

EDUCATION WELFARE SERVICE – POLICY AND PROCEDURES ON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Report By: HEAD OF CHILDREN'S AND STUDENTS' SERVICES

Wards Affected

Countywide

Purpose

1. To provide an update on the policies and procedures followed by the Education Welfare Service when monitoring and promoting good attendance by pupils in schools.

Financial Implications

2. None.

Report

3. At the Committee's meeting in February 2003 (minute No 62), reference was made to issues concerning levels of attendance of pupils in schools. At that meeting, the Education Welfare policy for promoting good attendance was circulated and discussed. The discussion touched on the policy for intervention, in the case of pupils whose attendance is persistently unsatisfactory. This report looks at progress made over the intervening period (see Appendix 1 'Absence Figures Herefordshire 2001/2004').
4. Truancy sweeps, conducted in partnership with the Police, continue to be a regular activity in promoting good attendance. Sweeps are usually undertaken once each half-term with extra sweeps added during targeted periods, for example the May Fair or the lead up to Christmas. In February 2005, the EWS will run a pilot Truancy Sweep involving the whole of the team. This will include removing unaccompanied children from the streets and taking them to a place of safety where they can be interviewed.
5. The Welfare Service's aim is to work supportively with families and schools to ensure that problems of attendance are addressed early, in the most positive way. However, in those cases where parents consistently fail to send their children to school to a satisfactory level, the Education Welfare Service (EWS) are increasingly resorting to methods which involve the use of penalties awarded against parents.
6. Although the ultimate possibility of legal action is always mentioned at an early stage in the discussions with parents, the Welfare Service and schools have a carefully graded approach, to ensure that efforts to persuade and assist have been thoroughly explored before a decision to prosecute is taken. The prospects of successful prosecution will be poor unless the Service and schools can demonstrate that all other reasonable strategies have been attempted over an appropriate timescale, but

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have failed. Court action is a strategy to ensure that pupils return to regular school attendance – it is not a device for punishing parents.

7. During the 2003/04 academic year, the Education Welfare Service prosecuted 27 parents because of their children's non-school attendance. This is in contrast to the previous year when 8 parents were prosecuted. All of these cases required more than one court appearance to resolve, the minimum number being 3 and the maximum being 10. Sentences ranged from an absolute discharge to a £300 fine and 2 parents who each received 100 hours Community Service. The parents being prosecuted represent a very small group of parents. In one case, the service is preparing to prosecute one set of parents for the 5th time. The effects of publicising the prosecution figures will, it is hoped, provide a positive increase in attendance figures during the current school year. The Education Welfare Service typically receives between 850 to 950 referrals a year.
8. The Education Welfare Service has publicised the statistics relating to prosecutions and announced the beginning of the Penalty Notice system (see Appendix 2) in both the Hereford Times and the Hereford Journal. In addition, during early September, there were 2 interviews for local radio stations. One of these involved a live broadcast, including an interview with the Head Teacher of Whitecross High School.
9. Since September 2004, the service has, been concentrating more on the government's recent legislation regarding the use of Penalty Notices to tackle truancy (see Appendix 2 for details). The service has issued over 40 Penalty Notice Warnings and 8 full Penalty Notices so far. The Penalty Notices issued are still within the initial 28-day period. One payment of £50 has already been received. Penalty Notice Warnings are having a beneficial affect on truancy, as the consequences to parents are swifter than the drawn out process of prosecution.
10. The Education Welfare Service undertook legal training on 12th November 2004 to enable it to improve case preparation for prosecution in line with the demands of The Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE).

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Committee is asked to consider the current policy and practice to support school attendance and add their approval of such work.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Fast Track Prosecutions
- Penalty Notice Protocol

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