

City & County of Swansea – Response to National Assembly for Wales
Children & Young People’s Committee Regarding Attendance & Behaviour
February 2013

The City & County of Swansea through schools, officers and elected members places a high priority on improving school attendance. It recognises that:

- Children who do not attend school regularly are more likely to leave school with a few or no qualifications; they are more likely to be drawn into crime and anti-social behaviour.
- Parents are responsible, by law, for ensuring that their children receive a suitable full time education.
- There are many causes for absence from school, apart from illness, that may need to be addressed. Many underlying absences relate to school, home and other pupils. This, for example, may include family problems or weakness in the quality or relevance of the curriculum.

A scrutiny review by elected members of school attendance concluded:

- Education Welfare Officers and Project Workers provide an invaluable service to schools, parents and children.
- Parenting skills and parental attitudes to school are key factors in a child’s school attendance and their resulting overall school attainment.
- The social and emotional climate in a school can make a huge difference on a child’s attitude and attendance.
- Some pupils are not emotionally or socially skilled to easily enjoy the classroom and therefore adequately engage in learning.
- Some pupils experience difficulties in attendance during the transition period between primary and secondary school.
- The overall attendance figures published for Swansea may not fully reflect the challenges being faced in particular schools and areas.
- Prosecution is an option for persistent absentees but should be used as a very last resort.
- An appropriate curriculum and other alternatives to the academic route was a key factor in engaging young people in learning and thus improving their life opportunities.
- Individual’s schools, working in conjunction with their EWO, were in the best position to judge what is required for their school and locality in relation to attendance issues. That there should not be a blanked system for all schools and wish to emphasise the importance of each school being ‘proactive’ in the tackling of non attendance.

The Authority encourages schools to meet their responsibilities regarding attendance so that a consistent approach is used to manage attendance and that each school:

- Has a clear policy on managing absence
- Has effective, non-bureaucratic systems for monitoring absence.
- Uses attendance data and other information to help improve school and pupil performance
- Promotes the importance and legal requirements of good attendance to pupils and their parents/carers.

- Has support systems in place for vulnerable pupils
- Rewards and celebrates good and improved attendance.

Actions taken over the past 2 years

- Schools are responsible for taking the lead on actions to maximise school attendance. The Authority supports these action in a variety of ways. School attendance is a school improvement issue. If pupils do not attend school they are not in a position to learn. Pupils attending school and schools offering appropriate, relevant and motivating educational experiences and opportunities are seen as key to maximising educational opportunities for all learners.
- In recent years schools and Authority services such as Education Effectiveness and the Education Welfare Service have worked together on a range of actions to maximise school attendance under the umbrella of the Improving Attendance Initiative.
- The core of the Improving Attendance Initiative (IAI) is schools being provided with data on an annual basis detailing their school attendance performance against themselves, cluster of schools, Swansea all schools data and the Welsh averages over the previous three years. This is part of a support and challenge discussion between the Education Welfare Officer working with the school and the senior management of the school. This discussion jointly reviews the performance data to identify the 'story it tells' what has worked well over the past 12 months and what issues a particular school has that is hindering school attendance. Out of this analysis an action plan is drawn up to prioritise actions over the next 12 months to try and maximise school attendance based on a rationale of why those actions will be expected for that's school context and situation.
- This annual review is supported by the Education Welfare Officers drawing out good practice and sharing it amongst the EWS and school in these discussions.
- Education Effectiveness staff also use school attendance data in their school profile visits.
- A small number of schools are also identified for joint visits by the School Development Advisor (SDA) and the Principal Education Welfare Officer if there are particular concerns about a school's trends in school attendance performance.

Over the past two years the work within the Improving Attendance Initiative has been supplemented by:

- Review of other Local Authorities who were evidencing particularly increased rates of improvement in school attendance performance. This led to discussions with these authorities and lessons identified that could be particularly relevant for the Swansea context. One element identified was an approach by a particularly successful Local Authority with the use of a tool they use to measure the effectiveness of school management systems for school attendance and absence.
- Development of a self evaluation tool with schools in Swansea for them to assess and rate their management systems for school attendance and absence. This was piloted, refined and then included as part of the annual Improving Attendance Initiative discussion and planning for future actions with all schools.
- A Good Practice Seminar to which all the schools were invited. This included two schools sharing their practice linked to consistent improved school attendance

performance in recent years. This was a basis for discussion and consideration of how all schools could maximise their school attendance.

- A Seminar to which all schools were invited to consider the changes made by Welsh Government to codings for the recording of absence in school attendance registers and returns.
- Discussion of school attendance performance and issues at Education Directorate Senior Leadership Team meetings with all Headteachers

With developments over recent years some schools have:

- Incorporated well being approaches such as Restorative Practice to encourage a supportive school environment.
- Used tools such as the Family Learning Signature to support links with parents
- Linked to Family Learning to provide practical ways for families to support the education of their children.
- Employed various types of support staff such as attendance officers, inclusion officers or well being officers

These developments can be linked together with wider school improvement approaches to improve educational outcomes for learners. The coordination of a range of such approaches within effectively led and managed schools, with a clear vision and purpose, was evident in the presentations by schools in the good practice seminar.

The Authority continues to encourage schools to view school attendance as a school improvement issue. Within this to encourage schools to have coherent and joined up strategies to improve attainments, improve literacy and numeracy levels, well being support, maximise school attendance, tackle issues related to school exclusions and ensure conducive learning environments to maximise educational opportunities for all learners. These were evident in the schools featured in the good practice seminar, alongside clear leadership linked to effective school management systems and effective working with partners and key stakeholders.