

Council considering cutting 'invaluable' pupil welfare staff

The City of Edinburgh Council is set to cut an "invaluable" service which helps to get some of the city's most vulnerable children back into school.

Teaching unions have criticised the proposal to get rid of Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) as part of a £600,000 budget cut – and have warned the local authority it could leave struggling families "without adequate support" and mean that more youngsters "slip through the net".

A local teacher said without them remaining in post "some kids would end up just disappearing".

The council claimed that no final decision will be taken on the future of the service until the end of an ongoing review, and that any loss of the pupil support workers would be covered by the creation of new roles within a "reshaped service" which current EWOs could apply for.

Education Convener Cllr Joan Griffiths said work was under-way to "minimise negative impacts" and "ensure the most vulnerable families continue to receive support".

However trade union representatives say it is clear the intention is to "delete" the scheme entirely by the end of this month, with the capital's 12 EWOs to be offered

voluntary redundancy or put on the redeployment list. And they fear there are no plans in place to ensure other council staff will be available to pick up the work they do.

Education Welfare Officers work with schools and families to get pupils who are repeatedly absent back into school by visiting them at home and discussing issues to find solutions. Critics of the move toward getting rid of them say that loss of personal interaction would be detrimental to efforts to improve attendance and help struggling households, as a more remotely-run service would not yield the same results.

At the council's annual budget meeting in February councillors approved a £600,000 cut to the service, although a report tabled at the meeting said it was "intrinsically punitive and does not support the child-centred vision for improving attendance or inclusion" as part of the EWO's remit is to "refer to the Children's Reporter where no improvement has been made".

The report stated: "We cannot reduce support for our most vulnerable families so this project would need to be seen as part of an overall improvement in service delivery."

Addressing the Finance and Resources Committee on Monday Graham Neal, Education and Children's Services steward for Unison's Edinburgh Council branch said the union was "concerned that the plan to delete the EWO service deeply flawed and based on a misunderstanding of their role".

He told councillors: "Unison questions why the council is prepared to delete an invaluable service and lose vital skills and experience due to this misunderstanding.

"Unison believes the deletion of this service will impact City of Edinburgh Council's ability to meet statutory commitments and leave some of the city's most vulnerable children and families without adequate support."

'Some kids would end up just disappearing'

Neil, a teacher in Edinburgh who has worked alongside EWOs, told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) that without the service "some kids would end up just disappearing".

He said the specialist support staff regularly visit families who often "don't have good opinions of schools," adding: "Sometimes the Education Welfare Officers are the only link between the school and the family.

"The school might try their best phoning, but a lot of the time that doesn't happen so the EWOs go out and actually knock on the door and start speaking and building relationships with families.

"There was one example where EWOs visited a family and there were concerns about the mother having an inappropriate male in the house. The school would have had no way of knowing that unless they were making regular visits.

"It ended up where the pupil went from zero attendance and there was concerns about what was happening in the home, the girl got placed with a foster family and absolutely loved it and her attendance went up to over 80 per cent.

"There's no way the school would have known about any of this because what you get told over the phone, you've got to believe the parents a lot of the time.

"Since Covid we've seen a lot more kids that are anxious going to school and are refusing school more. I definitely think this cut would make things worse."

Early intervention

At Monday's meeting Graeme Smith from Unite said social workers have "great belief" in EWOs due to their early intervention with youngsters before their situation deteriorates to the point they need to be referred to social services.

"They're able to provide welfare support to families who don't meet the social work threshold to make sure they don't eventually lead down that way," he said.

"The notion that the EWOs will still remain and we'll keep them in the service is flawed based on the process we're going through at the minute.

"Whatever roles are created as a result of the support worker consultation will not be done within the input of the EWOs."

Speaking on behalf of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Edinburgh branch secretary Alison Murphy said she had received a lot of correspondence from local head teachers who "massively value the service".

She said there was "no capacity" in schools to "take on the work that is done by the EWOs".

She added: "It's really important that this is retained, it's really important this is retained as a centrally managed service so there's support and challenge for schools around managing attendance, because frankly there's going to be huge long-term saving. The costs of even a few children who slip through the net, and then you have major child protection issues or you have major long term issues around criminality, whatever it might be, the £600,000 this is talking about is nothing compared with that."

Finance and Resources convener Mandy Watt, Labour, responded

by saying the budget saving was part of a review of the “whole service” which EW0s were “not scared of”. She added: “They think it’ll show what they do and how valuable they are and how they could remain in a reshaped service.”

The council’s Human Resources Director Nareen Turnbull said that “no decision been made on this,” adding: “If it does move to where there are posts that are surplus then the redeployment process and voluntary redundancy process would be applied.”

At the meeting a Labour administration amendment said the council was committed to “inclusion and high attendance in our schools” and that the “skills and experience of our EW0s should be retained within our inclusion work”.

An SNP amendment proposed taking £150,000 from last year’s underspend to fund the service for another year, however this was defeated as councillors voted to divert the full £13.7million left over from 2022/23 to cash-strapped health and social care services on the recommendation of council bosses.

Responding to the concerns raised by unions afterwards, the Education Convener said: “The current organisational consultation on methods to improve attendance is helping us to investigate the best ways of doing this within the current, post-Covid context.

“Schools already have a variety of measures in place to improve attendance, from clearer policies, improved management systems and effective inclusion as well as the use of Pupil Support Officers to build relationships and support families to improve attendance.

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.

THINK TANK RESEARCH

On Thursday, The Commission on School Reform set up by think tank Reform Scotland issued the results of their research which found that more than 210,000 children and young people miss a day of schooling every fortnight. The problem is said to be worse at high school where 40% of pupils miss a day a fortnight.

The research is based on Freedom of Information requests to Scottish local authorities. In Edinburgh a quarter of pupils in P1 to P4 have attendance of less than 90% which rises to 34% for pupils at High School.

[*Absent Minds – A Discussion*](#), will be held online on Thursday 26th October at 1pm, with a panel including Kate Forbes MSP.



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