



Saroja Forester

- General Practitioner
- Stockport
- Improving attendance in primary schools, Brinnington, Stockport



Project aim

I was struck by the difference in healthy life expectancy between residents of Brinnington and other neighbourhoods in Stockport. Looking at wider determinants of health, I found one of the contributing factors could be poor attendance in the primary schools in Brinnington. By reducing absenteeism in primary schools, it is hoped that these children's short-term health (educational outcomes, social and cognitive development) and subsequent long-term socioeconomic opportunities and health will improve.

What did I do?

Following a literature review of the evidence around health benefits of good school attendance, I reached out to key stakeholders across education, primary care, Stockport Council, GMCA, VCSE groups and the local population to gather their thoughts and ideas on why attendance may be low in this area, and how it could be improved. I then formulated a logic model and worked on several activities, mostly focused on how we in primary care can best work with the education sector to help local families become aware of the broader health benefits of school and how best to support them in minimising time off school.

What did I learn?

I learned how several different sectors already do a massive amount of work trying to improve families' engagement with schools, but the health benefits of good attendance are not well known. Families undoubtedly want the best for their children but face many psychosocial challenges outside their immediate control. The limited timeframe of this project could only tackle one aspect in detail, so I concentrated on how we in primary care can improve joined up working with families and services to minimise days off primary school and to improve take-up of places in nurseries and with childminders to help establish good routines from an early age. Ways of helping families access other support was also addressed, as school may be missed for reasons other than ill health.

Has this changed how you work?

National guidelines around whether certain illnesses warrant time off childcare settings are already sent to schools. These have been shared with GPs and community pharmacies in Brinnington and now to the rest of Stockport also, so that families benefit from consistent messaging from different sectors. Teaching events for local pharmacists, Safeguarding Leads of all the Stockport General Practices and future GPs in the Stockport GP Training Scheme were taught about the health benefits of good school attendance and how to best use our short consultations to address this. All of primary care, including dental and optometry colleagues, have been made aware of the importance of talking about attendance and giving specific advice on when a child ought to be well enough to return to their childcare setting following an appointment. Appointment systems have changed to minimise schooltime missed.

What happens next?

Attendance data have been analysed and the impact of changes made is already apparent. Evidence of social and educational benefit will take around 5 years and long-term health benefit will take at least 20 years. It is hoped that the activities in this project will become embedded across Stockport as a whole and can then be cascaded across other boroughs of Greater Manchester. As the Children's Commissioner for England said in 2024: "Attendance is everyone's business"!