Bristol School Attendance Strategy
Draft for Consultation – October 2018

Introduction

Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises every child's right to education and in particular that parties should 'take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates'.

Improving school attendance and reducing persistent absenteeism is a priority for Bristol and is a crucial part of the city's ambition to raise standards and secure the best outcomes for all young people. School attendance is everyone's responsibility. In order to improve school attendance, a citywide partnership approach is needed. All schools, council services and partner agencies need to recognise the importance of school attendance and work together with children, young people, parents and carers to remove the barriers to good school attendance.

Our Vision

We want all children and young people to attend and engage at school daily, so that they can develop to their full potential and have the life skills and opportunities to play an active part in society.

We want children and young people to experience positive school environments as part of a system where everyone has an understanding of the factors that may affect non-attendance; where approaches are based on an understanding of the needs of children and families, so that they get the right support at the right time.

This Strategy sets out a partnership approach to improving school attendance across the city. It has been developed using a strengths based 'Signs of Safety' approach; it sets out our concerns, what is working well and how we will work together to improve outcomes and build resilience.

Where are we now? *(Note – this data will be presented via infographics in the final version of the strategy, some other data sets may also be included.)*

Bristol Primary Attendance
- All Pupils 95.5% (National 96.0%)
- EAL[1] Pupils 95.0% (National 95.9%)
- Non-EAL Pupils 95.6% (National 96.0%)

Bristol Primary Persistent Absence (PA)[2]
- All Pupils 10.6% (National 8.3%)
- EAL Pupils 12.7% (National 8.8%)
- Non-EAL Pupils 10.0% (National 8.2%)

Bristol Secondary Attendance
- All Pupils 93.7% (National 94.6%)
- EAL Pupils 95.0% (National 95.3%)
- Non-EAL Pupils 93.5% (National 94.5%)

Bristol Secondary Persistent Absence
- All Pupils 17.3% (National 13.5%)
- EAL Pupils 12.4% (National 10.9%)
- Non-EAL Pupils 18.3% (National 14.1%)

Bristol Special School Attendance
- All Pupils 88.4% (National 90.3%)
- EAL Pupils 87.8% (National 89.9%)
- Non-EAL Pupils 88.5 % (National 90.3%)

Bristol Special School Persistent Absence
- All Pupils 33.8% (National 28.5%)
- EAL Pupils 34.9% (National 32.0%)
- Non-EAL Pupils 33.6% (National 27.8%)

Bristol School Attendance (All Schools)
- Pupils on Child in Need Plans 88.0% (National 89.6%)
- Pupils on Child Protection Plans 86.3% (National 89.1%)
- Looked After Children 94.5% (National 95.7%)

Bristol Persistent Absence (All Schools)
- Pupils on Child in Need Plans 36.2% (National 29.9%)
- Pupils on Child Protection Plans 40.7% (National 31.1%)
- Looked After Children 13.9% (National 10.0%)

---

[1] EAL Pupils are pupils whose first language is not English.
[2] Persistent Absence (PA) pupils are pupils with attendance of 90% or less. The PA measure is the % of PA pupils in the school, compared with all pupils in the school.

What are we worried about?

Bristol's School Attendance has been below the national average for a number of years. Primary and Secondary attendance between 2012 and 2016/7 was at least 0.5% below the national average. Bristol's 2015/16 Primary and Secondary school attendance was ranked bottom nationally. Special school attendance ranked 127th nationally and 6th of the core cities.

The average attendance rate of some groups of pupils in our city is much lower than other groups. This includes pupils from certain ethnic groups, including Bangladeshi and Pakistani pupils (whose attendance is significantly worse than average at Primary school, but not Secondary), white and Caribbean pupils (whose attendance is worse than average at Primary, but deteriorates further at Secondary school) and Gypsy, Roma, Traveller children.

Research[3] has shown a strong link between attendance and attainment and pupils need to be attending school regularly in order to realise their potential, academically and socially. However it is recognised that the reasons for poor attendance are complex and the contextual factors affecting attendance are also likely to directly impact on attainment.

Attending school regularly can also be a protective factor for children and young people. This can be particularly important for Children in Care, Children in Need, those with special educational needs and/or a disability and other vulnerable groups. School attendance can be crucial in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Absence from school can be an indicator of risk; and poor school attendance is a recurring theme in Serious Case Reviews. Any child or young person may be at risk of harm, regardless of their family background or other circumstances.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur before the age of 18 and affect children while growing up. ACEs have an impact throughout life in terms of physical and emotional health and wellbeing. In Bristol we are committed to improving outcomes for children and families and want to break the cycle of ACEs. Adverse Childhood Experiences include:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Living with someone who abused drugs
- Living with someone who abused alcohol
- Exposure to domestic violence
- Living with someone who was incarcerated
- Living with someone with serious mental illness
- Parental loss through divorce, death or abandonment

---

[3] DfE Report 2016 – The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4 2013 to 2014 academic year

There are many reasons why children and young people do not attend school regularly but ACEs are likely to impact on attendance.

> *'An increasing body of research identifies the long term harms that can result from chronic stress on individuals during childhood. Such stress arises from abuse and neglect of children but also from growing up in households where children are routinely exposed to issues such as domestic violence or individuals with alcohol and other substance misuse problems. Collectively such childhood stressors are called ACEs - Adverse Childhood Experiences.'*
>
> **Bristol Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB) Safeguarding Children from Neglect Strategy 2018.**

Additional reasons for school absence include:

- pupil's ill health (physical or mental);
- children who are young carers
- anxiety about bullying
- poverty – resulting in lack of school uniform, shoes, PE kit, bus money for example
- pupils on part-time timetables due to their behaviour or other Special Educational Needs or Disabilities
- pupils moving within the city and waiting for school places in new schools nearer to their home
- pupils travelling long distances to school by bus (due to no school places being available closer to home);
- period poverty;
- term time holidays;
- exclusions.

What have young people told us?

In May 2018, a small research study was undertaken on pupils' views on school attendance (see Appendix 1 for the full report). The project covered three schools: one central, one in the north east outer urban area and one on the outskirts of the city to the south. 60 students were involved, from years 7 - 10. The findings give an insight into what some Bristol students think about non-attendance, in their own words, some example comments are included below:

Key themes in order of frequency

1. Bullying & perceived threats to safety
'They notice you chewing but they don't notice if you're being bullied.'

2. Tiredness/ 'can't be bothered'
'So by the time you get in, have something to eat, do your homework, then it's quite late? So you need downtime, so you're on your phone or whatever, then it's really late, and so you're

tired when you wake up, sometimes it's like you never went to sleep it comes so soon! But you gotta relax.'

3. Avoiding lateness sanctions
'You're going to get det [detention] anyway you may as well enjoy a slow walk in!'

4. Avoiding homework & certain lessons
'Sometimes you can't do the homework and they're like, why, and if you say like, you can't access a computer for 'Show My Homework' [software used by schools to set & mark homework] *they're like, well that's not a good enough reason, so you get into trouble. But some people just don't have computers at home.'*

5. 'Family stuff'

'Sometimes your mum goes, I can't stay off work again, so you have to stay home with your little brother if he's poorly.'

6. Periods
'Teachers, they're used to it, but we're new to [periods], so we haven't got that experience, we don't always know when it will start, or how long we can go before needing to go to the toilet, especially if it's your first, and even for a few years, it changes, we don't really know how to manage it yet but they [teachers] assume we do.'

What are we good at?

Existing good practice

Many Bristol schools and Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) are working hard to support children's attendance and there are many successes to celebrate. Many schools already have excellent processes in place and attendance is significantly improving in a number of them. Schools and MATs are keen to work together, and with the Local Authority, to share their good practice and learn from each other.

Despite the pressure on resources, there is a vast range of high quality support services for children, young people and families living with the city and agencies are keen to ensure their work supports the overall aim of improving school attendance across the city.

There was some improvement in 2016/17 attendance, compared to the 2015/16 data

Significant improvement is still required, but the DfE 2016/17 attendance data showed that we narrowed the gap between our primary and secondary attendance and that of the other core cities, and nationally. The 2016/17 data showed a small improvement in our position Nationally for Primary and Secondary attendance. Overall, our slight improvement in Primary attendance, and considerable improvement in Primary persistent absence (PA), bucked the national trend.

The story is similar for Secondary attendance. Our Secondary attendance remained the same as last year, compared to a small decline in attendance nationally and across most of the core cities. Our secondary PA improved. We were one of only two core cities (Bristol and Liverpool) that improved for 16/17 whilst every other core city's PA rate worsened.

Bristol was the most improved core city in the UK in reducing persistent absenteeism for primary school pupils comparing the 15/16 data with 16/17. This improved from 11.8% to 10.6% which lifted Bristol 7 points in the national table to 143rd. Our Secondary pupil PA also improved for 16/17 from 17.7% to 17.3%. For secondary we also were one of only two core cities (Bristol and Liverpool) that improved for 16/17 whilst every other core city's PA rate worsened.

Children Missing Education Procedures

The council has robust Children Missing Education (CME) procedures in place for schools to follow. These are accessible [online](#) . Between May 2017 and June 2018 the Council provided free Children Missing Education training to more than 250 members of school staff from 149 Bristol schools.

Penalty Notice Process

The council has a clear Penalty Notice process in place which many of our schools are using on a regular basis; this includes Penalty Notices as a sanction for parentally condoned term-time leave of absence which has not been agreed by the school.

We are listening to each other

This strategy has been developed by the Council, voluntary agencies, health partners, schools and other stakeholders. It is evident that there is a shared understanding across the City that the issues impacting on school attendance are complex, and that a 'one size fits all' approach is not what is needed in order to improve attendance in the city. It is also clear that partners recognise school attendance is not the responsibility of any one agency, but a whole city issue. Bristol has made good progress in embedding a Think Family approach and this provides a good basis for this strategy to build on.

We have begun the process of listening to children and young people, through a piece of research undertaken in April/May 2018. We recognise that this needs to be a continual process if we are to achieve our aims, and that we need to listen to parents too.

> **Consultation note: We are consulting with families on this draft strategy. Their views will inform the final draft. If you are able to support this process please do get in touch.**

What Needs to Happen?

Regular school attendance is the key to enabling students to maximise the educational opportunities that they are entitled to. We have developed three priorities based on our needs assessment and evidence of good practice to enable Bristol to fulfil its ambition to significantly improve school attendance in the city.

Priority One – A shared understanding
Outcome: Attendance is understood as a whole city issue. Parents / carers and professionals working with children, young people and families have the necessary knowledge and understanding to improve attendance and are clear about their role in this.

Poor school attendance can be a consequence of a range of issues and needs. Improved school attendance can be achieved by families and universal and targeted services in the city working together to play their role in addressing these issues.

We will:

1. Listen to and work with children/ young people and their families to identify the barriers that are preventing school attendance, at the earliest opportunity.
2. Raise awareness of attendance as a 'Whole City Issue' through an *Attendance Charter* and encourage partners in the city to sign up to this, including local community organisations and local businesses.
3. Develop information about the importance of school attendance that is easily available and in a format which young people and parents/carers can understand. This will include research findings about the impact of lifestyle factors such as sleep and social media, on attendance and learning. We will ensure that the message to children and families regarding the link between good attendance and achievement, employment opportunities and other life outcomes is managed with care.
4. Coordinate citywide training and learning opportunities for school staff and Governors, and other professionals to enable them to fulfil their roles. This includes ACE awareness training and highlighting and the many reasons for non-attendance, as well as legal and statutory requirements. Work across agencies to ensure those who work with vulnerable children, including Children in Care, Children in Need and those with special educational needs and/or a disability develop confidence in supporting them to attend school.
5. Promote a culture of sharing and learning from good practice locally and nationally.
6. Expect all schools and MATs to develop and implement a whole school attendance policy that is culturally sensitive and includes effective intervention strategies that support families to addresses barriers to attendance. A model School Attendance Policy will be provided to schools, which can be modified to suit individual settings.

7. Encourage schools and MATs to examine how their policies and school culture are impacting on attendance. This includes, for example, whole school approaches to mental health and ensuring they understand the unintended consequences of policies which have a zero tolerance approach to punctuality or toilet breaks, particularly for vulnerable pupils including those with special educational needs and/or a disability.
8. Ensure that schools have access to specialist advice and support for individual and whole school attendance issues and benefit from working in partnership with other agencies across the city.

Priority Two – Working Together
Outcome: Children and families receive the right support at the right time from services that work well together

This Attendance Strategy is aligned with Bristol's Early Help strategy and the Bristol Multi Agency Threshold Guidance. Wherever possible we want families to be able to support themselves by engaging with and contributing to their local communities. Most do, but there are some children, young people and families who need help to do so. Our aim is to make sure children, young people and families are supported at the earliest opportunity and continue to be supported by the relevant services for as long as is required.

Early Help is not a team but a system wide approach to early intervention. Preventative and Early Help responses are critical to preventing issues escalating and children experiencing further harm. Early Help seeks to meet the needs of and support the family in resolving difficulties and prevent them becoming entrenched. Universal services are well placed to identify needs and support children and families at this early stage. They know children/ young people and families best and can use their relationship with children and families to help affect change. Universal services must remain involved even if a child and family go on to receive targeted or specialist support as this will help ensure that there is a whole-system response to meeting needs and achieving agreed outcomes.

We will:

1. Recognise attendance can be one factor in a more complex picture and that families may need additional support that can be accessed through the Early Help working arrangements.
2. Ensure a strategic oversight of other related city strategies to make certain that the strategies are working together, and if necessary make changes to oversight arrangements in order to ensure efficiency and minimise duplication. Other related strategies include the Early Help Strategy, the SEND Strategy, Corporate Parenting Strategy and the Neglect Strategy.
3. Embed a city wide policy on 'In Year Admissions' to ensure a coordinated and timely response to requests for school places throughout the school year. Including a coordinated approach where families move into, or within, the city to

minimise disruption to a child's education and reduce the need to travel long distances to school.

4. Work together as corporate parents to ensure swift access to the right school place for children in care.

5. Work together to prevent unnecessary delays to school admissions for children from vulnerable groups, such as Asylum Seekers; Gypsy, Roma, Traveller children; and those with special educational needs and disabilities.

6. Embed the use of Fair Access Protocols by Primary and Secondary Schools. These are implemented through the primary Fair Access Panel and secondary Bristol Inclusion Panel. This process should be considered when specific issues might be seen to be prohibiting a child or young person from attending school.

7. Continue to prioritise Children Missing Education (CME) services to ensure all CME living within Bristol are provided with a suitable education without delay, and CME Pupil Tracking cases are tracked as soon as possible, therefore minimising the time pupils who have moved out of the area need to be kept on a Bristol school's roll.

8. Utilise penalty notices and legal sanctions for cases of unauthorised absence. This includes holidays which have not been authorised by the school.

9. Utilise penalty notices and other legal sanctions where it is identified that families need additional support to address the barriers to their child's attendance, but do not engage or make the necessary changes.

10. Improve information sharing between Education and Health regarding attendance; to ensure timely support for children who cannot attend school due to health needs.

11. Develop guidance to ensure appropriate responses from schools and GPs where there is reason to doubt the veracity of illness cited by the parent for school absence.

12. Ensure schools understand their duty to provide a full-time, suitable, education for their pupils. Develop guidance to ensure pupils are only placed on part-time timetables in the most exceptional medical circumstances, and that part-time timetables are not used by schools as a strategy to deal with behavioural issues or special educational needs and/or disabilities.

13. Support schools to work closely together to ensure that pupils identified as vulnerable in terms of transition are provided with support to reduce the likelihood of poor attendance in their next setting. This may involve liaison and working with partner agencies to ensure families' needs are met.

14. Inform and support the development of a citywide approach to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Priority Three – Robust Data and Systems

Outcome: Attendance data is fully utilised, there are robust systems in place to ensure data is collected and analysed in a timely manner and continues to inform and shape the attendance improvement work in the city

Accurate and up to date school attendance data is necessary to proactively identify those who need extra help and support. High quality, timely data and analysis means that service providers are more likely to have the information they need to prevent issues escalating, ensure children remain safe, and to focus resources on vulnerable children.

We will:

1. Continue to use the centralised Children Missing Education and Pupil Tracking system across all Bristol schools, including independent schools. Continue to provide clear guidance and training to schools to ensure schools are equipped with the information they need to fulfil their obligations when removing pupils from school roll.
2. Establish a robust Local Authority system to monitor the actions taken by schools and ensure, when any child is placed on a time-table, it is regularly reviewed, and the child returns to full time provision without unnecessary delay.
3. Help schools to work with Department for Education (DfE) statutory guidance and the wider legal framework governing school attendance. Schools will be supported to embed effective registration systems and undertake active, whole school monitoring of pupil absence, in order to support and promote regular school attendance. Schools have a vital role to play in the early identification of patterns of poor attendance and punctuality and have a statutory duty under section 175 of the Education Act 2002, to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.
4. Liaise with the DfE and other external bodies to ensure that government initiatives and best practice exemplar, including from those from within the city, are communicated effectively with schools.
5. Improve data analysis, including data for vulnerable groups, so that we can be more responsive to citywide attendance issues and trends, identify barriers to attendance and provide support to assist timely interventions.
6. Analyse school level data and trends to identify schools with particularly poor attendance and support the development of multi-agency action plans to drive improvement.
7. Support schools in monitoring actions to improve attendance and review school targets at regular intervals.
8. Ensure effective and regular liaison between local authority teams, school management and other key agencies and organisations.

The 'Attendance Charter'

An Attendance Charter (see Appendix 2) has been developed, through consultation, to demonstrate the values and aspirations associated with the multi-agency approach required to address the issues of school attendance in Bristol. The Charter articulates the commitment by partners to work together to ensure all children within Bristol can benefit from improvements in school attendance detailed in this strategy. A key feature of the charter is for agencies to listen to all involved, especially the children and parents/carers, to understand the issues underpinning non-attendance and to ensure all involved understand the importance of school attendance and the associated benefits, and the voice of the children, young people, parents and carers is being heard.

The 'Attendance Toolkit'

This strategy will be supported by a suite of resources and guidance by means of an 'Attendance ToolKit' for schools to help develop a citywide approach. It will help schools recognise and reward good attendance and identify and address issues as early as possible before behaviours become entrenched and pupils are identified as persistent absentees. This toolkit will be added to and revised on an ongoing basis, to ensure it reflects the needs of schools.

How we will know the strategy is working?

An action plan will be developed with partners to support the delivery of the priorities included in this strategy. Progress against the action plan will be monitored by the Excellence in Schools Board.

The overarching performance indicators are:

1. **School Attendance:** Improved Primary and Secondary school attendance - achieving a place in the third quartile by the end of 2019/20 academic year, with an attendance rate of at least 95.8% for Primary and 94.3% for Secondary.
2. **Persistent Absence:** Reduce the number of Primary and Secondary pupils in the Persistent Absence category attendance. Achieving a place in the third quartile by the end of 2019/20 academic year, with a Persistent Absence rate of no higher than 9.2% for Primary and 13.8% for Secondary.
3. **Pupils Missing Education:** A robust city-wide system to collate and monitor the number of children and young people on part time provision (described as Pupils Missing Education (PME)) by 31 March 2019. With a year on year reduction in numbers of PME pupils from the implementation of the monitoring system.
4. **CME Training:** All Bristol schools trained in the city's CME and Pupil Tracking processes by December 2018. With ongoing training sessions available bi-monthly to meet the ongoing need due to staff changes in schools.
5. **CME Process:** A robust follow up system in place to challenge schools where the correct CME and Pupil Tracking processes are not followed – by 31 March 2019.
6. **Penalty Notices:** 80% of state funded Bristol schools using Penalty Notices where appropriate by the end of the 2018/19 academic year, with 100% of schools using Penalty Notices where appropriate by the end of the 2019/20 academic year. With ongoing training sessions available three times a year to meet the ongoing need due to staff changes in schools.
7. **School Attendance Network Meetings:** Locality based network meetings taking place in each locality (North, East/Central and South) three times a year, with a take up rate of at least 75% of schools attending.
8. **Regular, Consistent Data Reporting:** with an agreed timetable and suite of reports including analysis of validated DfE data releases and XVault/GroupCall Data. Analysis and reporting to include vulnerable groups, including Children in Care, Children in Need and those with a special educational need and/or disability.

Governance

This strategy will be overseen by the Excellence in Schools Board. They will call upon other strategic partnerships in the city to support implementation.