

# PERSISTENT ABSENTEEISM AND BULLYING

Education Participation and Skills



## Introduction

Education and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee have requested information about the links between persistent pupil absence and bullying in Plymouth. This discussion paper aims to consider the data that we can currently access in relation to this line of enquiry and makes recommendations as to how we may be able to develop this line of enquiry.

## Data

Persistent absence can be due to persistent unauthorised absences and/or authorised absences. When a pupil is absent from school, the absence on the pupil register is recorded using a registration code. There are 24 codes that can be used in pupil registers. These codes are statutory, there is no code which allows a pupil to be recorded as absent from school due to bullying.

Nationally schools are expected to apply an unauthorised absence code where it is due to alleged bullying. Unauthorised absence is a criminal offence therefore, if a pupil is persistently absent and those absences are unauthorised, the case would normally be referred to an Education Welfare Officer.

In order to understand the local position in more detail, a sample of 415 of the current open cases referred to an Education Welfare Officer have been reviewed. Within this sample, 21 (5%) have bullying cited as a reason for persistent absence. It is important to note that where bullying has been cited there are often additional factors contributing to the pupil's persistent absence.

Schools and families report bullying to the local authority on a case by case basis, there is no formal route for reporting bullying in schools to Plymouth City Council.

Plymouth's data for exclusions relating to bullying shows that:

2016/17 there were 18 fixed term exclusions for bullying (31 days in total).

2017/18 there were 18 fixed term exclusions for bullying (41 days in total)

2018/19 there have been 31 fixed term exclusions due to bullying (55 days in total)

Not all schools purchase the traded offer from the Inclusion, Attendance and Welfare Service and therefore would not have an allocated Education Welfare Officer. In order to receive comprehensive data on the number of children who are persistently absent from school due to bullying, individual schools would need to be asked to provide the data. In order to provide the data to establish whether there is a link between persistent absenteeism and bullying schools would need to follow the process outlined below:

- 1) look at the attendance of individual pupils who have alleged bullying and identify which of those children are persistent absentees,
- 2) identify which of the child's absences were related to alleged bullying and which absences were for other reasons,
- 3) identify whether the alleged bullying is what caused the persistent absenteeism.
- 4) submit their findings to the Local Authority.

## **What are schools required to do in relation to bullying?**

Schools are required by law to act to prevent bullying but also to address it when it happens.

The Department for Education (DfE) has produced guidance for all schools, including academies and free schools, which outlines its duties towards preventing and tackling bullying in schools:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-and-tackling-bullying>

The Education Act 2002 Section 175 placed a legal duty on maintained schools and Local Authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Some incidents of bullying may also be a child protection issue. A bullying incident should be addressed as a child protection issue under the Children Act 1989 when there is 'reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm. These concerns must be reported to the member of staff in school responsible for child protection and then reported to the local authority's children's social services.

Section 89 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 states that maintained schools must have measures to encourage good behaviour and prevent all forms of bullying amongst pupils. Some schools choose to include this information in an anti-bullying policy, whilst others include it in their behaviour policy. These measures must be communicated to all pupils, school staff and parents. The head teacher must follow through and adopt the policy and all students, parents and teachers should be notified of it once it has been decided.

The Independent School Standards (England)(Amendment) Regulations 2012 state that the proprietor of an academy or other independent school is required to ensure that an effective anti-bullying strategy and health & safety strategy is drawn up and implemented.

Under the Public Sector Equality Duty of the Equality Act 2010, schools and childcare providers must take steps to prevent and respond to discriminatory language.

Schools have the powers to intervene in bullying incidents outside of the school ground including on home-to-school transport, in the community and online.

Most bullying incidents are not crimes. But some types of bullying are illegal and should be reported to the police. This includes bullying that involves violence or assault; theft; harassment and intimidation over a period of time including calling someone names or threatening them, making abusive phone calls, and sending abusive emails or text messages (one incident is not normally enough to get a conviction); and anything involving hate crimes.

Some cyberbullying activities could be criminal offences under a range of different laws, including the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. There have been some instances of such prosecutions in the UK

## **How do schools record incidents of bullying?**

Many schools in Plymouth use CPOMS which is a Safeguarding and Child Protection software application for schools to monitor child protection, safeguarding and a whole range of pastoral and welfare issues including bullying.

The Education Reference Group (Safeguarding) identified that the way in which CPOMS is used in Plymouth schools is inconsistent. As a result there is a piece of work underway to develop best practice guidance for schools – using CPOMS to record bullying will form part of the best practice guidance.

CPOMS however is a separate software application to the software that schools use for pupil attendance registers.

### **What are we doing already?**

- Plymouth City Council has a web page which provides advice around bullying and signposts to services for support.
- Education Welfare Officers will liaise with school staff if a parent or child makes an allegation of bullying.
- Schools who purchase the traded service can refer a child who is persistently absent from school to an Education Welfare Officer.
- Schools who do not purchase the traded offer can contact the Inclusion, Attendance and Welfare Service for advice in relation to persistent absence. They also receive a termly visit from an Education Welfare Officer.
- Plymouth City Council is improving the Plymouth Online Directory which will enhance the information and signposting to services offer for families and schools.
- Schools use behaviour sanctions against children who bully.

### **Recommendations for consideration:**

- Improve the electronic information and advice offer by linking the council webpage on bullying and the Plymouth Online Directory.
- Consider creating a single route for parents and/or children to report bullying to the local authority where there is concern that this is not being addressed by the school.
- Invite a Primary and Secondary Headteacher to meet with Elected Members to describe their practice in relation to bullying.
- Request data from schools in relation to the link between bullying and persistent absenteeism.
- Work in partnership with schools rated good or outstanding by Ofsted to develop a template/best practice anti-bullying/behaviour policy framework.

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