



Orkney Islands Council

Increasing attendance through youth work in schools

In Orkney, Community Learning, Development and Employability (CLDE) Youth Services team have worked in partnership with Papdale Primary School and Kirkwall Grammar School to establish two Pupil Equity Funded (PEF), in-school Pupil Equity Workers (known as youth worker) posts. Along with a Community Learning Officer / co-ordinator post (initially funded until March 2024 from the Strategic Equity Fund) the primary focus is placed on closing the poverty-related attainment gap for children and young people in Orkney, using a Community Learning and Development / Youth Work approach.

Youth Services Team Manager, Cheryl Rafferty said:

"We worked collaboratively to develop our approach to this work. Youth workers and teachers are both educators, so in many ways a natural partnership. However, they have skills-sets and approaches specific to their profession. So, it felt important that the youth workers could be embedded within the school, but still be part of CLDE Youth Services."

Known as the Pupil Engagement Team (PET), the youth workers provide targeted support for children, young people and families from P1 – S3 who are at risk of disengagement or non-attendance, in line with the criteria for the PEF. A request for engagement process has been developed to encourage collaborative working between the guidance teams, teachers and the youth workers to best identify the right support for each pupil. Pupils are offered individual and/or targeted group support sessions which are led by the young people, supported by the youth worker and can include activities to develop or enhance their social, emotional and interpersonal skills, improve their wellbeing and also provide opportunities to achieve wider accreditation through Youth Awards. In both schools, the youth worker also provides wider engagement opportunities during, and after the school day to encourage engagement. Opportunities include a breakfast bar, a soft start option for young people who are unable to go directly to class themselves; and confidence building spaces and programmes. **A P6 pupil says:** *"I really like the Pupil Engagement Team because they do fun things, I know where to come when I am angry and need quiet time and I like making new friends in the clubs."*

Kirkwall Grammar School Head Teacher Claire Meakin says:

“The impact of the support our young people have received has been significant across a range of outcomes, but two that have stood out include the improvement in lesson attendance and the achievement of additional qualifications. Our youth worker has quickly built-up positive relationships with pupils, families and staff, which have ensured they are very well-placed to work with our young people, in one-to-one, and group, situations. Supporting our young people to feel ready and able to access learning has resulted in achievements across the curriculum.”

As part of their role, both youth workers offer support to the wider family. This could include offering low level wellbeing support, building confidence to engage with the school and also signposting to other support organisations.

Papdale Primary School Head Teacher Emma Billington says: *“Engaging families is crucial to establishing and maintaining good attendance with our children. The Pupil Equity Team engage with families that, due to various factors, may be reluctant to engage with school staff. We have noted that trusting relationships have developed that include a parental openness not previously in place. This inevitably impacts positively on the school relationships with families.”*

A key element of the Pupil Engagement Team is the ability to provide consistent support throughout the year, including during the school holidays. **Kat Beaver, Pupil Engagement Team Community Learning Officer stated,** *“We recognise that school breaks and holiday periods can be challenging times for families, and we have seen the disruption this can have on school attendance and engagement for some young people. Being able to offer consistent levels of support throughout the year, in addition to offering activities and opportunities during the holidays has proven to have a positive impact on families”.*

Last summer the Pupil Engagement Team trialled a Summer Activity Programme in Kirkwall Grammar School, designed to offer continued support to young people transitioning from P7 to S1. Providing free activities aimed at building familiarity and confidence within the school, building new social groups, and offering a learning opportunity through wider achievement was all received very well by both pupils and parents. **A parent shared:** *“This has been amazing for my child, he was really anxious and worried about coming from such a small school to a big one like Kirkwall Grammar School, but having had this opportunity has helped him to make new friends and he is now really excited to start the new term”.*

Emma Billington says “Using Pupil Equity Fund to invest in this partnership is bringing a new approach to engaging our children and families. It has opened a new route for children who are struggling with their engagement and enjoyment of school and provides a different type of support from that that the school can ordinarily offer. In our school and family meetings, children and parents are reporting to us that they are thrilled with having the support of the Pupil Engagement Team while quantifying the impact is more difficult at this early phase, I have no doubt that we will see impact in our wellbeing and engagement data as time moves on.”