

Report to	Performance Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting	26th September 2024
Lead Member / Officer	Cllr Diane King (Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People)
Head of Service	Geraint Davies (Head of Education)
Report author	Wayne Wheatley, Education Social Work
Title	Promote School Attendance and Engagement in Education

1. What is the report about?

- 1.1. The report provides the current position with regards to School attendance and engagement in education and the response taken to address matters when concern exists at individual pupil level in Denbighshire.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

- 2.1. To provide information and explain the measures in place to support vulnerable pupils to re-engage with their education and provide an understanding of the regional and national context in addressing the current level of concern nationally.

3. What are the Recommendations?

- 3.1 Scrutiny are invited to discuss the details of this report and to identify any matters raised that require further clarity or examination in the future.

4. Report details

- 4.1 School attendance rates in 2018/19 pre- pandemic school year ended with primary schools achieving an overall figure of 94.8% and secondary schools 93.7%.
- 4.2 The Wales average attendance for Primary / Secondary combined for the academic year September 2023 to June 2024 was 90.6%. This is an increase from 89.2% over

the same period in 2022/23 across Wales. In Denbighshire the overall figure for Primary / Secondary combined for the academic year 2023 / 2024 was 89.9 %, which equates to 0.7 % less than the Wales average. Nationally, 10.3 % of pupils met the persistent absence threshold of 10% of sessions missed for the academic year which is again an improvement from 12.9% over the same period in 2022/23. Denbighshire figure was 15.2% for the same period 2022/23.

- 4.3 Lynne Neagle MS Cabinet Secretary for Education has recently announced plans to bring Wales in line with England where persistent absence is defined as 10% of half day sessions missed (30 sessions) rather than the current 20% absence rate of persistent absence which equates to 60 half day sessions a year.
- 4.4 Denbighshire has received additional WG funding through the Local Authority Education Grant (LAEG) to address and support education and schools. We are continuing to develop cohesive community links across the authority to address this current trend and have a strong focus on community belonging and access to services. This ensures children access their right to a full-time education entitlement but also receive access to services broader and wider than just education alone. As part of this, we have developed a pupil engagement strategy which draws upon the many services supporting this agenda and sets a clear strategic direction for the service.
- 4.5 Improving school attendance is the agreed priority for this school year for all teams within Education services, working with schools to monitor and support pupils' engagement. This forms part of the revised attendance policy of the county linked to Welsh Government guidance [Belonging, Engagement and Participation](#) and reflects the key themes and expectations of actions by local authorities. The new template attendance policy for 2024/25 (**Appendix 1**) provided to schools by Denbighshire Education ensures compliance, effective management and support.
- 4.6 Education Welfare Service has direct responsibility for school attendance in Denbighshire. Utilising Welsh Government grant funding for 2024/25, the service has increased staff capacity and appointed two family engagement officers and one attendance officer. These staff support schools and families and provide regular contact and in-depth work to promote attendance, supporting and at times challenging the "parent" through the service's statutory duties to engage and participate in their child's education. An open-door ethos and culture is promoted

across all schools in the county. Furthermore, an emphasis on the parent feeling valued and welcomed to work with schools is in place, with varying offers to participate through activities, meetings and informal chats at school; offering the chance to meet and understand how the parent can make a difference. Additional Community Focused School grant funding for 2024/25 has enabled both the School Counselling Service and Early Years family link worker to form part of the services offered to families based on referrals from schools related to attendance concerns. This additional support will assist where mental health, social anxiety and early access to education is a significant factor.

4.8 Denbighshire Education is implementing a new reduced timetable policy for schools. This addresses the local and national concerns surrounding the numbers of pupils on reduced school days for a variety of reasons including health and wider social, attendance and behavioural needs. The policy offers a consistent process for tracking and monitoring of pupils including where schools must inform Denbighshire Education when they are considering implementing a reduced timetable plan for a pupil. An audit is currently being undertaken to have an accurate position on this work with the implementation of the new policy.

There is no single solution, one group or one service that can address this issue.

4.10 The local authority is looking at the scope in which recent reforms in Curriculum for Wales, Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (ALNET) (Wales) Act 2018, and the resources and connections within the authority services can place attendance of pupils within its remit of work as a priority.

4.11 The scope of the above in turn addresses many issues children deal with daily: apathy, despondency and more worrying mental health and well-being which has increased significantly since 2018 onwards. Most if not all referrals from schools to the Education Welfare Service have a repeating theme of the above issues.

4.12 Currently the overall performance of Denbighshire is 89.9 %, the average across Wales from September to June 2024 is 90.6%. A more detailed analysis of our current position regarding authorised and unauthorised absence over the last three academic years is available in **Appendix 2**.

4.13 A whole school approach is common across Denbighshire schools where all staff regardless of role can make a difference to a child in a school setting that places

the child central to all its work with a common interest of learning, care and well-being. Schools have pastoral teams and support staff in place, working with pupils to improve learning outcomes but also understanding the care of our vulnerable learners who are subject to adverse childhood experiences, complex family issues, poverty, disadvantage and increasing mental health, anxiety and disengagement issues.

4.14 A series of guides have been created to support schools and families to understand the expectations around good attendance and also provide clarity through a series of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

4.15 Fixed penalty notices are used as a measure where all efforts to engage a parent have failed by school, this is in line with the current guidance from the Welsh Government.

Fixed Penalty Notices	School Year	Warning issued	Fines Issued
	2021/ 2022	42	7
	2022/2023	234	22
Current School Year	2023/2024	483	76

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Plan 2022 to 2027: The Denbighshire We Want?

5.1 This area of work contributes towards making Denbighshire a place where young people want to live and work and have the skills to do so. It also contributes to make Denbighshire a place where young people can flourish and have the best start in life regardless of any issues or challenges they may be facing.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

6.1 The local authority is supported by external grants to address the current level of concern nationally and locally regarding the impact of poor attendance and the progress to regain and surpass the levels achieved back in 2018/19. If the funding were to reduce in the future settlement from the Welsh Government a review would need to be taken to look at the strategic direction of the county relating to the future

investment to support this high priority area. Denbighshire has a clear understanding that Welsh Government's current focus is to promote engagement of all learners.

7. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment?

7.1 There is no decision or proposal for change required and therefore a Well-being Impact Assessment is not required.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

8.1. Discussions are ongoing with headteachers to inform policy changes and support. This area was discussed at Performance Scrutiny in January 2024.

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

9.1 As set out within section 6 of the report.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

10.1 The risks of not achieving the WG and LA strategic objective will potentially see a lower number of children accessing school regularly in Denbighshire; this work will mitigate against those risks.

11. Power to make the decision.

11.1 Education Act 1996 – Section 444

11.2 Scrutiny's powers in respect of this matter are detailed in Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000 and Section 7 of the Council's Constitution.