

School welfare officers to be retained

Plans to axe a service which helps to boost attendance in Edinburgh's schools have been scrapped.

The council has withdrawn controversial proposals to close the Education Welfare Service after engagement with schools highlighted a "high number of strengths".

The u-turn allays fears raised by trade unions that Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) would be offered voluntary redundancy or redeployed to other jobs as a result of the decision, without their "invaluable" work being picked up by others.

The service is now set to be redesigned to focus on pupil well-being as well as attendance.

It was threatened with closure after being identified for an "organisational review" by council chiefs looking to save £600,000.

A report said the scheme – which supports pupils whose attendance has dropped below 85 per cent – was "long standing and that no other alternatives for making revenue savings could be found".

However the local authority was warned getting rid of it would be detrimental to efforts to improve attendance of vulnerable youngsters and help struggling households, as a more remotely-run service would not yield the same results achieved by face-to-face interaction with EWOs.

Neil, a teacher in Edinburgh who has worked alongside EWOs,

told the Local Democracy Reporting Service that if they didn't remain in post "some kids would end up just disappearing".

He explained that the specialist support workers 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 EW0s go out and actually knock on the door and start speaking and building relationships with families."

Where there has been involvement of an EW0 the attendance rate improved for 63 per cent of primary pupils and 49 per cent of secondary pupils. Overall 37 per cent of those referred to the service continued to see their absences increase.

Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) questioned why the council was prepared to "delete an invaluable service and lose vital skills and experience".

The union's Edinburgh branch secretary Alison Murphy told a council meeting last year that there was "no capacity" in schools to "take on the work that is done by the EW0s".

She said: "It's really important that this is retained . . . 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."

A report going to the education, children and families committee next week states: "There was engagement with stakeholders to explore the range of options to maximise attendance in schools and it was proposed that the Education

Welfare Service should close.

“A range of stakeholders contributed to the consultation on the proposal, including schools, service users and other key partners. Overall, the response highlighted a high number of strengths regarding the available resources to maximise attendance.

“As a result of the consultation, alongside our local commitment to maximise school attendance, the proposal to close the Education Welfare Service has been withdrawn.”

It will now be renamed the ‘Education Wellbeing Service’ to focus on “wellbeing indicators” as opposed to only attendance.

It’s remit will be: ‘building trusting relationships with children, young people and their families to assess and address specific barriers to wellbeing and attendance; connecting schools, children, young people and families to appropriate wellbeing support services in their communities; supporting schools to deliver family education and wellbeing programmes’.

It will also provide “advice for schools including case reviews where attendance and wellbeing are key concerns prior to referrals to statutory services”.

The redesigned service will be delivered within the existing £600k budget “with no redundancies, taking into consideration changes proposed via HR job grading exercise,” the report adds.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter