

Children and Young People Select Committee

A meeting of the Children and Young People Select Committee was held on Wednesday 13 March 2024.

Present: Cllr Carol Clark (Chair), Cllr Barbara Inman (Vice-Chair), Cllr Ray Godwin, Cllr David Reynard, Cllr Stephen Richardson, Cllr Paul Rowling, Cllr Emily Tate, Cllr Sally Ann Watson, Cllr Katie Weston

Officers: Vanessa Housley, Eddie Huntington, Mandie Rowlands, Sharon Stevens (ChS); Gary Woods (CS)

Also in attendance: None

Apologies: None

1	Evacuation Procedure The evacuation procedure was noted.
2	Declarations of Interest There were no interests declared.
3	Minutes Consideration was given to the minutes of the Children and Young People Select Committee meeting which was held on 14 February 2024 for approval and signature. AGREED that the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 14 February 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.
4	Scrutiny Review of Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment The latest evidence-gathering session for the Committee's ongoing review of Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment focused on a recent report that had been presented to the Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) Cabinet regarding school performance 2022-2023 for vulnerable pupils. A supplementary paper containing national, regional, Tees Valley, and Stockton-on-Tees attendance data released by the Department for Education (DfE) for the Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023 terms was also tabled for information. This annual report on vulnerable groups across the Borough enabled Cabinet to monitor educational standards and achievements, and to evaluate the impact of Local Authority monitoring, challenge, intervention, and support. The report presented a summary analysis of vulnerable pupil performance in the academic year 2022-2023 for all key stages and all providers in the Borough, and was informed by the latest available data (some of which remained unvalidated) and compared to national averages where they existed. It included performance outcomes for:

- Pupils in receipt of Pupil Premium Funding
- Performance by gender
- Black and Minority Ethnic children
- Children and Young People in Our Care
- Children with Special Needs
- Attendance and exclusion figures for Stockton-on-Tees

Introduced by the SBC Assistant Director – Education, Inclusion & Achievement, the report began with data / statistics relating to pupils identified as vulnerable within the Borough, and then described what had worked well, and any areas for development / challenges, for each of the six categories listed above. SBC officers present noted an encouraging development in terms of a forthcoming meeting within the community to address some of the issues emerging from the outcomes noted in the report.

Key issues highlighted and discussed were as follows:

- Members felt the term ‘vulnerable’ should also acknowledge young carers and questioned whether all such individuals were known to services. It was acknowledged that the Cabinet report centred on a finite number of groups and did not include young carers – however, they were factored into the ‘Closing the Gap’ Network and services utilised Eastern Ravens to identify young carers and address the challenges they faced. The Equalities Network also signposted such groups to available support.
- The issue of children from the travelling community coming into and leaving education during a school year was raised. Whilst numbers were likely to be low, a growing concern was the increasing prevalence of ‘working poor’, a cohort which may require inclusion when considering future school performance.
- The Committee recognised that there were a number of reasons for disruptive behaviour at school, though queried how much of this was a challenge / pushback to being punished in the first place. Officers reinforced the need for everyone to be on the same page when it came to making ‘reasonable adjustments’ in relation to behaviour which may be perceived as inappropriate, and also noted that actions which made a positive difference for one child may not work / be appropriate for others.
- Members asked why girls’ reading performance at the end of Key Stage 2 had become worse – officers stated this required further investigation.
- Referencing the supplementary attendance statistics, the Committee commented that whilst the data suggested SBC was broadly matching many of the regional / national averages, the additional context outlined within the Cabinet report demonstrated that local performance was very encouraging given wider issues around funding restrictions and external factors such as cost-of-living pressures. Officers added that the ‘detail’ page at the start of the Cabinet report had been included to explain (but not to excuse) context, and that the Council remained ambitious for children and young people within the Borough.
- Officers raised the issue of persistent absences from school and the potential for this to be linked to incidences of crime and disorder.

Recently published crime figures had shown an increase in reported incidents during the school day, and the Council / schools could be viewed as complicit in this activity if they were not following up on pupil absence.

- Bringing those young people who had become disaffected with education back into the fold was discussed, including what the curriculum should look like to encourage attendance. Members were informed of a pilot which was soon to commence around different curriculum options.
- Continuing this theme, the Committee expressed concern that education had become overly focused on academia and did not appeal to a significant proportion of young people, nor equip them for their futures. At the same time, local schools being in line with national performance (e.g. maths) did not mean that this was good enough.
- Members were wary about the term 'targeted support', a concept which had been promoted nationally (particularly in relation to COVID-recovery plans) but had not always been adequately supported or realised. Officers considered that the most effective help for a pupil was when their teachers fully understood their needs / challenges and provided consistent help.
- The Committee asked if the rate of permanent exclusions / suspensions was having a detrimental impact on staff recruitment and retention. Officers acknowledged that, for some school personnel, such cases did adversely affect their desire to enter / remain within the sector, though many were very resilient and understanding of the numerous factors which may be contributing to problematic pupil behaviour. Ultimately, schools had a duty to protect / support staff (which included the provision of appropriate training), many of whom were working with vulnerable pupils and those on the edge of care. A further pilot in relation to support for teachers in this regard was noted.
- Members further probed the existing landscape around school recruitment and retention, with officers commenting that the level of Teaching Assistants (TAs) was currently the most significant cause for concern, particularly for those schools with a higher proportion of pupils with additional needs. Conversely, Head Teacher recruitment was very positive, with a high volume and standard of applications for vacant posts. From a retention point-of-view, new teachers were only remaining in the profession for around three years on average, and a number of senior school leaders were also leaving (often citing behaviour of pupils and complaints from fellow staff or parents). Members noted the move to a nine-day fortnight for schools in other parts of the country (presumably to assist with staff recruitment / retention), though felt that many young people and their parents / carers may not be as enthused about such an arrangement. Officers highlighted that Gateshead Council was having some positive results in terms of reduced exclusions, principally as a result of schools making 'reasonable adjustments' (a required part of the educational code of practice).

Attention turned to the recent '*Reducing the Educational Attainment Gap*' stakeholder event which took place last week (8 March 2024). The Committee Chair spoke of a very positive day which comprised powerful

speeches, an excellent networking opportunity for those in attendance from a variety of interested parties (Councillors, Council officers, charities, schools), and the raising and discussion of numerous ideas which may help in addressing this scrutiny topic.

An important element of the stakeholder gathering was the relaying of feedback following engagement with schools, pupils, and parents / carers around educational attendance. For the benefit of those Members who could not be present at last week's event, the SBC Service Lead – Education and Wellbeing, the SBC Service Lead – Early Support and Projects, and the SBC Team Manager – Inclusion and Vulnerable Learners led the Committee through the main features of the feedback which covered:

- Schools (primary and secondary): top challenges and those areas of concern which had increased since 2022-2023.
- Pupil Voice (those on the edge of disengagement, not, for example, school council students who were generally engaged): how they learn well; what gets in the way of learning in school / home; what would help them stay in school; what activities they would like to do in / after school that did not currently happen.
- Parent / Carer Voice: how their child learns best; what gets in the way of their learning; what a 'good' and 'bad' school day looks like for the parent / carer; what their ambition was for their child; how they link with school.

The importance of building and maintaining teacher / pupil / parent / carer relationships was readily apparent throughout the feedback received.

An electronic questionnaire (comprising three separate sets of questions for either primary school pupils, secondary school pupils, or parents / carers with school pupils) was also administered to gain further insight on similar 'pupil voice' learning themes as listed above – this was still live and was due to close on 19 April 2024. It was noted that responses to some questions involved pre-loaded answers, though opportunities for an expansion on the option chosen was provided.

Reasons for and barriers to attendance were then highlighted (including pastoral, school curriculum / process, and multi-agency factors), as were efforts to eliminate school absence (involving pastoral, support mechanisms, and rewards v sanctions considerations). Reference was made to a previously published report around 'understanding attendance' which could be circulated to the Committee if required.

Key issues highlighted and discussed were as follows:

- Officers stated that there was an apparent dip in school attendance between Year 7 and Year 8 (secondary education), with the Committee subsequently debating the reasons for this. Members felt that some pupils may not see as much value in Year 8 given it fell between their first experience of secondary school (Year 7) and their decision on which GCSE subjects to opt for (Year 9).

- Members noted the original ethos of the Ingleby Manor Free School (including a longer school day with academic lessons in the morning and other elements held in the afternoon), and asked whether, in light of the questionnaire feedback, this was an arrangement which could be re-looked at. Officers stated that, as the school had now been brought into an academy structure, it was unlikely to return to its original way of operating – that said, stakeholders across the Borough were investigating any potential flexibility around the existing school curriculum requirement.
- The Committee contrasted those aspects which young people reportedly liked / valued about school (which appeared to be ‘emotional’ elements) with those which caused them issues (which appeared to more ‘functional’ / ‘practical’). It therefore seemed prudent to concentrate future focus on ‘emotional’ factors / support.
- Members spoke of their awareness of pupil fatigue / tiredness which was impacting upon the ability to learn – the apparent constancy of mobile phone / device use was deemed a major factor here.
- Mindful of the increasing prevalence of commentary around ‘woke’ interventions (felt by some to be unnecessary), Members stated that measures put in place by schools to support pupils (particularly those considered vulnerable) were very much necessary. From a staff perspective, teaching could sometimes be an intimidating role, and the drive to achieve national targets could undermine staff who were having to manage a range of challenging situations within the classroom.
- It was noted that attendance policies could be adversarial, and that care was needed around ‘rewarding’ attendance when some young people experienced environments which could, and indeed does, impact on their ability / motivation to access school at all times.
- Building relationships was acknowledged as a key necessity, and reported experiences of negative relationships between school staff and pupils and / or parents / carers was concerning. Members highlighted the significant level of responsibility / tasks that teachers already had – taking the required time to develop positive relationships whilst managing existing demands could be difficult.
- Members queried if a lack of in- / after-school clubs was contributing to attendance issues as out-of-classroom activity could often aid staff-pupil relationships. Officers noted that many schools now employ external providers to deliver extra-curricular activities due to the workload of their staff.
- Discussion took place on the merits / challenges of some pupils being placed in mainstream education when it may be felt that they would benefit from a more specialised setting. Members and officers agreed that, as far as possible, young people should access mainstream providers, though this should not be to their detriment.

Concluding this item, the Committee Chair reminded those present about the next stakeholder event taking place on 22 March 2024 (11.00am – 3.00pm) and encouraged Members to attend where possible.

AGREED that the information presented be noted.

5	Select Committee Work Programme The Committee's next meeting was scheduled for 17 April 2024 input from primary and secondary schools was planned. AGREED that the Work Programme be noted.
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