RHONDDA CYNON TAF

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2020- 2021

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

24th MARCH 2021

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

1. **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

   The purpose of this report is provide Members of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee with information regarding unauthorised absence levels of pupils in Rhondda Cynon Taf following concerns raised by Members of the Audit Committee.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

   It is recommended that Members:

2.1 Review the information contained in the report attached at Appendix 1:

2.2. Consider whether they wish to scrutinise in greater depth any matters contained in the report.

3. **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

3.1 For the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee to consider the concerns raised by the Audit Committee at its meetings held on the 5th October 2020 and 2nd November 2020.

4. **BACKGROUND**

4.1 At its meeting on the 5th October 2020 Audit Committee considered the

"Finalised Audit Assignments Report", where a number of priorities were identified relating to 'Attendance, Referrals and Intervention' and 'Post 16-Planning and Funding',

4.2 Following the consideration of the report Audit Committee agreed that Officers from Education and inclusion Services attend the Meeting on the 2nd November 2020 to discuss some of the findings.

4.2 Members of the Audit Committee considered the presentation of the Director of Education, Members also discussed post-16 attendance and an issue. The main concerns from the report was the level of unauthorised absences for statutory school age and post 16 settings.

4.3 The Audit Committee resolved to refer these matters to the Children and Young people Scrutiny Committee for consideration in greater detail.

4.4 Following scrutiny and challenge of thus report and the information contained with these appendices member may wish to consider, if appropriate, making recommendations to the Council's Cabinet on this matter or seek further information from officers. Members may also consider seeking appropriate evidence as part of member's enquiries in request of this area, should committee determine to explore and scrutiny this subject as part of future work programming.

4.5 Members of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee formed a Scrutiny Working Group to scrutinise School Non-Attendance Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) and their impact on improving attendance and decreasing absenteeism. The Working Group acknowledged the procedures that were already in place and considered how to improve upon them.

4.6 The Working Group formed a number of recommendations based on the work that they had undertaken, along with the feedback that had been received from Headteacher, Schools staff and Governors. However due to the Covid 19 Pandemic it has not been possible to finally conclude the Report. Members of the Working Group will reconvene as soon as they are able to finalise any outstanding Items.

5. **CONCLUSION**

5.1 Excellent school attendance is key to raising educational outcomes. In addition schools play a pivotal role in safeguarding children and young people, ensuring their positive social and emotional wellbeing, which would not be possible without their engagement in education.

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no Equality and Diversity implications arising from this report and no Equality Impact Assessment is deemed necessary for the purposes of this report.

7. CONSULTATION

7.1 There are no consultations implications arising from the content of the report

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

9. LINKS TO CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

9.1 Education performance has a clear link to the Council's priority of Building a Strong Economy. Improved attendance processes and therefore attendance will have a positive impact on this priority.

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2020-21

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

24TH MARCH 2021

UNAUTHORISED ABSENCE & POST-16 ATTENDANCE

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION & INCLUSION SERVICES

Author(s):   Daniel Williams, Head of Attendance and Wellbeing
Tel: 01443 744298

1.   PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1   The purpose of this report is to provide Members with information regarding unauthorised absence levels for statutory school ages and also Post-16 attendance following concerns raised by members of Audit Committee.

2.   RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

2.1   Scrutinise and comment on the information contained within this report.

2.2   Consider whether they wish to scrutinise in greater depth any matters contained in the report.

3.   BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

3.1   During internal audits relating to 'Attendance, Referrals and Intervention' and 'Post-16 Planning and Funding', a number of priorities were identified. The 'Attendance, Referrals and Intervention' audit was discussed by Audit Committee on the 5th of October 2020 and members requested Education and Inclusion Service representation at their meeting on the 2nd of November 2020 to discuss some of the findings. During this meeting, post-16 attendance was also discussed as an issue raised in the 'Post-16 Planning and Funding' audit report.

3.2   The main concerns from the report surrounded unauthorised absence levels for statutory school ages and for post-16, settings not always maintaining class registers for academic lessons as well as Key Skills/Welsh Baccalaureate lessons.

3.3   The Audit Committee resolved to refer these matters to Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee for consideration in greater detail.

4.   UNAUTHORISED ABSENCE

4.1   The concern raised by Audit Committee surrounded high levels of unauthorised absence levels in the secondary and through schools which were sampled. A specific concern surrounded one setting having 6,325 unauthorised sessions during that period – this equated to 4.8%. The sample period was between 1st September 2019 and 29th November 2019. Please see Appendix One for the table presented in the original audit report.

4.2   It was relayed via a presentation during the Audit Committee meeting, and previously discussed at Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee during yearly attendance progress reports, that unauthorised absence figures increased in recent academic years. The tables below show these figures at primary and secondary phase for statutory age groups.
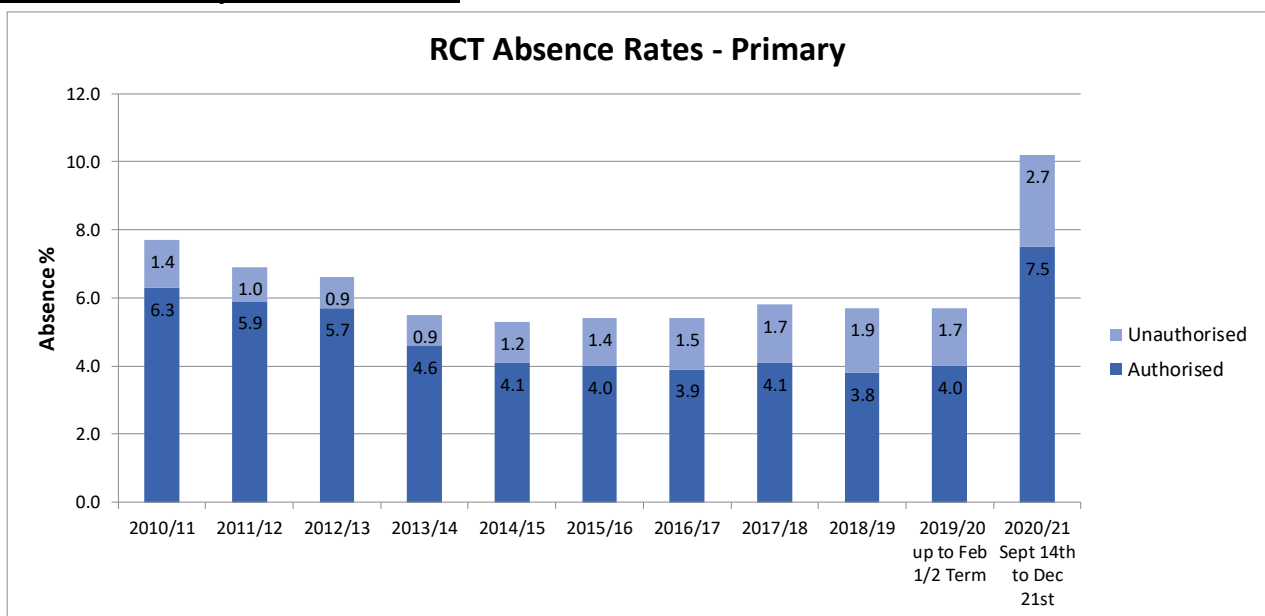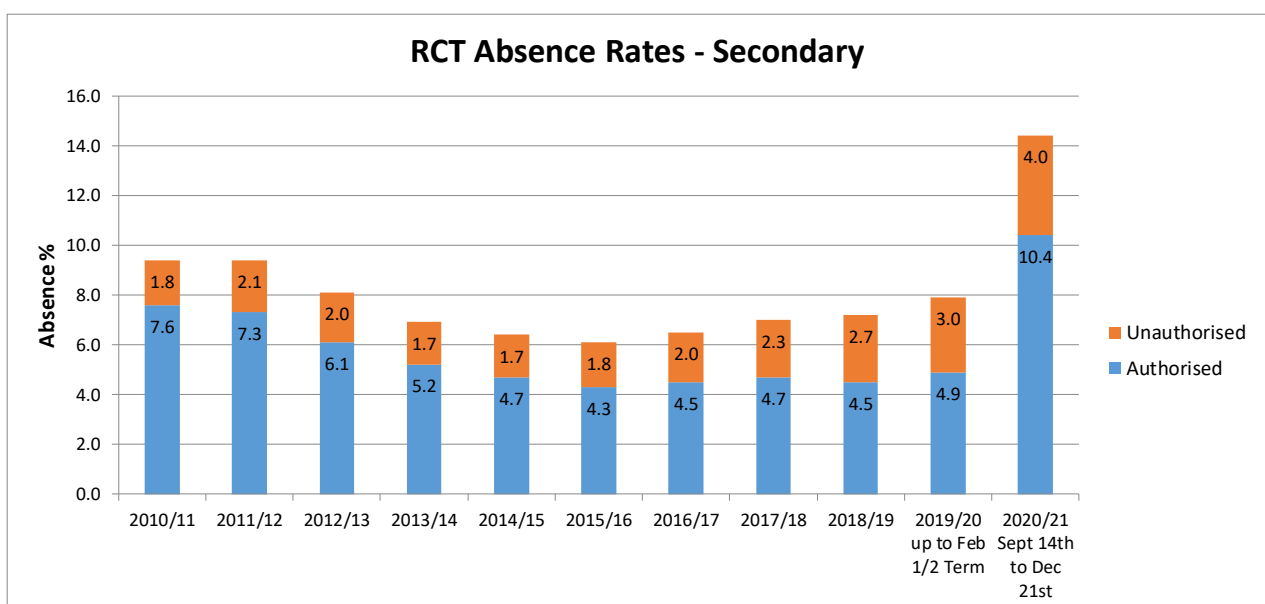
Table 1. Primary Absence Rates

Table 2. Secondary Absence Rates

4.3   As you will be able to see, from Table 1 and 2, from the 2010/11 academic year to 2013/14 academic year the percentage of authorised and unauthorised absences both declined. Since this time unauthorised absence has risen year on year.

4.4   The increase in unauthorised absence levels are in line with the onus placed upon schools to investigate absence by the Attendance and Wellbeing Service, and wider Education and Inclusion Services, as a result of the release of the All Wales Attendance Framework in 2011 and the introduction of Fixed Penalty Notices since 2015.

4.5   Following the release of the Attendance Framework in 2011, settings were encouraged to challenge parents/carers more frequently and request evidence for absences. This increased emphasis supported an improvement in attendance in the immediate years following.

4.6   The introduction of Fixed Penalty Notices in 2015 placed a specific emphasis on accurate recording of authorised or unauthorised absences as schools could only request a penalty notice on learners meeting aspects of the code of conduct which all surround unauthorised absences only. We therefore see in the subsequent years, an increase in unauthorised absences. This increase in unauthorised absences was therefore expected.

4.7   In relation to 4.1, the school raised as concerning due to the high number of unauthorised sessions may need further context. This school was our lowest performing through-school during that period, as well as having our lowest performing secondary phase across the local authority. Therefore, absence figures were particularly high and an attendance audit had been undertaken with the school. It was identified that more work was needed in key areas and the school was sending a strong message to parents/carers that absence would not be tolerated at that time.

4.8   In Tables 1 and 2, we do not have a complete data set for 2019/20 and 2020/21, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As expected during this period, absence levels have increased drastically at the onset of the pandemic and subsequently in this academic year. Various changes have been made to coding guidance during this time from Welsh Government. The increase in unauthorised absences at both phases is a consequence of parental/pupil anxiety and refusal to return to school. Where this refusal has continued over a long period, schools have begun to unauthorise absences where there are no mitigating circumstances.

4.9   Operationally, the Attendance and Wellbeing Service has changed during the pandemic to support in these key areas. The majority of 'open cases,' that were open prior to the pandemic, were closed with the agreement of families and settings in order to realign the focus on Wellbeing Response Visits.

4.10   Wellbeing Response Visits are door-knock visits adhering to Public Health Wales guidance where either the child has been absent from school without explanation; where the explanation provided is disputed by the school; where there are safeguarding concerns; or, during full lockdowns, where parent/carers fail to maintain engagement with the school and no contact has been made for three days. All schools are on a three-day rota for visits and staff will attempt to establish contact to

determine the reason behind absence/non-engagement and work with families to support. Feedback is provided to the schools on the same day as referral in the majority of cases.

4.11   The Attendance and Wellbeing Service also maintains termly register compliance checks with all settings, including throughout the pandemic, to ensure that the attendance codes are used in line with Welsh Government guidance. During these checks, schools are RAG rated dependent on compliance and actions are issued where needed. Schools who appear as 'red' during these checks are escalated in line with the Attendance and Exclusions Graduated Response.

4.12   Attendance coding is also frequently monitored with open cases under ordinary circumstances and the ability that we have centrally to monitor the attendance picture of all settings within 24 hours via Capita One ensures that we have the data available for support and challenge. We are therefore confident that registers, coding practices and the ability to challenge these is very effective within RCT.

5.   **POST-16 ATTENDANCE**

5.1   The second concern raised by Audit Committee, and subsequently requested to be referred to Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, was Post-16 Attendance Practices.

5.2   The original audit into this subject was not attendance focused. However, a concern was raised during the audit that attendance registers were not always completed in academic lessons as well as Key Skills/Welsh Baccalaureate lessons. Learners were also leaving site at various times without challenge.

5.3   Post-16 attendance is not statutory. Therefore, we do not ordinarily report on attendance at this level within the annual attendance progress reports and similarly there is no attendance data collection by Welsh Government for Post-16 learners.

5.4   However, settings still need to maintain safeguarding practice on site. This is particularly relevant where many of our learners are still under 18 years of age and therefore legally defined as children whilst accessing our Sixth Forms. This is defined in section 175 of the Education Act 2002 and section 3 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

5.5   Schools with Post-16 provision have been encouraged to ensure safeguarding practices are considered and pupils adhere to these practices. They have been reminded that any Post-16 learners leaving the school site must sign-out and unexplained absences should be acted upon.

5.6   Schools will also be reminded that their Post-16 Attendance and Absence procedures, as well as their expectations, should be communicated with learners and their families.

5.7   The Attendance Toolkit was revised in March 2020, just prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, which emphasised the need to maintain accurate registers for all year groups to accurately monitor, not just attendance, but also engagement levels.

5.8   The Covid-19 pandemic has led to various new approaches to attendance in Post-16 education where learners in some settings have been requested to return home

during periods without lessons to reduce the risk of transmission. Welsh Government guidance has suggested the use of areas such as common rooms should not be utilised.

6.   EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

6.1   There are no equality and diversity implications at this time.

7.   CONSULTATION

7.1   There are no consultation implications arising from the content of the report.

8.   FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

8.1   There are no financial implications arising from the content of the report.

9.   LEGAL IMPLICATIONS *OR* LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

9.1   None at present.

10.   LINKS TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN / OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/SIP

10.1   Educational performance has a clear link to the Council's priority of Building a Strong Economy. Improved attendance processes, and therefore attendance, will have a positive impact on this priority.

11.   CONCLUSION

11.1   Our Attendance approach has shifted over the past ten years as a result of Welsh Government guidance, the introduction of FPN's and changes within the Attendance and Wellbeing Service. Attendance Strategies have been updated and renewed throughout that time to change the focus of the service and this strategy has dynamically changed throughout the pandemic to deal with the frequent changes we are presented with.

11.2   Unauthorised absence levels during this time have increased which may look concerning at first glance. However, this is expected as settings have responded to the changes outlined above and provided an increased level of challenge to parents/carers/learners relating to their absence. Where there is no evidence or explanation, schools have coded correctly in line with the Guidance on School Attendance Codes (June 2010).

11.3   The measures that the Attendance and Wellbeing Service are able to undertake to monitor attendance and coding provides sufficient and effective support and challenge for all settings. This provides us centrally with the confidence that coding is accurate.

11.4   Post-16 attendance is more difficult to centrally control but settings are frequently reminded of their responsibilities to maintain registers and ensure safeguarding practices are in place.

11.5   The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the expectation of settings in relation to Post-16 learners remaining on site in libraries or common rooms to be counteracted with mitigation of virus transmission. Hopefully, going forward, when educational settings return to more 'normal' operating procedures and the guidance around risks of transmission reduce then we can revisit schools to consider this aspect.

11.6   At this time, we will also work closely with Internal Audit to consider an audit specifically aimed at Post-16 attendance practices to determine where further improvement can be made.

Appendix One - ATTENDANCES, ABSENCES & AM/PM LATE MARKS AT SAMPLED SECONDARY/THROUGH SCHOOLS – TABLE INITIALLY PRESENTED IN THE 'ATTENDANCE, REFERRALS & INTERVENTION' AUDIT REPORT

(Sample period - 01/09/2019 to 29/11/2019)

School Name	Present Percent	Present	Authorised Absence	Unauthorised Absence	Possible Sessions	Present			
						AM	PM	L*	U**
Aberdare Community School	92.6%	121721	5976	3791	131488	56390	58485	3484	80
Ferndale Community School	92.2%	62623	3182	2141	67946	28927	30327	1858	111
Hawthorn High School	92.8%	66321	3025	2137	71483	30736	32203	2163	6
Porth Community School	91.8%	92208	4689	3555	100452	44446	45082	1234	7
Tonyrefail Community School	90.8%	120265	5901	6325	132491	57992	58616	2310	533
Ysgol Garth Olwg	94.3%	104607	4325	2020	110952	50587	50071	1455	24
TOTALS		567745	27098	19969	614812	269078	274784	12504	761

NOTE –

N - No reason for the absence provided yet	
G - Family holiday (not agreed or sessions in excess of agreement)	**Unauthorised Absences could include any of these Attendance Codes**
O - Other unauthorised (not covered by other codes or descriptions)	
U - Late and arrived after the register closed	

KEY –

***CODE L** - LATE (But arrived before the register closed)
****CODE U** - LATE (But arrived after the register closed)

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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