



Agenda Item

9

Report Status

For information/note

For consultation & views

For decision

Report to Haringey Schools Forum 17th October 2019

Report Title: Education Welfare Service

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Purpose: Report from EWS Steering Group

Recommendations: agree to fund EWS for 3 years

1. EWS Steering Group

- 1.1 In January 2019, Schools Forum agreed to fund the Education Welfare Service (EWS) for the next 3 years, with a strong recommendation that a steering group be formed to investigate how improvements could be secured for the service and also how the service could be made more accountable to our schools. This report sets out the work of the steering group and the improvements secured to the service. It also provides some more contextual information on the safeguarding roll that the service is able to provide for our children, young people, families and our schools as a part of the overall work that education welfare officers (EWOs) carry out in our borough. In order to provide regular updates to Schools Forum, officers will provide annual reports in October of each year and prior to any voting on the contribution from the DSG to the service.
- 1.2 The steering group was formed in March 2019 and comprised of representatives from primary, secondary and special schools, as well as Council officers and the Cabinet Member for Children. The steering group met on four occasions between March and June 2019 with a view to driving the service upwards and ensuring it is meeting the needs of our children, young people, families and schools.

1.3 A range of EWS duties and responsibilities were examined in detail, including child licencing, elective home education, the EWS traded service structure and its delivery and the EWS core work which is to improve school attendance, investigate the whereabouts of children missing education (CME) and proceed to prosecution in the most pernicious cases and where negotiation and dialogue with a parent(s) or carer(s) has not resulted in improved attendance or where attendance at school has already been significantly flouted.

1.4 The steering group collectively agreed to focus on the following areas for improvement in the work of the EWS:

- EWS casework model.
- A three-tiered traded service offer to schools (allowing schools to decide the level of service they want to buy in).
- An amendment to the Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) code of conduct to tighten up unauthorised absences from our schools.
- End of year Education Welfare Officer evaluation/assessment to allow feedback to improve and shape the service.

2. EWS current casework model

2.1 The Education Welfare Service currently uses the “fast track to attendance” framework, which is used by almost all local authority (LA) Education Welfare Services. This framework allows timely escalation in cases of irregular pupil attendance and leading to potential legal proceedings in cases where attendance fails to improve despite the best efforts of the school and the EWS.

2.2 As all LAs have an annual duty to report on numbers of fast track cases to the DfE, EWS proposes to continue to use this framework as this is deemed widely as the best practice in the management of irregular attendance. EWS will also incorporate the use of penalty notices into casework where poor attendance isn't yet entrenched, and the issuing of a penalty notice would allow the EWO to concentrate efforts on more complex cases.

2.3 Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) have been available for LAs to use as a tool to improve school attendance for the last 15 years. Payment of an FPN does not result in a criminal record and allows the parent to discharge their responsibility for a period of absence from school. The use of FPNs has been broadened to manage low level irregular attendance.

2.4 FPNs are currently used to deter parents from removing their children from school for the purpose of an unauthorised holiday during term time. The amended FPN code of conduct allows more effective use of this tool. It would also allow officers to use FPNs as a light touch sanction, following an official warning, to address low level odd-day unauthorised absence.

- 2.5 Such a move also frees up much needed capacity for officers to undertake more effective work with some of the more entrenched and complex cases of poor school attendance, which will still be managed through the fast track to attendance process. The payment of an FPN discharges a parents' responsibility for a period of unauthorised absence and **does not** result in a criminal record.

3. Statutory services and discretionary traded services

- 3.1 The EWS, along with numerous Haringey teams offering services to our schools, has been trading its service now for several years. In order to trade effectively, services were required to identify the statutory elements of their work, and the more discretionary elements. Statutory services are available free of charge to all schools, regardless of whether they were maintained, academies or free schools. All other services are offered at a cost, i.e. traded.
- 3.2 The current service price structure offers a 10% discount on discretionary traded services to Haringey maintained schools. Discretionary services are also offered to academies and free schools but without this discount. Maintained schools are charged less as the DSG funds part of this service delivery, which allows academies and free schools to take advantage of this without trading with the LA. Out of borough schools were required to pay higher prices than are charged to schools in Haringey, but capacity and jurisdictional issues have resulted in the offer of EWS work now being limited to Haringey schools only.

4. Proposed three-tiered offer to schools

- 4.1 We listened to the views expressed at previous school forum meetings and the description below details our response. Please note that although attendance management advice is usually offered free to all schools, we are aware that some LAs had intended to charge for advice. We are, however, of the opinion that we wish to support all Haringey pupils to maximise their attendance at school at all times and in all settings.
- 4.2 The LA offers three different levels of service to our schools with prices reflecting the level of service offered. These three levels are set out below (A to C).

A. Statutory duty for academies, free schools and independent schools that do not buy into EWS services:

Primary Schools:

- missing children research is carried out following notification of missing children;
- schools will be expected to undertake their own home visits to investigate the whereabouts of child missing education where it is reasonable to do so;
- penalty notice referrals will be processed, and payment monitored. Non-payment will be followed up with the school;

- investigations into irregular attendance will be conducted by the PEWO (principal education welfare officer). This will be via a court assessment meeting at school;
- advice and guidance will be offered on request.

Secondary Schools:

- have their own attendance staff who would undertake attendance tasks in any case;
- missing children research is carried out following notification of missing children;
- schools will be expected to undertake their own home visits to investigate the whereabouts of child missing education;
- penalty notice referrals will be processed, and payment monitored. Non-payment will be followed up with the school;
- investigations into irregular attendance will be conducted by the PEWO. This will be via a court assessment meeting at school;
- advice and guidance will be offered on request;
- PEWO routinely assists secondary school attendance staff with case advice and missing children enquiries.

B. Enhanced statutory offer for Haringey maintained schools that do not buy into EWS services:

Primary Schools:

- missing children research is carried out following notification of any children missing education;
- schools will be expected to undertake their own home visits to investigate the whereabouts of child missing education where it is reasonable to do so;
- penalty notice referrals will be processed, and payment monitored. Non-payment will be followed up with the school;
- investigations into irregular attendance will be conducted by the PEWO (principal education welfare officer). This will be via a court assessment meeting at school;
- advice and guidance will be offered on request.

In addition to the above:

- a named “link” EWO (education welfare officer) to provide advice and guidance when required;
- a termly visit to the school to undertake an “attendance health check”. This meeting may be used to meet parents, conduct training and to offer advice and support to school staff in relation to individual cases and whole-school attendance management policies.

Secondary Schools:

- have their own attendance staff who would undertake attendance tasks in any case;
- missing children research is carried out following notification of missing children;
- schools will be expected to undertake their own home visits to investigate the whereabouts of child missing education;
- penalty notice referrals will be processed, and payment monitored. Non-payment will be followed up with the school;
- investigations into irregular attendance will be conducted by the PEWO. This will be via a court assessment meeting at school;
- advice and guidance will be offered on request;
- PEWO routinely assists secondary school attendance staff with case advice and missing children enquiries.

In addition to the above:

- link to PEWO to provide advice and guidance when required during visits to the school;
- a termly visit to the school to undertake an “attendance health check”;
- school based Education Welfare Officers and attendance officers will be able to access a termly “Secondary Attendance Forum” for training, and the sharing of information and best practice.

C. Discretionary services for all schools that buy into EWS services:

Primary and Secondary Schools:

- All of the above statutory services, plus
- EWS provide a range of services (mostly based on the amount of EWO time working on behalf of the school) to improve attendance and punctuality of individual pupils and the whole school. further details are available via the Haringey Traded Services Portal;
- maintained schools receive a 10% discount on all traded services outlined above.

5. FPN (Fixed Penalty Notice) amendments to allow more flexible and time-effective approach to low level irregular attendance, and to allow more time for casework in more complex cases.

- 5.1 Haringey EWS criteria for issuing FPNs has been amended from 20 sessions of unauthorised absence in a six-week period to six sessions of unauthorised absence in a six-week period. The previous criteria equated to only 66% attendance in the qualifying period and was considered by the steering group and, when measured against other LAs’ qualifying period, to be unacceptably low. The amended criteria equate to 90% attendance in the qualifying period and is now in line with the national persistent absence criteria of 90% attendance, as determined by the DfE.

- 5.2 In order to amend the criteria, a consultation with schools, chairs of governors and the police took place. All schools who responded agreed, and indeed welcomed the suggested amendment. All but one governor agreed with the amendment. The amended FPN code of conduct is now available for parents on Haringey's webpage at <https://www.haringey.gov.uk/children-and-families/schools-and-education/information-parents/supporting-education/education-welfare-service/non-school-attendance-fixed-penalty-notice>

Sample warning letters have been sent to schools with a briefing letter to headteachers, and FPN issuing processes have been upgraded so that this is a less bureaucratic process for our schools and for our families.

- 5.3 The amended FPN criteria will allow EWOs to request FPNs to be issued in cases of low-level irregular attendance. This will also ensure that parents who pay the FPN are not criminalised as payment of the FPN will not result in a criminal conviction. The issuing of FPNs, following a formal warning to parents, will allow EWOs to undertake swift work to address low level concerns, and will expand capacity for undertaking more complex and time-consuming casework, where potential referral to court may be considered where appropriate.

6. FPN amendments to allow a more effective deterrent to parents removing children from school for term time holidays

- 6.1 Many schools report that a small minority of their parent and carer community remove their children for the purpose of holidays during school term time. This is particularly apparent either side of the summer, Christmas and Easter holidays.
- 6.2 Such term time holidays can seriously affect whole school attendance, individual pupils miss substantial amounts of school time through this practice, and disruption to other children's learning is caused while the teacher is helping these pupils to 'catch up' on their return from being away. Many parents take their children out of school regularly at these times, to take advantage of lower flight and holiday prices, or because they want to spend extended periods with their families back in their country of birth.
- 6.3 The FPN amended criteria of six sessions of unauthorised absence in a six-week period will give EWOs and schools a more effective tool to deter parents from removing their children from school in all but the most extenuating of circumstances (and authorised by the Head teacher) when they should be at school and accessing their education.

7. Avoiding penalising vulnerable parents

- 7.1 Currently, all FPNs are issued by EWS at the request of schools and are mostly used to deter families from removing children from school for the purpose of holidays or other recreational activities during term time. As schools treat all requests for exceptional leave on a case-by-case basis,

those families with genuine or exceptional reasons for requesting leave are treated sympathetically.

- 7.2 Although there is no recourse to appeal against the issue of a FPN in law, Haringey EWS liaise with parents who make representations against the issue of a FPN, and will liaise with schools to ensure that FPNs are not issued in cases where subsequent information renders the original period of absence as “exceptional”, for example a death in the family.
- 7.3 The system is not designed to be punitive without a clear evidence base of why an FPN is being pursued but rather is designed to: a) deter unauthorised absences from school and b) act when it is clear that parents or carers are choosing holiday or recreation breaks over school for their child(ren).

8. EWS accountability

- 8.1 Education Welfare Officers discuss their work during supervision with the PEWO, and submit an end of year report detailing work undertaken during the year, including numbers of cases referred for enforcement action and a breakdown of attendance by year group, class etc.
- 8.2 It was agreed by the steering group that this process would be replaced by a school-led end of year assessment of the work and effectiveness of each school’s Education Welfare Officer. This will allow headteachers (or identified attendance management staff) the opportunity to detail good practice and success stories as well as provide an opportunity to bring to attention any issues or feedback that will help shape the service to ensure it is operating to the very highest standards across the year.
- 8.3 This revised process will result in greater accountability for the service and will permit improvements to be made both in relation to the work of individual officers and in relation to the service as a whole.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 The Steering Group agreed to a number of changes designed to improve EWS capacity, more effectively address low level absence and term time holidays, and to ensure more robust accountability and permit service improvements:
 - Incorporation of FPNs into EWS casework model
 - Three-tiered service offer to schools
 - Amendment to FPN code of conduct
 - Service and officer accountability
- 9.3 Although it is too soon to be able to state with certainty, it is envisaged that these changes will allow earlier intervention in cases of low-level poor attendance, improve overall school attendance profiles and reduce individual pupil absence, create capacity to undertake more complex casework, and to improve EWS work with schools.

Appendix 1 - Steering Group Membership

Michael Welton	Principal Education Welfare Officer
Eveleen Riordan	Assistant Director Schools & Learning
Cllr Elin Weston	Cabinet Member for Children
Hannah D'Aguiar	Governor, Chestnuts Primary School
Jean Brown	Governor, The Vale Special School
Sylvia Dobie	Governor Park View School
Mary Gardiner	Head Teacher West Green Primary School
Patricia Davies,	Head of School, Haringey Tuition Centre
Terry Sullivan	Governor Park View School
Tony Hartney	Head Teacher Gladesmore School
Jackie Nicholls	Education Welfare Officer
Wajeeha Amin	Education Welfare Officer
Meeta Mahtani	Service Manager, Early Help

Appendix 2 – Case Studies

During the steering group meetings, case studies were shared to illustrate some of the complex, varied and very positive outcomes work undertaken by Education Welfare Officers. These case studies provide an evidence base of actions and outcomes not routinely recorded or seen when the EWS work is discussed as it is often only the statutory and traded work that is focused upon. The following case histories provide some flesh to the frequent but often unacknowledged role that EWOs play in supporting our families and children to keep safe and to understand the importance of education and improve attendance.

Case Study 1 – Year 3 siblings

The parent of year 3 siblings had a history in school of being very hard to engage, which affected the ability of professionals to effectively work with him. The parent believed that one of his children had been assaulted by a temporary member of school staff. Following a rigorous process at the school and a thorough investigation of the allegation, this allegation was not proven, but the parent continued to believe that his son had been assaulted.

The parent removed his children from the school, refusing to return them and stating that he wished to electively home educate his children. The school were unable to legally delete from roll, as he repeatedly failed to put his request in writing to the school (which is required in accordance with DfE guidance). The school eventually referred the matter to Haringey's Education Welfare Service.

The EWO attempted on numerous occasions to work with this parent to calm the situation and to return his children back to school, but he refused to work effectively with professionals. Because this parent's children were not accessing their education, EWS took the decision to resort to enforcement action on two separate occasions, to signal to the parent that the situation was serious. Following this robust approach, the parent eventually returned his children to school, and they completed year 6, successfully transitioning into year 7.

Case Study 2 – 8-year-old pupil

Background: The child attended a nursery provision and was then electively home educated during the reception year, joining a school in year one.

Within the first few weeks of starting school, the child was having sporadic day absences: he mother reported ill health as the reason for absence. Because of the number of absences, medical evidence was requested but not provided. Checks with the nursery provision revealed irregular attendance at the nursery placement, ill health being cited as the reason.

A home visit was made, and meetings were held at school. During discussions with the mother it transpired that she had separated from the child's father and had returned to live with her family. The mother was struggling with the prospect of the separation from and divorce from the child's father. This led to a lack of boundaries and routine at home, and during a home visit it was observed that the child was playing 18-rated games on an Xbox and staying up late at night.

With the mother's consent a referral for mum to receive counselling and for the child to receive art therapy at school were made and also a referral to Early Help.

The mother engaged with the counselling sessions and eventually attended college. She is now self-employed and running her own business. Although the child's attendance is still not 100%, there has been a significant improvement. The mother still struggles with separation anxiety, and the child continues to receive therapy, but medical evidence is now being provided to the school when the child is absent so that we can be sure the child is safeguarded

Case Study 3 – 7-year-old pupil

A history of poor attendance and punctuality whilst in reception class provides the background to this case study.

The family lived in Waltham Forest, but the mother worked in Wood Green: following Early Intervention meetings with the mother to increase attendance, attendance and punctuality briefly improved.

A bite mark was observed by the school on the child's cheek and the parents were invited to school to discuss this concern. During this meeting the mother informed the school that this was as a result of play-fighting between the child and his father. A referral was made to Waltham Forest Children's Social Care, but the case was closed with no further action taken.

EWS continued to monitor the child's attendance, and the EWO frequently spoke to the mother at the end of the school day about the child's attendance, punctuality, and also about the child being collected late after school. The mother would apologise, and attendance would improve for a while but would then slip again.

The mother came into school on one occasion and asked to collect her child early as there was a family emergency. The school permitted the child to leave school early. The next day the mother again requested to collect her child early and provided the same reason. The EWO asked to speak to the mother in a private room at school.

After speaking to the mother, the EWO was able to establish that the mother was planning to leave her husband because of domestic violence. She had never reported it in the past to any professional but was able to confide in the EWO, with whom she had built a relationship as she had got to the point, she could not take it any longer. The mother said that she had tried to leave the day before but got scared and went back home. Notes from the meeting record that: "today she had all her paperwork with her and was planning to run away".

The EWO supported the mother to contact Hearthstone who advised her to go to her local police station as she had no recourse to public funds. She was advised to go to a Waltham Forest Police station as she was a Waltham Forest resident, but she was afraid to go to Waltham Forest police station just in case she was seen by a family member.

The EWO made a referral to Waltham Forest MASH because the mother also disclosed that the bite on her child's cheek was caused by the child's father as a punishment and that the child was afraid of his father. The importance of making the referral was discussed with the Mother, who consented for the referral to be made. Without this critical relationship of trust that had been built between EWO and mother, this might not have been the outcome.

The EWO spoke to the mother the following day and was informed that she did not go to the police station and stayed with a friend in Enfield. The EWO advised the mother of relevant local charities she could approach for support and made a referral to Enfield Children's Social Care.

The father and a family member called the school asking about his son. No information was shared other than that he was absent. The father asked if the mother had left the country; again no information was shared.

The mother subsequently received support from a charity to access a refuge. The EWO supported the mother to apply for a new school place and her child was removed from the current school register.

Case Study 4 – 8-year-old pupil

As background, the family were new to the UK and a school place was applied for and offered via the School Admissions team. At the time of application, no special education needs were disclosed on any paperwork or verbally. During the admission process it became clear that the child had significant health needs. The child did not have a current EHCP plan as he had never attended school in the UK. The parents were asked to approach their GP to provide more information on their child's health needs. Following this, the parents did not return their child to school.

Because of the child's subsequent absences, the school referred to the EWS. The EWO followed up with a home visit and made housing checks as she was unable to contact the family. The family returned to school eight weeks later and said that they returned to Bulgaria for treatment for their child.

The EWO followed up with a referral to the Child Development Centre, a referral to School Nursing Service and contacted Great Ormond Street Hospital. Team around the child meetings were arranged and after several weeks of collating all the information needed to put a risk assessment and a medical care plan in place, the child was offered a new start date at school.

The child's attendance continued to be of concern and following meetings with the parents, it was established that the parents were acting in an overprotective manner and did not trust the UK medical system, insisting that they would return to Bulgaria for medical treatment.

Following frequent contact with the family, the child is now settled in school and his attendance has significantly improved this academic year.