

Workforce/Attendance Case Example, January 2022 – Cherry Garden School, London

Background

Cherry Garden School is a special primary school in Peckham for pupils aged 2-11 years who have severe learning differences, complex needs and autism. They take children from all over Southwark and have a diverse pupil community that is representative of the wider borough. They currently have 85 pupils on roll. The school has never had to shut due to staff absences but have had periods of high absences related to shielding and national peaks in cases. Although they have had periods of higher vulnerability prior to testing and vaccine roll out, they have been able to maintain pupil attendance throughout the pandemic.

Factors in Keeping School Attendance High

- Flexible deployment of staff, including frontloading the mornings with more casual staff (staff permanently employed by the school who are not in teaching roles such as midday meals supervisors) to ensure all pupils could attend daily
- Ongoing detailed staff deployment planning from Assistant Headteacher, which was daily at peaks of high staff absence
- Effective, open and speedy communication of changes to plans to all staff and space for them to share concerns directly to decision makers
- Offering part-time staff the opportunity to take on more hours as over-time to cover absences

Approach Taken

The main contingency that Cherry Garden put in place was to use casual staff to fill gaps in staff attendance. They did also seek to use some agency staff as well but due to high levels of demand, this was not a viable solution. Part-time members of staff were also offered the opportunity to take on some additional over-time hours if they wanted to, but this was entirely optional. The workforce has demonstrated high levels of flexibility and resilience to ensure that the school could comfortably keep children in a safe setting whilst having appropriate safety measures in place. The safety measures they employed were informed by consistent communication with Public Health England (PHE) and helped staff to feel more protected in the workplace.

Further contingency measures were considered. For example, as many pupils travel in through school provided transport, parents need to be informed as soon as possible if their child isn't able to attend. As a final contingency measure to ensure that they had adequate staffing levels in place, they sought to frontload their morning staffing levels. By using casual staff and

deploying them from 9:30am, if adequate staff couldn't be guaranteed from 1:30pm onwards then they had adequate time to contact parents to arrange for children to be collected early. This has yet to be required but is in place in case staff absences continue to rise.

Challenges

A key challenge the school faced was maintaining staff morale and wellbeing with understandable levels of anxieties. At periods staff have felt very vulnerable and overwhelmed, however since the rollout of COVID testing and vaccines in January 2021 staff have begun to feel more protected. The senior leadership team has worked hard to provide support to staff through consistent communication and reduce workload where possible.

They have also felt an external pressure for things to be running as normal from September onwards which sometimes feels as odds with their need to ensure that children are safe. They have adapted their delivery to ensure that they can balance safety and the need to keep children in school which has ensured positive outcomes for the children.

Successes

The main success has been that Cherry Garden has never had to shut its doors to pupils throughout the pandemic. Although there have been some reduced numbers of children at times, they have not had big outbreaks and have been able to contain cases due to good, local guidance offered by PHE who recognised that social distancing wouldn't be possible for their pupils and other measures would be needed instead.

Additionally, the school community is stronger now than before as the school have built a shared ethos that they can all get through challenges together. This includes parents who have been incredibly resilient and supportive of all school decisions due to their keenness to keep staff safe.

Another positive success is that children have continued to make really good progress in spite of staff changes and uncertainty. This is thanks to staff constantly striving to ensure the best outcomes for children and families providing constant support to their children and the school.

Key lessons learnt

- The school has been able to **reduce the workload of staff** in a particularly stressful time and have committed to ensuring this in future by removing unnecessary tasks
- **Staff wellbeing** has been crucial over the past year and the pandemic has led to a drive from senior leadership to continue to improve in this area
- They have **improved how they communicate as a school** to all members of the community
- Adopting **smart ways of working** opens up capacity and enables greater flexibility among the workforce