that overall absence in school year 2022/23 was 7.5%. At primary this was 6%, secondary 9.3% and in special schools 13.1%. Persistent absence data (children with below 90% attendance) shows that 22.3% of all children were persistently absent from school. At primary this was 17.2%, secondary 28.3% and in special schools 38.7%.

National data shows that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEN are significantly more likely to be absent from school. Absence rates were:

- 11.4% of pupils eligible for free school meals, 6.2% those not eligible
- 13.3% for pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHC Plan), 11.1% for pupils with SEN support, 6.9% with no identified SEN

Sheffield data shows that we are operating below the national average data for attendance and above the national average for persistent absence in all measures. We have historically been near the bottom of national league tables for local authority areas school attendance. Whilst there have been some improvements during 2022/23, particularly against other local authority areas, we should rightly be significantly concerned by the high level of absence in Sheffield schools and continue to increase the work to address this.

The attached annual report: '2022-23 Annual Report – Attendance' (Appendix 1) provides detailed information on school attendance data in Sheffield, where improvements have been made, the causes of absence, the specific attendance work that has been undertaken to address this challenge and the extent of the challenges that remain.

### 1.2 National guidance on school attendance:

In September 2022, the Department for Education introduced new non-statutory attendance guidance; Working together to improve attendance. Sheffield City Council has worked hard to introduce the recommendations within this guidance.

We have been successful in meeting the expectations of the new guidance at a higher rate than other local authorities:

- In Term 1 99% of schools had a Termly Attendance Support Meetings (TASM), 98% in Term 2 and 99% in Term 3.
- All but 1 maintained school has allocated an attendance champion who is part of their senior leadership team.
- Citywide and Locality networking opportunities have been offered every half term with 93% of schools having attended at least 1 session.

During 2022, Sheffield benefitted from the support of a Department for Education Attendance Advisor. This supported a self-assessment of our position on attendance and provided guidance on our plans to improve attendance and implement the 'Working together to improve attendance' guidance. The advisor provided positive feedback on the work taking place across Education and Skills to implement the guidance and improve attendance, but also acknowledged that it will likely take several years of consistent and citywide system focused work for improvements to be realised.

### 1.3 Reasons for absence:

Despite these successes we know that there remain significant barriers to effective school attendance. Children tell us that they want to go to school, but struggle when the right support is not in place either in or outside school, and when they don't feel like they belong within the school and local community.

Reasons for absence from school include:

- Poor mental health and well-being / Anxiety
- Educational neglect and families struggling to ensure their child can access school
- Where a child is not allowed or expected to be in school including reduced timetables, suspension and permanent exclusion
- Term time leave
- Mobility of children and limited school places in certain areas of the city
- Disagreement and incidents between child, family and school
- Illness and health needs, including time taken out of school for medical appointments
- Children's special educational needs not being met within school

Children being in education is not only vital for their future life development but is also a protective factor in keeping them safe from harm. Data shows us that children open to a social worker are more likely to have poor school attendance. Likewise, children in the criminal justice system and those at risk of exploitation statistically have lower school attendance.

#### 1.4 Developing strategic system leadership to improve school attendance:

To drive improvements in school attendance, it needs to be a focus of leadership across the city at every level. The Committee are asked to commit to playing their role as system leaders and leaders across Sheffield City Council to improve school attendance.

The Strategic Director of Children's Services has agreed that this is an area of significant concern and is committed to ensuring a strategic approach to addressing poor attendance in the city.

We are working with colleagues across the Council and with other key strategic bodies to look at how we can take a whole system approach to addressing school absence. This will be working with already established committees within the Council, multi-agency partnerships and anchor institutions to ensure we have a clear narrative that every school day counts and children and young people should be in school to ensure they learn, achieve, learn life skill lesson, social skills and belong as a member of a community. We should have an expectation across Sheffield that children should be in school every school day and have support from all anchor institutions through our attendance charter. We will work with all parts of Sheffield City Council to find ways to optimise school attendance and with our NHS providers and commissioners.

Committee members are asked to champion school attendance when they have the opportunity to do so when working with other bodies and through the Local Area Committees.

We should expect that as a council our own employees are supported to ensure that their own children attend school. This should become a clear and natural narrative that non-attendance for whatever reason becomes an unusual occurrence and we will know this by the level of attendance rising across Sheffield at all stages and ages. We would want this to become the narrative across Sheffield and for all anchor institutions to support this.

As corporate parent we should ensure that our looked after children are provided the best support to attend school and we seek to remove barriers to them attending through the work of the Corporate Parenting Board. Services including the virtual school, Inclusion and Attendance and Social Care are working to ensure that attendance is a priority for Sheffield looked after children whether they live in the city or not.

#### 1.5 Attendance charter:

In 2022, as part of our attendance campaign 'Every school day matters' we co-produced an attendance charter (attached at appendix 2) where Sheffield City Council and other anchor organisations committed to the following:

We pledge to:

- Work jointly to improve attendance across our city.
- Champion the benefits of good school attendance in our work.
- Support families to help their children develop and maintain good attendance habits in the early years and throughout their school life.
- Celebrate good and improved attendance.
- Listen to children and young people's experiences, and how they affect their ability to engage in school life daily.
- Make sure that the right kind of support is available so that children and young people can attend school.
- Work together to remove barriers to good attendance.
- Minimise disruption to learning if children and young people are unable to attend school.
- Review how our organisation can support all children and young people to have good school attendance in our city.

We are now asking organisations and individual services within organisations including Sheffield Council to commit to three things that they can do to implement the charter and make a difference to school attendance in the city.

#### 1.6 Planned activity to address school absence in the coming year:

Work is taking place in many areas to address specific reasons for absence and improve overall school attendance. Some of this work is new, other examples are at the early stages of development. There is other work that is much more embedded. The following are some of the planned activity in the coming year that is either new or builds on work from the past year or two.

- We have refreshed our attendance campaign at the start of the academic year to again promote the importance of school attendance. This has included bus and park advertising and further training and promotion to services on the importance of school attendance.
- We will again set citywide Key Performance Indicators for attendance, working with schools to create individual targets for whole school attendance, reduction of persistent absence and reduction of severe absence (absence below 50%). We will work with individual schools to target this work building on the good work completed last academic year.
- We will continue to develop our Inclusion Model, focusing on the 'Team around' the family, school, locality, and city, as part of our work to address the barriers to successful school attendance. We will continue to direct our work to ensure that attendance is part of

every child's plan where services are involved and to identify children who need support to access school but do not currently have it.

- We will continue to work with colleagues to identify children at risk of 'educational neglect'. Some parents are unable to take all possible action to ensure that their children access the education that they are entitled to. In the past year we have worked with social care colleagues to create an 'educational neglect' pathway so that appropriate family support can be put in place where families do not have the capacity to ensure that their child accesses their educational entitlement. This is a new process and so in the coming year we will be seeking to embed this within practice.
- We will work in partnership with schools and Learn Sheffield to ensure that school attendance is a core part of school improvement plans with a focus on ensuring children are welcomed and feel that they belong within the school community.
- We will work to embed EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance) strategies across schools. The past year has seen this developed as an approach and will require further time to embed as practice.
- We have been working with health colleagues on pilots around how health needs can be met in school to reduce the time children miss education due to medical appointments, building on positive experiences during the pandemic. We will work with colleagues in the Children's Hospital Trust to expand on this approach.
- We need to consider how we can better target the interventions we can deliver to have the biggest impact and how we invest our limited resources in the best way. Data shows the geographical areas where absence is greatest and the needs which are prevalent such as high level of anxiety about attending school. Future investment is needed to target these.
- We will develop a belonging framework to articulate ways of working that drive local inclusion and belonging for all children within our schools.

1.7

A call to act:

Improving school attendance is not something that can be improved by a single service changing its way of working or by a school in isolation. It can only be improved by the whole city addressing the barriers that cause absence and creating a culture that states that missing education, even for a short time, is wrong. It is essential that Sheffield City Council provide leadership in driving forward improvement and support citywide, championing of attendance and challenging practice that means that children do not attend school.

This paper is presented to enable the committee to consider the challenges of school attendance and how policy and practice can ensure a clear focus on improving attendance so that all children are provided a better opportunity to move to a successful adult life.

## **2. HOW DOES THIS DECISION CONTRIBUTE ?**

- 2.1 These proposals reiterate the approach of the 2021/22 one year plan where there was a commitment to reduce exclusions in all forms.

A focus on school attendance supports the following strategic goal for the city:

Happy young people who have the start they need for the future they want: young Sheffielders are happy, safe and have the opportunities they need to be fulfilled and reach their potential in a changing world.

## **3. HAS THERE BEEN ANY CONSULTATION?**

- 3.1 No specific consultation has taken place for this paper.

## **4. RISK ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE DECISION**

### **4.1 Equality Implications**

- 4.1.1 This paper is presented to identify the citywide challenges related to poor school attendance and significant areas of absence. This report is an analysis around the challenges of school attendance which considers the protected and equality characteristics of children and recognises that practice needs to consider the specific needs of individual protected groups and communities. Data is used to identify specific groups, including BAME with the Roma community being the group with highest school absence; children with care needs; children with SEND.

### **4.2 Financial and Commercial Implications**

- 4.2.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

### **4.3 Legal Implications**

- 4.3.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

### **4.4 Climate Implications**

- 4.4.1 There are no direct climate implications arising from this report.

### **4.4 Other Implications**



4.4.1 There are no other direct implications arising from this report.

## **5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

5.1 The alternative would be to continue to see attendance as a single service or school issue. This option has been rejected due to the range of challenges that are in place and the need to prioritise attendance at school.

## **6. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

6.1 Children in Sheffield are consistently not attending school, risking future life chances and preventing academic success. More than that, education should provide a place of belonging, safety, fun and friendship for children and young people. Currently too many children are missing out on maximising those opportunities. It is recommended that school attendance be a strategic priority to address this.

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