

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
(CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND SAFEGUARDING)**



**PERSISTENT PUPIL ABSENCE  
WORKING GROUP**

**FINAL REPORT  
JANUARY 2021**

Overview  
& Scrutiny



# Overview & Scrutiny

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Improvement'**

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## LEAD MEMBER'S INTRODUCTION

It gives me great pleasure to submit the findings in relation to the review on persistent pupil absence in schools.

We began this piece of work before Covid-19 had been heard of, at a time when there were some concerns regarding school attendance, particularly in our primary schools. The outbreak of the pandemic curtailed our work and prevented us from visiting mainstream schools to experience first-hand the excellent work already being undertaken in some of our schools. At the time of producing this final report the country is in another lockdown situation and once again most of our children are unable to attend school, much of the work being undertaken on-line. Hopefully, the vaccine will enable children to return to school in due course and it will never be so important to ensure that our children attend school, to try to make up the ground they have lost and to enable them to have greater life chances, particularly for those children who already face disadvantages in their lives.

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who contributed towards this review and thank other Working Group Members for their commitment and dedication in looking at this matter. Finally, I would like to thank our support officers for their assistance and support during the course of the review and in producing this final report.



**Councillor Claire Carragher, Lead Member of the Persistent Pupil Absence Working Group and Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Children's Services and Safeguarding).**



## GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED

SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
MACE	Multi-Agency Child Exploitation
Sefton Virtual School	<p>The Virtual School exists as a collaborative endeavour, with different professionals and stakeholders across the Local Authority holding Corporate Parenting as a priority throughout.</p> <p>It promotes the progress and educational attainment of children and young people who are, or who have been, in care so that they achieve educational outcomes comparable to their peers. Ensuring that they receive a high-quality education is the foundation for improving their lives.</p> <p>The school does not exist in real terms, or as a building. Children do not attend it, rather they remain the responsibility of the school at which they are enrolled.</p>
Personalised Learning Plan	Personalised learning focuses on working with each student, in partnership with the student's parents or carers, to develop a plan that maps a pathway for students to achieve learning goals tailored to their developmental and motivational needs.
EHC Plan	Education, Health and Care Plan. The former Statement of SEN, setting out a child's Special Education Needs (educational) and any additional help a child should receive, was replaced by the Education, Health and Care Plan, which sets out educational, health and social needs for a child and also sets out the additional support required to meet those needs.



SEN Register	<p>Schools have a SEN register which records all SEND pupils, and schools are expected to track the progress of these pupils closely.</p> <p>Children who need extra support when learning may be put on their school's SEN register. This is a record of children who have SEN and the kind of support they may require.</p>
Triangulation	<p>A process by which a teacher collects evidence about student learning and this evidence is collected from three different sources. These sources are conversations, observations, and products.</p>
Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)	<p>A teacher who co-ordinates the provision for children with SEND in schools.</p>
ASD	<p>Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disorder that affects communication and behaviour.</p>

## BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW

1. At the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Children’s Services and Safeguarding) held on 9 July 2019, the Committee considered potential topics for a scrutiny review to be undertaken by a Working Group appointed by the Committee.

## MEMBERSHIP OF WORKING GROUP

1. At its meeting on 9 July 2019 the Committee agreed that:  
  
“(5) a working group be established to review the topic of persistent pupil absence and Councillors Carragher, Keith and Mrs. Sandra Cain, Independent Advisory Member, be appointed to serve on the working group;” (Minute No. 11 (5) refers).

## LEAD MEMBER

1. The first meeting of the Working Group took place on 9 October 2019, and Councillor Carragher was appointed as the Lead Member.

## DEFINITION

1. The Working Group agreed to the following definition in considering persistent pupil absence:  
  
“Any pupil whose attendance falls below 90% will be classed as a Persistently Absent student. Therefore, if a student misses 19 or more days over an academic year they will be classed as Persistently Absent.”

## TERMS OF REFERENCE AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE REVIEW

1. The Working Group agreed the following terms of reference and objectives for the review:  
  
“To review persistent pupil absence in primary schools within the Borough.  
  
Focus will also be given to those pupils with SEN Support; with Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans; and those pupils supported by Child Protection, Child in Need and Early Help Plans.”



## METHODS OF ENQUIRY

- Through the gathering and consideration of data, information and evidence, either from existing sources or through specific Working Group interviews.
- Through any necessary site visits:
  - A visit to be undertaken to the Council's Complimentary Education Service, Pinefield Centre, Formby, to meet with members of staff and hear about the services provided. Completed on 27/11/19.
  - A visit to be arranged to Jigsaw Primary Pupil Referral Unit, Thornton. Completed on 25/02/20.
  - A visit to be arranged to Newfield School, Thornton. Completed on 28/02/20.
- Interviewing of parents/carers/relevant officers, if deemed necessary/relevant.

## SUMMARY OF MEETINGS OF THE WORKING GROUP HELD AND SITE VISITS UNDERTAKEN

A summary of Working Group meetings and activity is outlined as follows:

Meeting Date	Activity
9 October 2019	Councillor Carragher appointed Lead Member of Working Group and the Working Group scoped the review.
14 November 2019	Information on the attendance toolkit was considered, together with figures provided on exclusions during 2018/19 and 2019/20 to date.
22 January 2020	The site visit to the Council's Complimentary Education Service was considered, together with information on attendance figures; Sefton Education Cohort; what we know about SEND in Sefton; and information on SEND/referrals.
16 October 2020	Informal meeting to recap on previous findings and determine the way forward. Members requested additional information to be obtained on home schooling. Discussion on draft recommendations.
27 November 2020	Information on home schooling was considered, together with the draft recommendations.





17 December 2020	Lead Member met with officers to discuss the draft recommendations.
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In addition, Working Group Members undertook site visits, as follows:

Date	Site Visit
27 November 2019	Site visit to the Council's Complimentary Education Service based at the Pinefield Centre, Formby, to meet with members of staff and hear about the services provided at the Pinefield Centre, Formby.
25 February 2020	Site visit to Jigsaw Primary Pupil Referral Unit, Thornton.
28 February 2020	Site Visit to Newfield School, Edge Lane, Thornton.

## BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Working Group Members considered the following documents during the course of their review:

1. School Attendance Toolkit.
2. Exclusion figures for 2018/19 and 2019/20.
3. MACE Attendance Figures
4. Sefton Education Cohort.
5. What we know about SEND in Sefton.
6. Information on SEND/Referrals.
7. Information received on home schooling via the Facebook page of the Sefton Parent Carers' Forum.
8. Report submitted by the Co-ordinator; Complementary Education Service, on home schooling.



## **INTERVIEWING OF KEY WITNESSES**

During the course of the review Working Group Members met with the following:

**Executive Director of Children’s Social Care and Education**

**Team Manager Locality South, Attendance and Welfare Services**

**Interim Head of Education**

**Staff and pupils at the Complementary Education Service, Pinefield Centre, Formby**

**Staff and pupils at the Jigsaw Referral Unit, Thornton**

**Staff and pupils at Newfield School, Thornton**

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE WORKING GROUP REVIEW**

Unfortunately, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the first lockdown curtailed the activities of the Working Group for some considerable time during the spring and summer of 2020 and prevented further face to face meetings and the lack of opportunity for Members to access mainstream provision to see some of the good work currently undertaken.



## KEY FINDINGS DURING THE REVIEW

1. At the commencement of the review, some of the good practice through the School Attendance Tool kit was shared with Members.
2. Concerns were raised regarding possible child exploitation and data was shared with Members. This is a priority area for Children's Services in relation to children missing school.
3. All schools in Sefton operate some form of a first day response scheme following up on absence and lateness with pupils to identify barriers and reasons for absence.
4. A significant number of schools undertake home visits to families where they are deemed to be vulnerable.
5. Looked after children's attendance is discussed at the personal education planning meeting.
6. The virtual school has a dedicated attendance worker.
7. Young people of school age who are discharged from custody are discussed at the monitoring and placements children missing education panel and a plan is put into place to enable those children to access an education package.
8. All schools attend the multi-agency child exploitation meetings (MACE) which looks at persistent absence and planning for children and young people to divert them away from risk taking behaviours.
9. Class teachers and form tutor groups identify issues, intervene early and help set targets.
10. Some schools gather feedback from pupils about their attendance and look at modifying the curriculum.
11. Some schools apply rewards and sanctions consistently.
12. School attendance forms part of some children's personalised learning plans.
13. The majority of schools analyse the data to identify patterns and trends to address any barriers that may be preventing children attending schools.
14. There has been an increase in the young carers' service being present in schools to address barriers for those children who have additional caring responsibilities.
15. Some schools recognise and celebrate small steps in improving attendance.



16. Attendance is correlated with behaviour and attainment data as part of the school's triangulation.
17. Addressing persistent absence is included in early help and children's social care assessments.
18. The Council operates a school attendance panel which discusses expectations with parents about the child's attendance. The panel also considers the child's voice and addresses any barriers that may be preventing them from attending school. There are specific questions in relation to bullying asked at the panel to gather the parents and child's views.

## KEY FINDINGS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE WORKING GROUP

1. Members considered that there was statistical evidence of a "north/south divide" within the Borough in terms of school attendance and persistent pupil absence.
2. There is already plenty of good practice undertaken by schools in the Borough and by the Local Authority.
3. The importance of emphasising good school attendance habits during the early years' stage.
4. It is important to deliver clear messages regarding the importance of school messages at admission and transition events. The early years' stage is also important in identifying any children coming into school from nursery who may have additional needs.
5. Regarding the importance of monitoring the attendance of vulnerable children across the early years' stage, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for work in this area to commence and this needs to continue.
6. Although it is recognised that the Council is unable to support additional posts at this time, due to the financial situation of the Council, nevertheless, Members considered that it was important to recognise the aspiration for a dedicated worker to support those children on Education Health and Care Plans, in order that any barriers to school attendance can be recognised and addressed. There is currently a temporary post undertaking such work and as part of the on-going work on school attendance, consideration could be given at some point as to how this could be made into a permanent post.
7. School attendance should ideally be part of the enhanced transition and not just for children and young people on the SEND register, as this helps to address the early identification of any school attendance issues. Members considered that there were issues at transition from the primary to secondary stage and whilst children with more high-level SEND were identified, it could



sometimes be that lower levels of SEND were not always recognised as much as they might be.

8. Sanctions for non-attendance of school were not always applied as consistently across primary and secondary schools as they might be.
9. It was recognised that children who have contact with the school SENCO but who are not necessarily on the SEND register often form good, trusting relationships with teaching staff, support staff and/or office staff. This could provide an opportunity for an adult mentor to build up a positive relationship with the child and to be a good role model. This could be raised through both the Primary and Secondary Schools Association.
10. All schools provide training in SEND and ASD. Additional encouragement could be given for quality training, such as trauma training, to include school office staff.
11. Many schools have a “buddy scheme”, where younger pupils are “matched up” with older peers to ensure they have something in common. This can assist with school attendance.
12. The transition stage is vitally important in retaining and ensuring good school attendance. Communication, together with the sharing of good practice, is key.



## CONCLUSIONS

1. That the good practice regarding school attendance currently undertaken by the Council and schools, as outlined in the findings of the report, should be acknowledged and recognised.
2. A campaign to tackle school attendance across all key stages with a specific emphasis on the early years and foundation stage, should be considered, the campaign to focus on conveying clear messages about how absence affects attainment, wellbeing and wider outcomes.
3. Clear messages about expectations, routines and consequences to new pupils and families through prospectus and admission/transition events, should be delivered.
4. The school attendance of vulnerable children should be ensured and monitored across the early years stage.
5. There is an aspiration for a post of a dedicated worker for children who are supported by Education, Health and Care Plans, in order to address any barriers for children and young people attending school; this aspiration could be considered in the future as part of the on-going work on school attendance. It is recognised and acknowledged that this may not be possible at the current time.
6. Attendance should ideally be part of the enhanced transition and not just for children and young people on the SEND register, as this will address the early identification of any school attendance issues.
7. Sanctions for non-school attendance should be applied consistently across primary and secondary schools in the Borough.
8. Schools should be encouraged to provide an adult mentor to those children who have contact with the school SENCO but who are not on the SEND register, with whom the children can have regular access and build up a relationship.
9. Schools should be encouraged to provide training in SEND and ASD conditions to all teaching staff, to include office staff.
10. Buddy schemes with older peers should be extended to all schools, pupils to be “matched up” to ensure they have something in common.
11. Communication between primary and secondary schools could be improved at transition stage, to ensure children are “understood” by teaching staff in secondary schools and that any good practice is shared.



12. A six-monthly monitoring report, setting out progress made against each of the recommendations outlined above, will be required by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Children's Services and Safeguarding), as is standard practice with all working group reports.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

In producing this report on persistent pupil absence in education, acknowledgements and thanks are attributed to the individuals outlined below, for their time and input:

- *The following officers from the Council:*
- **Senior Democratic Services Officer**
- **Executive Director of Children’s Social Care and Education**
- **Team Manager Locality South, Attendance and Welfare Services**
- **Interim Head of Education**
- **Staff and pupils at the Complementary Education Service, Pinefield Centre, Formby**
- **Staff and pupils at the Jigsaw Referral Unit, Thornton**
- **Staff and pupils at Newfield School, Thornton**

Thanks must also go to the Members of the Working Group who have worked hard and dedicated a great deal of time to this review, namely:



***Councillor Claire Carragher  
(Lead Member)***



***Councillor Maria Bennett***



***Councillor Pat Keith***

***Mrs. Sandra Cain  
Independent Advisory Member***





## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the good practice regarding school attendance currently undertaken by the Council and schools, as outlined in the findings of the Final Report, be acknowledged and noted.
2. That the Interim Head of Education be requested to explore the possibility of:
  - (a) a campaign to tackle school attendance across all key stages with a specific emphasis on the early years and foundation stage, the campaign to focus on conveying clear messages about how absence affects attainment, wellbeing and wider outcomes.
  - (b) delivering of clear messages about expectations, routines and consequences to new pupils and families through prospectus and admission/transition events.
  - (c) ensuring that the attendance of vulnerable children is monitored across the early years stage.
  - (d) an aspiration for a post of a dedicated worker for children who are supported by Education, Health and Care Plans, in order to address any barriers for children and young people attending school; this aspiration could be considered in the future as part of the on-going work on school attendance.
  - (e) attendance being part of the enhanced transition and not just for children and young people on the Special Educational Needs and disability (SEND) register, as this will address the early identification of any school attendance issues.
  - (f) sanctions for non-attendance being applied consistently across primary and secondary schools.
  - (g) schools providing an adult mentor to those children who have contact with the school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) but who are not on the SEND register, with whom the children can have regular access and build up a relationship.
  - (h) encouraging schools to provide training in SEND and Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) conditions to all teaching staff, to include office staff.
  - (i) Extending buddy schemes with older peers to all schools, pupils to be “matched up” to ensure they have something in common.
  - (j) Improving communication between primary and secondary schools at transition stage, to ensure children are “understood” by teaching staff in secondary schools and that any good practice is shared.



3. That the Senior Democratic Services Officer be requested to liaise with relevant officers in order to ensure that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Children's Services and Safeguarding) receives a six-monthly monitoring report, setting out progress made against each of the recommendations outlined above.



## Overview & Scrutiny



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