

SCRUTINY ADVISORY BOARD – CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Meeting date: 9 February 2021

From: Executive Director - People (Deputy Chief Executive)

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 To provide the Board with an update on attendance and exclusion data in the context of COVID-19, and to inform members of the support provided by the Directorate to children and families during the pandemic. The report also sets out some of the longer-term strategic work being undertaken by the Directorate to support improved access to education in the future.

2.0 Issues for Scrutiny

2.1 To note the report.

2.2 To seek assurances around the ongoing provision of support to children and families whilst COVID-19 restrictions remain in place and beyond.

2.3 To make recommendations to the Executive Director People and the Assistant Directors.

3.0 Background

3.1 This report provides details of the support provided in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to preserve access to schools and education, and includes a summary of the position relating to attendance and exclusion.

3.2 The report also sets out details of the Directorate's recent and longer-term strategy for improving access to education.

3.3 This has clearly been an unprecedented period for schools, children, their families and the Directorate itself. There have been three periods of 'lock-down' affecting schools, with differing advice from central government in each, often requiring action to be taken at very short notice. Advice from government is constantly updated, and the challenges have been substantial. That our schools have continued to deliver in these circumstances is testament to the dedicated work of their staff and governors in incredibly difficult, constantly changing circumstances.

3.4 The Executive Director – People provided a report to the Scrutiny Panel in September 2020, detailing the support provided by the Directorate to schools and families during the first lockdown phase. This support, continually evolving, is ongoing during the current lockdown:

- Education Tactical Co-ordination Group (ETCG) established as a working group of the Local Resilience Forum focusing on supporting the education system for all year phases to manage the response to the pandemic. The ETCG aimed:
 - To prioritise access to vulnerable children and children of critical workers;
 - To facilitate and act in a system leadership role;
 - To ensure the system had clarity on the DfE guidance and demonstrated compliance with it
- Establishment of 'hub' schools during first lockdown for vulnerable children and those of key workers
- Risk assessment tool developed to support schools in phased reopening from 1 June 2020
- Schools provided remote learning for those children not in school
- September Opening Group established to support full reopening at the start of the autumn term, chaired by Cabinet Member – Schools and Learning:
 - Curriculum redesign, to take into account both the learning needs of the pupils and the challenges of successfully reintegrating the school community;
 - Pastoral care, to ensure there were support teams around each school;
 - Transport, to review existing arrangements to see how they could be best adapted to reduce risk of infection;
 - School layout and property – a particular priority for this group was to review school capacity to provide the level of washing facilities required;
 - Revised HR guidance to support schools and employers to work with staff who have concerns about returning to work.

3.5 During the second lockdown, in November and December 2020, schools were expected to remain open for all pupils, save those who were required to self-isolate following a positive test or contact with an infected person. Schools effectively operated in much the same way as they had been since the start of term in September during this period, albeit taking into account an increased level of absence, and taking the appropriate more stringent precautions around infection.

- 3.6 From 5 January 2021 – the start of the current lockdown – schools have been closed to all but vulnerable children and those of key workers. Unlike the first lockdown, no hubs have been established on this occasion, and the large majority of schools are open in one form or another. Schools are providing remote learning, with limited face-to-face teaching via apps like 'Zoom' or 'Teams'. Government has announced that there will be no formal exams this year for GCSE and A Level students, with arrangements for grading to be announced.

Attendance

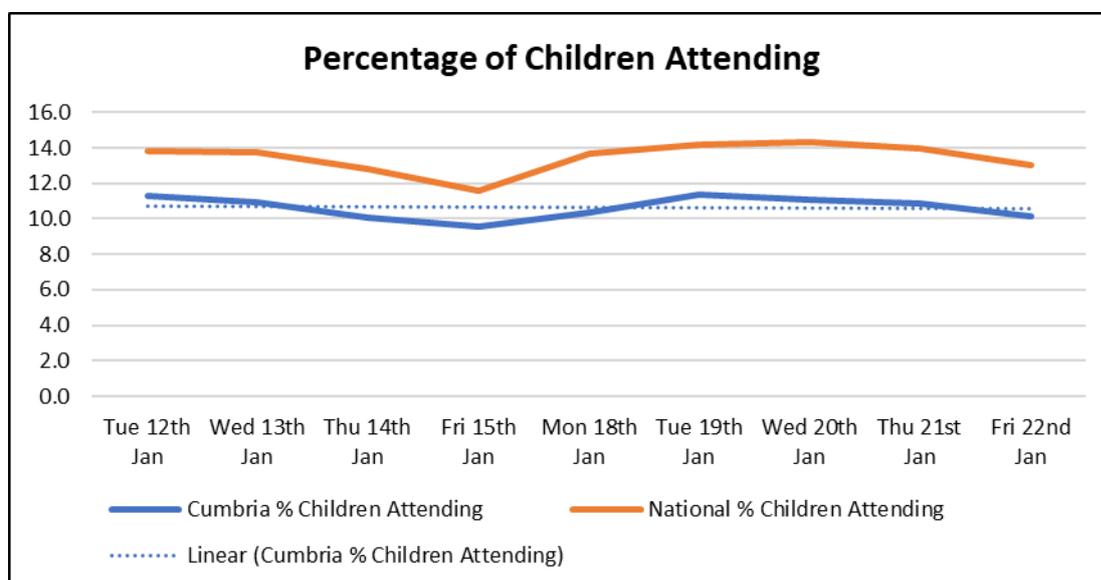
- 4.0 During Lockdown 1 the majority of schools were closed, and the expectation from government was that, where it was safe to do so, children should stay at home. School provision was made for the children of key workers and also vulnerable children and pupils with special educational needs. The provision was delivered in hubs and schools were required to undertake a risk assessment to determine which children needed to access this provision.
- 4.1 During Lockdown 2, schools remained open and the expectation was that all pupils would attend unless they were unwell or required to isolate due to COVID-related reasons. We adopted the following position:
- For cases where there were no health issues for parents or child there was a clear legal requirement for attendance. General fears about catching Covid-19 were not considered to be a valid reason for non-attendance.
 - For cases where there were health issues for the parent but they were not classed as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV), again, there was a clear legal requirement to attend.
 - For cases where the parent is CEV, guidance suggested the child should attend, and attendance was expected. It was suggested that schools may wish to consider supporting education at home where there was a marked reluctance on the part of the parent or child to attend, but there was no requirement for schools to implement this.
 - For cases where the child was previously classed as CEV and/or fell within one of the then-current CEV categories, they were expected not to attend school unless medical advice clarified that it was safe for them to do so. Schools were advised to ask parents to provide medical advice confirming such a position.
 - Advice and support provided to schools to support attendance; there were no fines issued or prosecutions brought during this period.
- 4.2 The current position is that schools are closed to the majority of children and they should be offered remote learning. Schools should be recording this with the X code, which means that these children are not counted as absent for the purposes of data returns. Pupils who are clinically extremely vulnerable or shielding are also being recorded using the X code
- 4.3 Vulnerable children are expected to attend school full time, if they are not attending school the parent should notify the school and this should be

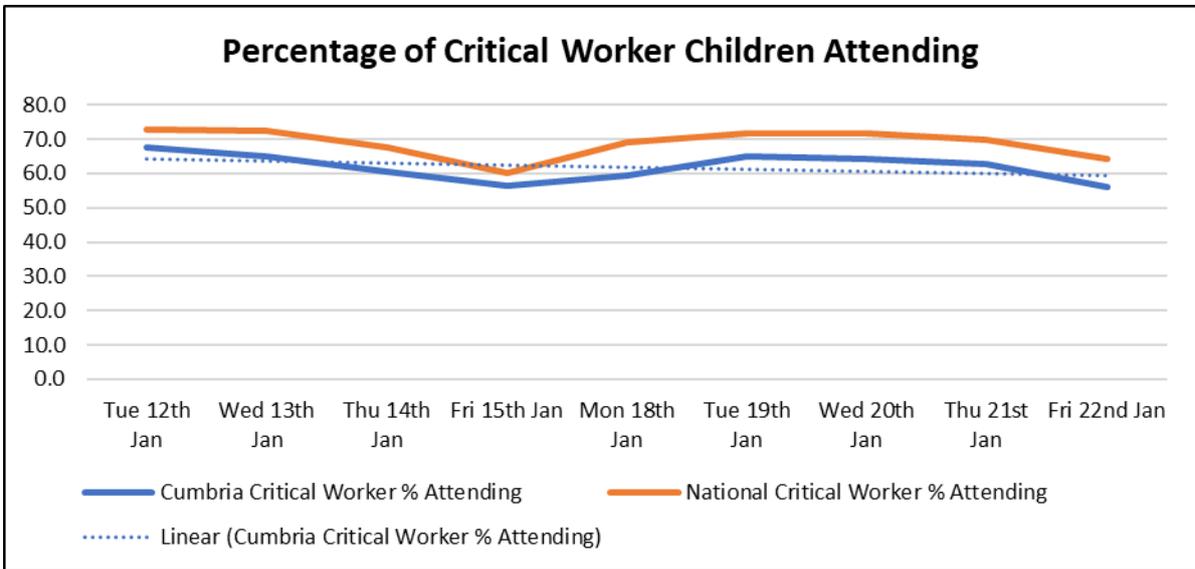
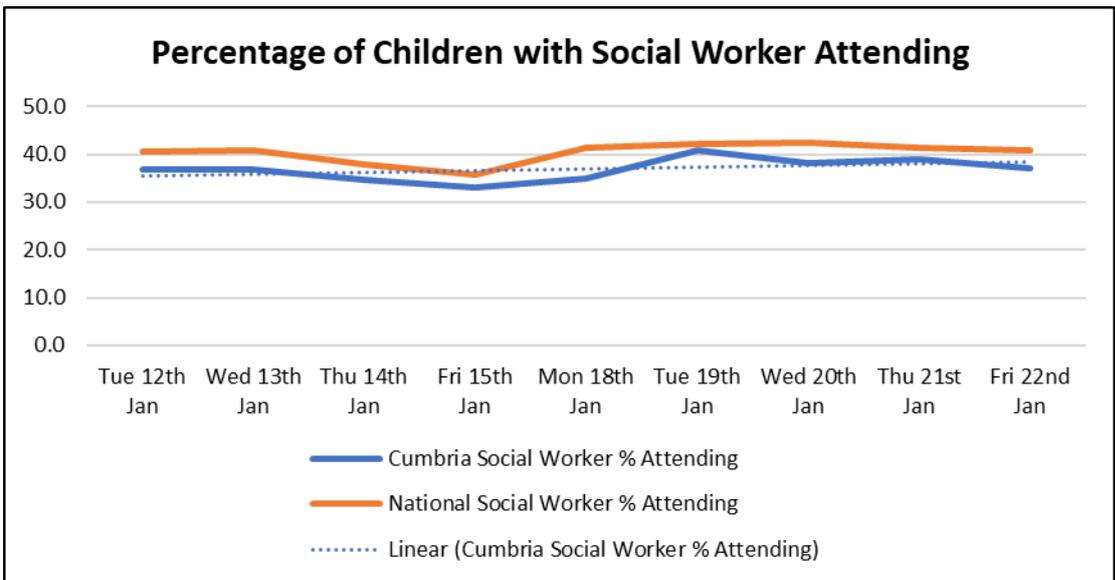
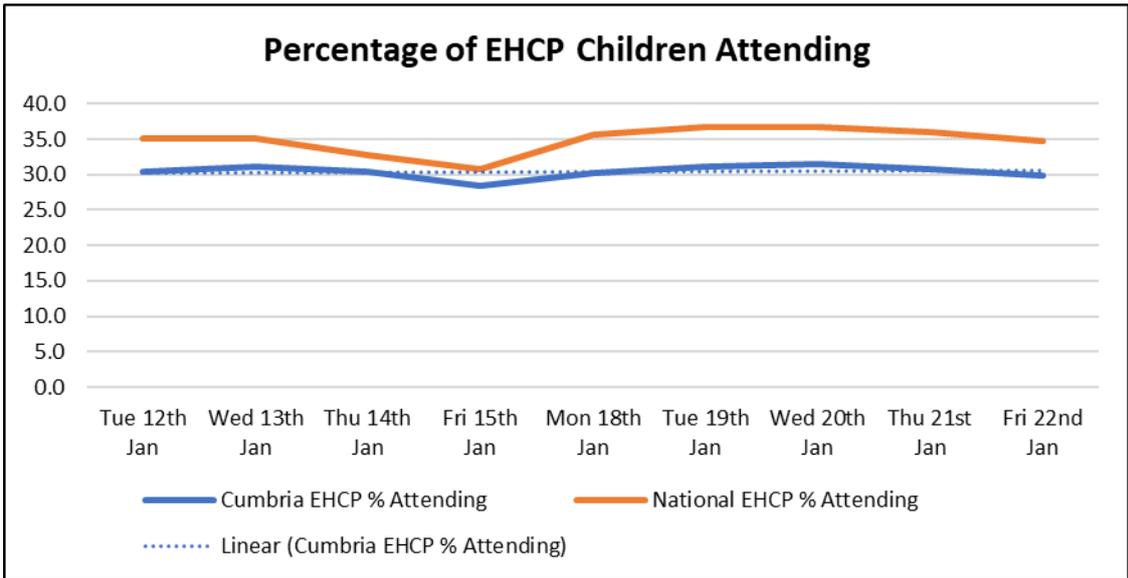
recorded using the C code unless another authorised absence code is more appropriate.

- 4.4 Children whose parents are critical workers are also being offered a place to attend school where required. The LA has established a system for resolving disputes over whether a child qualifies for a place under the key worker criterion.
- 4.5 During the autumn term 2020 school attendance was reported to DfE on a daily basis, and in Cumbria it remained above the national average. On the last day of term Cumbria's attendance stood at 83.6%, compared to a national average of 78.2%. Attendance was higher in our primary schools (89.8%) than secondary schools (75.1%).
- 4.6 Clearly these numbers are well below the attendance rates we would expect to see in 'normal' times. In 2018-19 (the last full year of reported data prior to the onset of COVID), percentage absence rates were as follows:

	Overall	Authorised	Unauthorised
Primary (England)	4	2.9	1.1
Primary (Cumbria)	4	3	0.9
Secondary (England)	5.5	3.7	1.8
Secondary (Cumbria)	5.7	4.4	1.3

- 4.7 The closure of some year groups and 'bubbles' to comply with self-isolation requirements obviously reduced attendance in school over the autumn term.
- 4.8 The following graphs show, for various groups, recent numbers attending during the current period of lockdown.





Exclusions

5.0 Recent exclusion data is shown in the table below. Whilst schools were operating under COVID restrictions during the autumn term 2020, the vast majority of students continued to attend, hence the similarity of that period with the previous year.

5.1 Exclusion activity during the periods of 'lockdown'. Unsurprisingly, there were very few exclusions in the periods during which schools were largely closed (Lockdowns 1 and 3), though the position was much nearer to normal during Lockdown 2, when schools continued to operate close to full capacity.

	Dates	Permanent	Fixed Term
Full Term	1 Sep 19 – 31 Dec 19	68	1,498
Full Term	1 Sep 20 – 31 Dec 20	40	1,436
Lockdown 1	20 Mar 20 – 17 Jul 20	0	2
Lockdown 2*	4 Nov 20 – 2 Dec 20	13	448
Lockdown 3	4 Jan 20 – 20 Jan 20	0	3

*Data for Lockdown 2 is also included in the Full Term data for Sept-Dec 2020

Future Support for Access and Inclusion

6.0 Even without the impact of COVID-19, there is a recognition that we have insufficient places in dedicated SEND settings – particularly in special schools – and Alternative Provision (AP) settings to appropriately meet the level of demand. We have, however, made some substantial investments to both improve and increase the facilities available:

School	Location	Places	Cost	Completion	Comments
Sandside Lodge	Ulverston	80	£8.6m	Jul 19	MUGA to be installed March / April.
Sandgate	Kendal	Additional 40 (120 total)	£5.0m	Oct 22	Planning to be submitted in February.
Mayfield	Whitehaven	150	Part of £30m Whitehaven Campus.	Dec 18	Subsequent increase to 170 places.
AP North (see below)	Barrow	40	£5m+	Sep 22	See below
AP South (see below)	Barrow	40			See below
SEN Adaptations	Various	5 to 15 places annually	£0.05m to 0.5m annually	Ongoing	Eg. Ramps, hoists, door widening, accessible toilets, etc

- 6.1 The county council's Inclusive Cumbria Strategy (2017-22) sets out proposals to ensure all children have the best possible education and support. A key part of the strategy focuses on Alternative Provision (AP) as a way of improving outcomes for young people who are not able to access the curriculum in mainstream schools. The need for AP in Cumbria is emphasised by a continuing increase in permanently excluded young people from mainstream schools, with Barrow and Carlisle identified as priority areas following Strategic Needs Analysis.
- 6.2 The county council is now investing over £5M to help address that challenge with the creation of new, purpose-built AP Units in Barrow and Carlisle. Following the model developed in West Cumbria, these Units will be managed by our local Pupil Referral Services, providing new and additional space to complement existing facilities at Newbridge House and the Gillford Centre whilst enabling specialist teaching for this specific cohort.
- 6.3 Each new facility will accommodate 40 pupils, including young people with Social Emotional & Mental Health (SEMH) diagnoses who could otherwise be left behind. These young people will receive specialist support and education as close as possible to their families and communities, rather than through independent 'out-of-County' provision.
- 6.4 In November, Planning permission was approved at Channelside, between Furness College and the Dock Museum, in Barrow. Subject to Planning, the former Pennine Way School site at bottom of Edgehill Road in Harraby is the proposed location in Carlisle. In December, Cabinet approved the award of a contract to Roland Hill to build these new facilities, which aim to be operational in early 2022.

- 6.5 In addition to the county council projects shown in the table, the Cumbria Academy for Autism in Workington is now open. This is a 'free school', funded direct by government, but with places commissioned by the LA for Cumbrian children. This facility will eventually provide 50 places across the whole school age range for children and young people with autistic spectrum conditions. The county council has also created an additional 25 Resourced Provision places across the county, providing targeted, funded support in mainstream schools for children with SEND.
- 6.6 Further work will be required to develop our facilities over the coming months and years. Prior to the impact of COVID, there had been an upward trend nationally and locally in, for example, the number of children with EHCPs and, correspondingly, the number of parents seeking places in special schools. The ongoing reorganisation of Resourced Provision will provide better access to SEND facilities and support in mainstream schools, but we will need to carefully consider all options available to attract substantial capital support into the county if we are to make further strides forward.

Conclusions

- 7.0 Given the disruption to children and young people's education over the last year, it is inevitable that schools and families will require ongoing support over the coming months and years. There will need to be a focus on maintaining access to education for all of our children, and we will need to seek out the appropriate resources to allow us to provide the support required.

Dan Barton
Assistant Director – Education and Skills

4 March 2021

Please ensure that every part of this section where there is an asterisk* is completed in accordance with the instructions before sending the report to Member Services, following which please delete this sentence.

Appendices

Officer Decision Records taken during the Pandemic

Previous Relevant Council or Executive Decisions
[including Local Committees]

No background.

Background Papers

No background papers.

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