

By: Merrill Haeusler, Director of Learning Group
Rosalind Turner, Managing Director, Children, Families & Education Directorate
Sarah Hohler, Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education Directorate

To: Learning and Development Children, Families & Education Policy Overview Committee

Date: 20 May 2010

Subject: Absence in Kent Schools

Classification: *Unrestricted*

1. Introduction

(1) Safeguarding children, raising standards and narrowing attainment gaps remain key priorities for the government and for Kent. A focus on reducing absence from school, especially persistent absence, supports these aims. The priority in Kent remains for all schools, working with Local Authority (LA) support, to continue to address high overall absence, and within this, persistent absence (PA). This supports the delivery goal set by DCSF, that by 2010/11 no local authority will have more than 5% of its secondary school pupils identified as being persistently absent. This target is described as National Indicator 87 (NI87).

(2) The DCSF agreed Kent's targets for 2008/09 of 6% persistent absence in secondary schools and for 2009/10 of 5.5% persistent absence in secondary schools. Kent achieved the target of 5.5% in 2008/09, a year early. Kent has shown a year on year reduction in persistent absence in secondary schools:

2006/07	6.8%
2007/08	6.0%
2008/09	5.5%

(3) Persistent absence refers to absence of 20% or more over a school year, whether authorised or unauthorised. This includes absence for medical reasons and holidays in term time as well as for absence which is not authorised by a school.

(4) 'Truancy' is not identified specifically in DCSF or LA data. It is the Headteacher's decision to register a pupil's absence as authorised or unauthorised, taking into account each pupil's individual circumstances. A higher level of unauthorised absence in a school can be a sign that the Headteacher is robustly challenging reasons for non-attendance. The DCSF has recognised that all absence has an impact on outcomes for children and

young people. Therefore the priorities are overall absence, with a particular focus on persistent absence.

2. Local Children and Young People's Plans (CYPP)

(1) The commitment to reducing persistent absence is a high priority for the LA. It was highlighted in the first Kent CYPP and remains in the CYPP 2008-2011. Increasing attendance and reducing persistent absence is also a priority in CYPPs of each of the Local Children's Services Partnerships (LCSP). It is either identified as a specific indicator in plans or is included in the broader aims of Enjoy and Achieve, Make a Positive Contribution and Achieve Economic Well Being.

3. LCSP figures

(1) The rate of overall absence in Kent's secondary schools has shown a year on year decrease from 8.19% (2006-07), 7.69% (2007-08) to 7.63% (2008-09). The national average for the rate of overall absence in secondary schools in 2008-09 was 7.21%. Kent's secondary schools ranked 10th out of the 11 statistical neighbours for overall absence in secondary schools in 2008/09. However between 2007/08 and 2008/09 Kent secondary schools' overall absence improved by a greater amount than 5 of the 10 statistical neighbours with whom a comparison can be made (Bedford is a new LA). This greater rate of improvement than all but 4 statistical neighbours can also be seen when tracked over the 4 year period from 2005/06 to 2008/09.

(2) In primary schools, overall absence has shown an increase from 5.22% (2006-07), 5.32% (2007-08) to 5.34% % in 2008-09. The national average for the rate of overall absence in primary schools in 2008-09 was 5.30%. Kent's primary schools ranked 10th out of the 11 statistical neighbours for overall absence in primary schools. Although the trend of absence in primary schools has been rising in Kent and nationally the rise from 2007/08 to 2008/09 in Kent was less than that measured in 6 of the 10 statistical neighbours with whom a comparison can be made, and less than the national rise.

(3) The three year trends reflect the national picture in both phases. In line with the DCSF persistent absence target described in NI87 (see above) Kent's secondary schools across 17 LCSPs have reduced persistent absenteeism since 2007.

(4) The recording of persistent absence within primary schools shows a very slight increase from 1.7% in 2006-07 to 1.8% in 2008-09 which is also in line with the national trend. Primary persistent absence does not yet have a National Indicator set by DCSF, although the benchmark for 2009/10 is 2.5%. All but 3 LCSPs were achieving better than this benchmark as of 2008/09.

4. Analysis of factors which give rise to truancy

(1) In September 2006, the DCSF introduced national absence codes, which enable consistent analysis of specific categories of absence. In Kent schools in 2008-09, illness accounted for 54% of secondary, and 62.7% of primary authorised absence. Holidays taken during term time, whether agreed (authorised) by the school or not (unauthorised), accounted for 5.56% of secondary and 13.44% of primary absence.

(2) The LA and LCSPs are working with schools to take a robust approach to all absence categories, but particularly the two reasons identified above. There is increased agreement of common attendance policies and practice within and across partnerships, increased engagement by schools with the penalty notice process, and early intervention and challenge where parents/carers condone their children's absence. It is of particular note that in successive Attendance and Exclusion Sweeps (formerly known as 'truancy sweeps'), 60% of the children stopped by police and Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) were found to be in the company of a parent/carer or other adult.

5. Attendance and local Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)

(1) According to the most recent DCSF Statistical First Release (April 2010), national figures indicate that absence, both overall and persistent, is generally higher in the most deprived areas, but that this is improving. "The % of resident pupils who are PA in the most deprived areas has continued to fall from 6.1% in 2007/08 to 5.7% in 2008/09. The gap between the % of resident pupils who are PA in the most and least deprived of areas has fallen from 4.9 to 4.4% since 2007/08."

(2) There is a correlation in Kent between the schools with the highest levels of persistent absence and their IMD measure and rank. This is most marked in primary schools with high PA, where six of the worst performing PA schools are ranked in the top 65 for IMD across the county, including 2 in the top 10. In both primary and secondary phases however there are some exceptions.

6. Attendance and Ofsted

(1) Based on each Kent school's most recent Ofsted judgement for attendance the current situation is that 4 secondary schools (4.5%) and 16 primary schools (3.6%) were 'inadequate'. 38 secondary schools (43.2%) and 193 primary schools (43.4%) have a current judgement of 'satisfactory'. No special schools are judged inadequate and 5 are judged satisfactory (20.8%).

(2) There is a direct correlation at secondary level between an 'inadequate' Ofsted judgement for attendance and high levels of persistent absence. Of the 4 secondary schools with an inadequate judgement 3 are among the 10 worst performing secondary schools for persistent absence in Kent.

7. Attendance and age

(1) According to the April 2010 Statistical Release “the % of persistent absentees increases as pupils progress through school. For national curriculum year groups up to year 11, the highest % of persistent absentees is in year 11”. This trend is reflected in the Kent secondary schools where the rate of persistent absence by and large increases as pupils get older.

8. Schools’ attendance policies

(1) The DCSF recognises that there are generally higher rates of attendance in those schools which have a robust whole school approach to attendance with clear policies and procedures understood by all, including parents/carers, children and young people. There are a number of outstanding examples in Kent where a whole school approach to absence in general and persistent absence in particular has made a significant difference. Aylesford School for example has reduced PA from 17.3% in 2005/06 to 4.9% in 2008/09.

(2) Grammar schools in Kent have the lowest rates of persistent absence among secondary schools. This does not necessarily reflect good policies in all instances however, but may be a function of high aspirations, academic expectations and drive.

9. Role of the Education Welfare Officer (EWO)

(1) Education Welfare Officers act on behalf of the LA to fulfil the statutory responsibility of ensuring regular attendance of pupils. They work closely with pupils, families, schools, services and agencies. This includes direct involvement with families as well as support to schools with their policies and procedures. It is worth noting that in this work in Kent, as the largest LA in both the South East and amongst comparator ‘statistical neighbour’ authorities, size does matter.

(2) In order to improve persistent absence in secondary schools by 0.01% Kent EWOs must influence the often entrenched behaviour of 78 pupils and their families. In Hampshire the number is 70, and in all other LAs significantly lower – Surrey (53), W Sussex (40), Oxfordshire (30), E Sussex (27).

(3) Among Kent’s 11 statistical neighbours only Essex, Northamptonshire and Swindon have improved their PA figures by a greater amount than Kent over the period 2005/06 to 2008/09.

(4) Attendance and Behaviour Service Attendance Leaders support schools and LCSPs with specific attendance recording issues that may cause concern to school leaders. A recent example has been the recording of absence when schools are closed due to snow or bad weather, or when schools stay open (Kent’s preferred option) but some children are unable to

get to school. The DCSF 'Absence and Attendance Codes Guidance for Schools and LAs' makes recommendations for various situations, and ABS staff guide schools through the implications. This refers specifically to schools' reporting to the DCSF, and the judgements and explanations that schools make of their own attendance performance for the purposes of Ofsted. At face value there would appear to be a perverse incentive, where the code used for absence recording does not count against the school or LA, whereas a school that remains open may be required to explain the absence of pupils who could have attended but didn't.

10. Measures taken at county and at LCSP level to reduce persistent absence

- The DCSF prioritised persistent absence over the past 3 years, and has identified secondary schools in each LA with a specific proportion of pupils identified as persistently absent. The DCSF benchmark for identification in 2009/10 is 6.1%. 41 schools in Kent were identified by the DCSF (based on Autumn 08/Spring 09 census figures) with over 6.1% persistent absence. These schools are required to provide half-termly data to the LA for submission to the DCSF to enable the schools, the LA and the DCSF to monitor progress. The Attendance & Behaviour Service (ABS) is targeting support, intervention and challenge to these schools on behalf of the LA, and engaging with School Improvement Partners (SIPs) so that they are informed and focused in their role of support and challenge to all schools.
- National Strategies Regional Advisers are working in support of Kent to reduce persistent absence. The recent evaluation by Kent's Regional Adviser (RA) on Attendance rated Kent as 'on trajectory' to meet the 2010/11 goal of 5%. The RA stated that 'reducing persistent absence is high profile in Kent with clear high level strategic engagement, and that targeted intervention from the LA had resulted in significant reductions in levels of persistent absence.'
- ABS and National Strategies Regional Advisers held a County Conference in Nov 2009 for the school attendance leaders in the 41 priority schools. The objective was to support schools with the new Ofsted framework, and to disseminate proven strategies for reducing persistent absence. The event was opened by CFE Managing Director, which highlighted the level of importance with which this issue is regarded in the LA. The event was highly evaluated by participant schools, with the attendance leaders (members of schools' Senior Leadership Teams) of 39 of the 41 PA priority schools present.
- ABS Attendance Leaders have an ongoing programme of visits to Headteachers and school attendance leaders in the priority schools. They work in partnership with schools on policies and procedures in order to ensure a whole school approach to attendance, data analysis to inform

actions, a focus on vulnerable pupils, early intervention and parental engagement.

- ABS works closely with SIPs to ensure the shared priority of linking attendance and learning outcomes. Attendance is a standing item for discussion on the agenda of each of the SIPs requisite visits to schools.
- Schools have clear processes for the referral of individual pupils whose attendance is causing concern to the LA via Education Welfare Officers. There is a range of strategies for support, including family group conferencing, multi-agency intervention through CAF/Team around the Child arrangements, and parenting contracts.
- Use of parental responsibility measures include:
 - the issuing of penalty notices by the ABS at the request of Headteachers for unauthorised absence. Approx 1300 were issued in each of the past two years (2007/08 and 2008/09). There were 200-300 prosecutions in each of the past two years in Magistrates' Courts following non payment of penalty notices.
 - Prosecution of parents for failure to ensure their children's regular attendance at school. Approximately 400 parents prosecuted by the ABS in each of the past two years.
 - Most LCSPs have, or are developing, Partnership or District attendance policies to ensure consistency of practice for schools and parents in a locality.
 - Colleagues in LCSPs are working to provide local support for families and vulnerable young people, where needs and circumstances may undermine attendance (e.g. children with health needs, Looked After Children, young carers, families whose first language is not English, teenage parents).

11. Partnership between EWOs, police and schools

(1) There is a very effective partnership between the Attendance & Behaviour Service (ABS) and the police:

- ABS District and Court Co-ordinators attend Community Safety Partnership meetings re issues affecting local areas and individual young people
- EWOs and Kent police carry out Attendance & Exclusion Sweeps (previously called Truancy Sweeps). The purpose of these is to identify children and young people out of education, to target anti-social behaviour and to raise awareness in the community.
- ABS contribute to the induction programme for Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) to raise awareness of attendance issues

- EWOs and schools link locally with community police, PCSOs and Community Wardens
- Targeted support is given to pupils known to the Youth Offending Service (YOS) to ensure that pupils are in education or training, in order to improve outcomes and reduce opportunities to engage in anti-social behaviour.

12. Reports from general public

(1) Reports to the LA from the general public are always acted on. This may involve, for example, visiting a home to ascertain if a child is missing from education or liaising with community police if there are reports of anti social behaviour.

13. Next steps

- Complete review of Kent Attendance Strategy to ensure sustained improvement in attendance for Kent's pupils. This will need involvement and consultation with all stakeholders, including young people and parents, to ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities. This will need 'sign up' from partner services and agencies, including schools, Children's Services, Learning, Health, Police, and community organisations.
- Improve use and analysis of data to inform support and actions for schools and LA.
- Develop links and protocols at the new District level to ensure attendance remains a priority and vulnerable children are supported.
- ABS to continue to support schools with strategies for improving attendance and reducing persistent absence, including prioritising those schools with identified need.

14. Recommendations

Recommendations:

Members of the Learning and Development Children, Families and Education Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note this report for information.

Chris Berry

Head of Attendance and Behaviour Service (Acting)

01622 696367

Chris.berry@kent.gov.uk

Background Documents: None

Other Useful Information: None