

ATTENDANCE CONSULTATION

Education Participation and Skills



1. Introduction

Penalty notices can be used by schools to address unauthorised pupil absence. In order to issue a penalty notice the Local Authority must have a Code of Conduct that has been developed in consultation with Headteachers/Principals, Governing Bodies and the Chief of Police. Plymouth City Council held a statutory consultation in relation to changes to the Code of Conduct. The proposal is to increase the threshold set within the Code of Conduct, from 8 unauthorised sessions (4 days) to 11 unauthorised sessions (5.5 days) and also use the school's attendance policy as a threshold, before a penalty notice can be issued.

In addition to a consultation for changes to the Code of Conduct, Plymouth City Council sought views from the public and other stakeholders regarding the following:

- Aligning INSET days to straddle a weekend outside of term dates to provide the potential for a week's holiday for families when holidays are less expensive.
- Shortening the six-week summer holiday as a way of creating an additional week of holiday at another point in the year, potentially the October and May break. This would then provide the potential for two weeks of holiday for families when holidays are less expensive.

The consultation was held between 2nd and 30th September 2019. In total 344 responses were received:

- 121 by email
- 26 by post
- 84 Facebook posts (133 shares, 144 comments)

2. Consultation Survey Part I

Consultation survey part I asked the following:

Do you agree that the policy should revert to 11 sessions (5.5 days) from 8 sessions (4 days) unauthorised absences and use the schools attendance policy as a threshold?

In carrying out the survey:

- 14 Headteachers responded.
- 17 Governors responded.
- No response was received from the Chief of Police.
- 5 respondents did not identify themselves

Of the responses:

- 15 were in favour of the changes (41.67%)*
- 21 were not in favour of the changes (58.33%)**

* 6 of whom were Headteachers

** 8 of whom were Headteachers

In addition, Horizon Multi Academy Trust representing 9 Headteachers commented:

'We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. All heads have noticed a gradual increase in absence rates since Plymouth adopted their current position on penalty notices. There are examples of head's being challenged in OfSTED inspections over their absent rates and inspectors being told that their hands are tied by the LA.'

2.1 Main Themes

Overall the themes raised by Plymouth Schools in relation to the proposal to increase the threshold of unauthorised absence were as follows:

- Concerns regarding the impact of school non-attendance on a child's learning and attainment.
- Concerns that raising the threshold of unauthorised absence will negatively impact on schools overall performance data.
- Perceived lack of support from the LA and elected members in relation to unauthorised absence from school.
- A desire to reinstate penalty notices for unauthorised holiday absence.
- The detrimental impact that removing penalty notices for unauthorised holiday absence has had on schools.
- Concerns regarding the detrimental impact of 2 weeks holiday absence can have on a child's learning and attainment in school.
- Dissatisfaction with the 6 month element of the Code of Conduct i.e. a penalty notice will only be issued to the parent(s) if the pupil has had at least eight unauthorised absences recorded against their name within a six month period.

Consultation Survey Part 1. The feedback strongly indicates that schools feel that they should have the support of the LA in order to use penalty notices to address and deter families from unauthorised absences during term time. A number of the responses link increasing levels of pupil absence across schools in the city to increasing levels of unauthorised holiday absence. There are repeated references to the negative impact pupil absence has not only on children themselves, but also teaching and learning within schools. There is a sense that the current position held by Plymouth City Council undermines the statutory requirement for all children to attend school, unless there are exceptional circumstances, and encourages pupil non-attendance. The responses suggest that the proposed changes would offer further endorsement of pupil non-attendance and make the task that schools face in relation to raising standards even more challenging.

3. Consultation Survey Part 2

The consultation survey part 2 asked the following:

Do you agree that we should look at aligning INSET Days to straddle a weekend outside of term dates to provide a potential weeks holiday for families when holidays are less expensive?

3.1 Response from schools and governing bodies

In carrying out the survey with schools and governing bodies:

- 27 schools responded
- 13 governors responded
- 5 who identified parent and school
- 1 member of staff
- 1 Teacher

- 1 who identified as parent and Devon LA

Of the responses

- 15 were in favour of the proposal (31.25%)
- 26 were not in favour of the proposal (54.17%)
- 1 had no preference (2.08%)
- 6 provided no response (12.5%)

3.2 Themes

The main themes raised by school and governing bodies in relation to aligning INSET days were as follows:

- INSET days are used to reflect the needs of the curriculum and the professional development of staff; not to facilitate holidays. Dates are set based on the requirements of individual schools, not the LA.
- All schools would need to align their INSET days however, academy schools set their own term dates and academies represent the majority of schools within the city.

3.3 Response from parents/carers

In carrying out the survey with parents and carers:

- 40 parents/carers responded

Of the responses:

- 32 were in favour of the proposal (80%)
- 8 were not in favour (20%)

3.4 Themes

The main themes raised by parents and carers in relation to aligning INSET days were as follows:

- Support from parents regarding the potential for families to access a cheaper holiday during term time is favourable
- All schools need to adopt the same approach and set the same dates for the proposal to work.

4. Consultation Survey Part 3

The consultation survey part 3 asked the following:

Do you agree that we should develop a proposal for shortening the six week summer holiday as a way of creating an additional 2 weeks of holiday at other points in the year, potentially the October and May break? This would then provide a potential of 2 weeks of holidays for families when holidays are less expensive.

4.1 Response from schools and governing bodies

In carrying out the survey with schools and governing bodies:

- 27 schools responded
- 13 governors responded

- 5 who identified parent and school
- 1 member of staff
- 1 Teacher
- 1 who identified as parent and Devon LA

Of the responses:

- 25 were in favour of the proposal (52.08%)
- 16 were not in favour of the proposal (33.33%)
- 7 did not respond (14.58%)

4.2 Themes

The main themes raised by Headteachers, governors and teachers in relation to shortening the 6 week summer holiday to allow for 2 weeks during other time in the year were as follows:

- The potential for a negative impact on teaching staff.
- The ability of the LA to align school holidays across the city and with neighbouring authorities.
- Travel companies increasing holiday prices when they 'cotton on' to the arrangement.
- Concerns regarding a possible detrimental impact on curriculum and learning at key points during the academic year.
- Concerns regarding the time at which the 2 weeks were taken during the year.

4.3 Response from parents/carers

In carrying out the survey with parents and carers:

- 40 parents/carers responded by email/post
- 1 Councillor response.

Of the responses:

- 31 were in favour of the proposal (75.61%)
- 9 were not in favour (21.95%)
- 1 undecided (2.44%)

4.4 Themes

The main themes raised by parents and carers in relation to shortening the 6 week summer holiday to allow for 2 weeks during other time in the year were as follows:

- Favourable view of the potential for families to access cheaper holidays.
- Concerns that holiday companies will 'cotton on' and increase their prices.
- Concerns about the ability of parents to access affordable childcare if they are required to work.
- A view that the summer holidays are currently too long for parents and children, particularly working parents.
- Concerns regarding the time at which the 2 weeks would be taken during the year.
- The importance of schools aligning their term dates for the proposal to work.
- Concerns from secondary schools relating to GCSE's and the impact of an additional week's holiday during the summer term.
- 1 week as opposed to 2 may be preferable.

5. Facebook

Of the 144 comments on Facebook, 36 were responses to the consultation survey. The responses have not been categorised under survey Part 2 or 3, however based on the written responses all appear to relate to consultation survey Part 3. Of the responses:

- 21 were in favour (58.33%)
- 11 were not in favour (30.56%)
- 4 were undecided (11.11%)

5.1 Emerging themes

The main themes raised by parents and carers in relation to the proposals were as follows:

- Favourable view of the potential for families to access cheaper holidays.
- Concerns that holiday companies will 'cotton on' and increase their prices.
- Concerns about the ability of parents to access childcare.
- A view that the summer holidays are currently too long for parents and children, particularly working parents.
- Some parents enjoy the 6 week holiday period with their children.
- Concerns regarding the time at which the 2 weeks would be taken during the year.
- The importance of schools aligning their term dates for the proposals to work.

*All survey responses are available as an appendix on request.

Summary

1. Survey 1 (consultation with statutory partners). The majority of respondents did not support the proposal.
2. Survey 2. The majority of schools did not support this proposal, however the majority of parents and carers did.
3. Survey 3. The majority of respondents (both parents and schools) support the proposal.

Consideration of the findings and next steps

We recognise the impact the pupil absence has both on the children themselves but also the schools that they attend. We are keen to support schools to take action in relation to unauthorised absence and that includes unauthorised holiday absence.

The Code of Conduct for Penalty Notices needs to be reviewed to reflect the position in Plymouth and all schools supported to enforce regular school attendance. At present penalty notices can be issued for all types of unauthorised school absence, but not unauthorised holiday absence. Schools have told us that the rise in unauthorised holiday absence is having a detrimental impact on children's outcomes and this needs to be considered in the context of Plymouth's challenging school landscape. There appears to be 2 options that should now be considered:

1. Changing the threshold of unauthorised absence within the Code of Conduct from 8 sessions to 11 sessions. This will provide an opportunity for all families to take one week of unauthorised holiday absence every 12 months during term time.
2. Changing the threshold for unauthorised holiday absence within the Code of Conduct from 8 sessions to 11 sessions for unauthorised holiday absence only; keeping the threshold at 8 sessions for all other types of unauthorised absence. This will provide an opportunity for families to take a week of unauthorised holiday during term time every 12 months, whilst enabling schools to continue to tackle other types of unauthorised absence at an early stage.

In other authorities both regionally and across the country the following thresholds of unauthorised absence apply:

Devon 10 sessions

Portsmouth 10 sessions

Hampshire 10 sessions

Torbay 10 sessions

Bristol 8 sessions

Poole 10 sessions

Somerset 10 sessions

Manchester 5 sessions

East Sussex 10 sessions

Royal Borough Kensington and Chelsea 8 sessions

Gloucestershire 10 sessions

Lancashire 10 sessions

Bournemouth 10 sessions

Cornwall 20 sessions

Darlington 10 sessions

Kent 10 sessions

Telford 20 for general unauthorised absence and 10 sessions for unauthorised holiday absence.

In raising the threshold within the Code of Conduct any unintended consequences relating to Safeguarding must be considered. At present the Inclusion, Attendance and Welfare Service receives referrals for children who are persistently absent from school and those with high levels of unauthorised absence. Enforcement action can be taken once the threshold within the Code of Conduct is met however referrals can be made to the service prior to the threshold of 8 unauthorised sessions being met. Changing the threshold from 8 sessions to 11 sessions will not impact on the ability of the school and / or the Inclusion, Attendance and Welfare Service to intervene if there are safeguarding concerns. Changing the threshold will however, impact on the LA's ability to take enforcement action at an earlier stage.

In relation to consultation survey 2 and 3, the majority of respondents support the proposal under survey 3. As a result of the emerging themes under survey 2, the proposal will not be progressed. We will instead, focus on progressing the proposal under consultation survey 3.

To progress the proposal to shorten the 6 week summer holiday to allow for holiday at other points during the year, we will work with maintained schools and academies in Plymouth, Devon County Council and Cornwall Council to seek their views regarding alignment the term dates. The term dates are now set until the end of academic year 2021/22.

Isabelle Morgan

Inclusion and Attendance Manager