

ATTENDANCE AT KEY STAGE 1 AND RECEPTION REVIEW GROUP

17TH October, 2011

PRESENT – Councillors C. Taylor, Curry, Lister, T. Richmond, J. Vasey; and D. Moyes.

OFFICERS – George McQueen, Head of Education Services; Jenni Cooke, Assistant Director Children, Families and Learning; Chris Archer, Lead Officer Early Years; and Allison Hill, Democratic Officer.

PURPOSE OF MEETING – This was the first meeting of the Review Group and the purpose of the meeting was to receive and overview of the current situation with attendance at Key Stage 1 and Reception within the borough's schools and also to approve the terms of reference for the Review.

DISCUSSION:

- Members received a presentation from the Head of Education Service to provide some background on the current legislation relating to school attendance; the importance of attendance; and how Darlington is doing on attendance generally compared to regional neighbours and the national average.
- At primary and secondary level, Darlington is comparable with regional neighbours and national average, however at Key Stage 1 is lower than regional neighbours, lower than statistical neighbours and lower than the national average. However, attendance is improving rather than declining but it is still too low.
- Chris Archer spoke to Members on the Early Years Foundation Stage which covers the period of a child's life from birth to the end of Reception and give details of the various settings a child may be in including maintained nursery places and Private, Voluntary and Independent nursery places i.e. daycare, playgroups, pre-school, childminders and independent schools. Members also examined the models of access to nursery Flexible Free Entitlement (FFE) which differs upon the type of setting and also examined the differences in session attendance.
- It was noted that children can be encouraged to attend school at 4 but this cannot be enforced until the child is 5 years old and there are a number of parents who elected not to send their children until they are 5 years old.
- Members undertook a simple mapping exercise to determine what effect different factors had on school attendance, whether they always, sometimes or never effected attendance. Factors included Family Intervention Teams; closer work with Children's Services; Home School Liaison; Education Welfare Officer Intervention; Incentives to Parents; Withholding benefits; Fast track prosecutions; and Incentives to Schools.
- Analysis of the exercise carried out amongst the Members showed that generally opinion was equal as to the importance of family intervention teams, work with children's services and home liaison on attendance. Factors that Members though

sometimes may help attendance were Education Welfare Visits to homes, incentives for schools and parents and factors that would never help would be fact tracking prosecutions and withholding benefits.

- During the exercise Members made further suggestions for increasing attendance to include wider family liaison and school to home liaison; school policies to contact families if a child is not in school without an explanation by 10 am.; flexibility with 'Rising 5's' admission policy to Reception Class; and raising the age for school starters.
- Members considered the draft Terms of Reference for the Review and agreed to forward to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Meeting on 31st October, 2011 for approval.
- Members also discussed the impact of traveller families upon attendance levels and other ethnic minorities and also the proportion of domiciled travellers not attending.

FUTURE ACTIONS:

- Invite the Traveller Education Service to attend the next meeting.
- Examine good practise in neighbouring authorities.
- Speak with the Schools Forum for incentives.
- Case studies on non-attendance and literature reviews.
- Examine policies for attendance within the 4 star authorities.
- Examine consistency of approach across the schools within the Borough. Liaise with Head Teachers.

**ATTENDANCE AT KEY STAGE 1 AND RECEPTION –TASK AND FINISH
REVIEW
6TH DECEMBER, 2011**

PRESENT – Councillors Lister, C. Taylor, J. Vasey; Bob Egan; Murray Rose, Director of People; Anita Hamer, Development and Commissioning Manager 12-19; Lynne Henderson, Development and Commissioning Manager 0-11; Deborah Archer, 0-19 Area 2 Service Co-ordinator and Lindsey Armstrong, Family Support Officer Area 3; and Janine Lowther, Traveller Education Service.

APOLOGIES - Councillors Crudass, Galletley and T. Richmond; D. Moyes.

DISCUSSION:

- Councillor Taylor outlined the purpose of the Review which was to examine the problems in Reception and Key Stage 1 with attendance and advised that the Group had already agreed that to introduce any form of ‘punishment’ was not the solution. There should be more incentives in place to encourage parents at Nursery stage, although it was accepted that attendance is not compulsory until 5 years of age. He also advised Members of the Group that he had recently written to all Primary School Heads and to date had received responses back from St. John’s and St. Augustines advising him of how they had tackled issues of non- attendance. He also advised the officers that the Group had considered the idea of flexible starting times across the different settings.
- Murray Rose advised Members that the local authority had tried to reshape services around attendance however the responsibility rests with parents and schools , the local authority can only support and give encouragement to the schools. School attendance had improved over the last two years. There is a lot of best practice in schools and ways to share this are continually being explored. He agreed that parents need to be encouraged as to the benefits of their child attending school and that a publicity campaign would be a low cost and effective measure to get the message across. It is generally assumed also that if children do not attend in early years they are more likely to continue to have poor attendance, at a later stage, followed by poorer outcomes. Family trends also impact on attendance.
- Anita Hamer advised Members that statistical information showed that attendance improved from YR1 to YR2 and previous research had shown that attendance improved from Reception to Y1 which would indicate that parents do not understand how important education is when the children are at a young age and that they are still learning through structured play.
- Lynne Henderson agreed that there is a perception among some parents that at a young age they are ‘just playing’ so a campaign around the importance of learning from play would have its benefits. She also advised Members of a provision from September 2013 for ‘disadvantaged’ 2 year olds to offer child care places, which it is

hoped will then encourage the take up of free nursery provision at 3 years of age and thus encouraging the importance of continuing their child in 'group settings'. A recent piece of work suggested that only 86% of eligible 3 and 4 year olds are accessing their Flexible Free Entitlement of 15 hours per week but further interrogation of the data and a short survey to parents indicated that approximately less than 50 had not accessed any pre-school provision. It was also noted that there needs to be an understanding of why parents are not taking up the nursery provision for their 3 year olds.

- Deborah Archer advised Members of the targeted support in Primary Schools for those parents where there are problems. The transition from nursery to reception being a key transition stage. It was also highlighted that another key stage of transition is from home to nursery and getting that message across to parents is key in take up of provision along the way. Again the role of the parent being key to a child's attendance.
- Bob Egan referred to a Poster which used to be available in secondary schools containing hard hitting messages of what the costs could be to your child if their attendance falls. He also asked if any research had been done in relating absences to birth dates, are younger children in a year group more likely to be absent?
- Following general discussion it was suggested that schools could commence the rolling programme on school/parent education a lot earlier, and not just a couple of meetings prior to their child starting school. This may have an impact on attendance by showing the importance of school attendance and allaying any doubts/fears parents may have in sending their young child to School.
- It was also suggested that maybe the attitudes of school staff on late attendance and how this is directed to parents may impact on future attendance. Parents have a responsibility in allowing their child to attend school however schools also have a responsibility to work with parents initially. Murray referred to a piece of research he had previously undertaken on Yr7-Yr11 pupils in secondary education and the escalated pattern of continued absenteeism, triggered by the consequences of the initial absence, which there was generally a genuine reason for.
- Reference was made to the new Pupil Premium which schools can use to work with the more deprived communities and to target those families which struggle with attendance.
- A question was asked as to whether any research had been done on the benefits of school breakfast clubs and Janine Lowther confirmed that in her role with the

Traveller Service this was a very useful resource and did impact on attendance and the difficulties experienced by families getting to one or more settings.

- A question was asked if the reason why Darlington had particularly lower attendance in Reception and KS1 than its neighbouring authorities was because of the travelling community and Janine Lowther confirmed that non-attendance is as a result of the travelling patterns and is throughout the school years so the Travellers do not just affect KS1 and Reception. In 2010/11 there were 19 YR 1 traveller children out of 1268 so this did not have an overall significant effect on attendance figures. It was also confirmed that the travelling community usually do take up nursery provision.
- Members concluded that some form of publicity campaign, including leaflets and posters, to advise parents of the importance of attendance is required and also schools to be encouraged to work with families earlier, especially new families. Lynne Henderson advised Members that there is some 3-4 year old funding available that could be used for this purpose and they had already addressed the need for some form of education campaign.