
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICY AND STRATEGY

Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Chris McEwan, Children's Services Portfolio

Responsible Director – Geoff Pennington, Director of Education

Purpose of Report

1. This report introduces a new attendance policy, strategy and guidelines for implementation and seeks Council approval. The new policy and strategy include a response to the new powers available to local authorities to issue penalty notices to parents for the non-attendance of children at school.

Information and Analysis

2. The revised attendance policy, strategy and guidelines are attached to this report as appendices 1 to 8.
3. The current policy was agreed by Members in 2001. However, it is timely to review the policy and the arrangements to implement that policy now as new powers and strategies have been developed to address promoting and securing good levels of attendance at school.
4. The new policy, strategy and guidelines focus more on inter agency working. The Educational Welfare Service (EWS), the Education Department based service charged with carrying out the statutory functions of the Local Authority with respect to attendance at school, works closely with the Police. It carries out regular joint 'truancy sweeps' whereby an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) and a Police Officer together 'sweep' areas where young people may be found during the school day. Names and addresses of young people found out of school are taken, and the absence from school followed up with the parent/carer. A truancy sweep undertaken during November of last year identified 90 children out of school in a single day.
5. To support further the capacity of local authorities to secure attendance at school, powers to issue penalty notices are being made available. This report proposes that these powers be given to each individual Educational Welfare Officer employed by Darlington Borough Council, as permitted under the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003. The act empowers headteachers, the Police and the LEA to issue penalty notices, as set out in Appendix 7 of this report.
6. A draft code of conduct has been developed by the EWS to describe how and when the penalty notices will be used (see Appendix 7). These notices are not intended to be an early stage intervention and will be used in cases of overt truancy, where a pupil's non attendance has fallen below 80% and other interventions have not improved attendance.

7. Subject to Council approval, the use of penalty notices will be introduced from January 2005, and members may wish to receive an early report on how these powers are being used, and the impact of them on improving attendance at school.
8. There are now opportunities to work proactively with Uniformed Wardens, which are currently being explored. It is important in deterring children from absenting themselves from school, and discouraging parents/carers from taking their children out of schools on a casual basis, for example to make shopping trips, that there is a disincentive. The risk of being stopped, either by an EWO, a police officer or a Uniformed Warden, should they be given the powers to stop members of the public, will provide this disincentive and help to support good levels of attendance at schools.
9. The service employs a range of other responses to secure and support good levels of school attendance, and many of these are set out in the attached documentation. These include working with groups of pupils in schools, working with staff in schools, providing parenting classes and many other support activities and, in extremis, prosecuting parents.
10. The funding accessed through the LPSA is supporting a publicity campaign which began in September 2004. This encompasses posters, adverts on buses, radio adverts, leaflets, banners and a small amount of additional staffing.
11. The service is now better placed to support improving school attendance. Staffing is more stable and there is a greater focus on joint agency working. These improvements, along with the capacity to issue Penalty Notices, and the benefits of working more closely in particular with the Uniformed Wardens will support improved school attendance. Also, consultation with schools has identified an issue about parental holidays in term time. The draft strategy and guidelines (see appendix 5) take a harder line on authorising such absences other than in exceptional circumstances.
12. It is of critical importance that as well as Council services focussing on assertive approaches to promoting school attendance, that schools do everything they can to encourage children to attend school, through providing appropriate and engaging curricular opportunities; rewards for good attendance and by working closely with parents and communities, in particular at the point when problems are just beginning to emerge, to create schools as a place where young people want to be.
13. A recent focus of the work of the EWS has been around publicity, and to this end leaflets and advertising stands have been produced and promoted, to put positive messages about school attendance before parents/cares and children. This approach needs to be built upon and the new attendance policy and strategy launched with a co-ordinated media campaign to maximise its impact.

Outcome of Consultation

14. Headteachers and governing bodies have been consulted on this draft policy and strategy and where appropriate, the comments made have been incorporated.

Legal Implications

15. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough

Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

16. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Council Policy Framework

17. The issues contained within this report represent a change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework

Recommendation

18. It is recommended that: -
- (a) Council approve the new Attendance Policy attached as annex 1; and
 - (b) the Education Welfare Service be authorised to issue Penalty Notices within the constraints of the local code, as shown in Appendix 7 of the Attendance Policy and Guidelines.

Reasons

19. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-
- (a) To ensure that the Authority has an up to date Attendance Strategy; and
 - (b) To enable new powers of issuing penalty notices to be adopted.

Geoffrey Pennington

Background Papers

Attendance Policy and Guidelines (annex 1)

author Gail Bowen : Extension 2881