

SCHOOLS FORUM – JANUARY 2020

EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICES

In January 2018 the reshape of GCC education services resulted in the creation of the Children with Additional Needs Service to provide a focus on supporting schools to meet the needs of all of their children and assisting them with individual cases which necessitate a multi-agency response. In addition to advice, guidance and training for school staff and Governors, since that time, the service has directed supported schools in:

- finding alternatives to permanent exclusion for over 100 children;
- co-ordinating a multi-agency response to wider school challenges through its Team Around the School – improving attendance, fixed term and permanent exclusions and pupil progress in those schools;
- providing dedicated support to schools in meeting the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (on individual cases and wider school challenges) reducing their time out of education from a maximum of 7 months to 3 weeks and increasing their success rate of integration and participation within school;
- overseeing 885 part-time timetable provision to assist schools in ensuring their systems and decisions will stand up to Ofsted scrutiny;
- liaising with other agencies on schools behalf where there are wider child or family issues to ensure a joined up approach and that schools are kept informed of a child's circumstances – especially in relation to police operation activity;
- liaising with children who are home educated or have previously been excluded and their new school to facilitate successful transition in over 200 cases
- increasing overall attendance of children to 95.7% and reducing persistent absence to 9.6% through increased family support and legal action where this is not effective

Feedback from schools and families has been positive about the work of this service (especially Education Inclusion) and we are seeing greater collaboration between schools and other partners to best meet the needs of children.

Unfortunately, due to the increase in vulnerable children and families in the county, GCC education support services are finding themselves unable to maintain appropriate levels of service to schools, and to their children. Support services have undergone a number of efficiency savings but this has not been able to remedy the resource required in two particular areas where GCC teams are providing a greater service to schools than is legislatively required.

Schools Forum is therefore asked to consider the preferred course of action in the support provided for both attendance and safeguarding through the MASH.

1. Attendance

Whilst GCC has a statutory responsibility to take legal action against parents who do not send their children to school, this responsibility does not extend to the issuing of penalty notices (unless legal action is taken in regard to non-payment). As individual schools are responsible for setting their own attendance policies and ensuring children attend school this duty sits with them. However to ease the administrative burden on schools this service was retained by GCC when the funding for education services (including education welfare) was delegated to schools in 2011.

Since that time we have seen an increase in the number of attendance cases; significantly so in recent years. In the 2018/19 academic year, 85 schools asked GCC to issue 1,851 penalty notices for non-attendance. This was a 2.5x increase from the previous academic year.

	2017/18	2018/19
Number Requests to issue received	713	1,851
Total Number Penalty Notices issued	575	1,632
Of which...		
Holidays	561	1,612
Lateness	9	8
Truancy	4	0
After Pre-court	1	12

A quarter (57) of primary schools requested the issue of penalty notices during 2018/19; with an average of 16 issued per school. 36 of these primary schools had not requested the issue of penalty notices previously. 70% of secondary schools (28 schools) had penalty notices issued which was 7 more schools than in 2017/18. The average number issued per secondary school was 25 and ranged from 1 to 79.

In the same time period, the number of requests for legal interventions received and legal interventions that have taken place have more than doubled.

	2017/18	2018/19
Requests to initiate legal proceedings received	83	176
Interviews Under Caution taken place	80	133
School Attendance Orders Issued	4	0
Prosecutions taken place	24	110
Simple Cautions delivered	18	14

The number of prosecutions have mainly increased due to a larger number of unpaid Penalty Notices that have been taken forward for prosecution (93 of the prosecutions were for the original offence of non-school attendance following an unpaid penalty notice).

Whilst the income generated by penalty notices has previously been almost sufficient to cover the staffing resource required for attendance work, the increase in this area means that this is no longer the case. As such, it has been identified that GCC would require a further full-time position to continue to offer the same level of attendance service for schools (to include non statutory work such as penalty notices, providing advice and guidance to schools and hosting attendance networks).

The costs associated to such a post would equate to £43,00 per year.

Due to the current demands upon the High Needs Budget there is insufficient funding available to GCC to meet such a cost. As such Schools Forum is asked to consider two options:

a) To reduce the attendance support provided by GCC.

This would result in individual schools taking responsibility for issuing their own penalty notices and taking steps to ensure prompt payment. It would also limit school information, advice and guidance on attendance issues to a web resource on schoolsnet. In addition, it would also see the demise of the Attendance Networks unless schools were willing to increase their funding level to participate in this forum to cover the true cost.

b) For schools to provide additional funding so GCC can continue to provide the same level of attendance support.

This would sustain the current level of support but improve responsiveness and timeliness of support which has become an issue recently due to the lack of staff capacity. However, this would require agreement from all schools to cover the additional resource cost of £43,000 per year.

2. Safeguarding (MASH)

As schools are an essential partner in identifying and responding to safeguarding concerns GCC currently employ 2 education researchers dedicated to the MASH. This resource (funded through the High Needs Budget) has slowly increased over time as the MASH has become more established but we have not been able to match the increasing levels of investment from our partners.

Current establishment of the MASH is:

	Posts
Police	37
Social Care	34
Family Information Service	3
Health*	3
GDAS*	2
Education	2

** There are plans to increase the health compliment and to consider expanding the GDAS element due to the volume of MASH workload.*

For safeguarding reasons, the level of personal scrutiny required for staff working within the MASH prevents us from being able to appoint any additional temporary staff in a timely way when workloads peak and therefore dedicated resource is required to manage school support within the MASH.

The volume of cases dealt with within the MASH has continued to increase since its inception and deliberate steps have been taken to filter all safeguarding concerns through the team to ensure a consistent, informed, multi-agency and timely response which protects children and their families. However, as a result of this the monthly volume of work for the education researchers has increased by eight-fold between 2018 to 2019 (i.e. from 31 in September 2018 to 248 in September 2019 alone).

And whilst Operation Encompass has received positive support from schools and others involved, its introduction has resulted in an average of 173 additional cases requiring school contact and support per month, placing additional burden on the staff.

The work of the MASH education researchers has been reviewed and non-essential tasks have been able to be covered by the wider education support service where necessary and appropriate (based upon safeguarding thresholds). However, despite this, the volume of workload within the MASH means that there are an increasing number of cases where education research is not being delivered to the required timescales to inform appropriate safeguarding action (i.e. in July 2019 education research was provided in the required 24 hours in 174 cases and this had fallen to 32 by November 2019).

This meant that in November there were 156 cases closed (28% of all cases) without education research having been conducted. Whilst education research may not always be vital to inform every case, it is essential that education information is shared with other partners to assist with making the appropriate safeguarding responses; and more importantly that schools are able to make informed decisions based upon wider agency planning when responding to children and their families on a daily basis. As such, it has been identified that an additional education research post is required within the MASH, but suggested that this is limited to term time only working to reflect the nature of schools work – a financial commitment of £16,000 per year.

Due to the current demands upon the High Needs Budget there is insufficient funding available to GCC to meet such a cost. As such Schools Forum is asked to consider two options:

a) To accept the reduced level of education input into the MASH.

As the volume of cases being referred through the MASH continues to increase this would result in education being involved in many less cases; with schools not being alerted to a number of cases (safeguarding threshold dependent) or invited to participate in strategy meetings in a timely way, and schools not being asked to share their information about a child or family to inform the appropriate response. We know of a number of cases where it has been the education information which has resulted in the right course of action being taken for a child. To allow education researchers to meet the casework requirements of the MASH, they would become unavailable for DSLs to contact informally for support, advice or guidance on current cases; or where they have lower level concerns they wish to seek advice on for a quick response outside of the formal safeguarding processes.

b) For schools to provide additional funding so GCC can increase education presence in the MASH.

This would sustain the current level of activity but significantly improve responsiveness and timeliness of information sharing and gathering with, and from, schools – providing a greater multi-agency approach to safeguarding and assisting schools in meeting their safeguarding duties. However, this would require agreement from all schools to cover the additional resource cost of £16,000 per year.