

NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

A Guide to Non School Attendance, Statutory Responsibility and Referral to Education Welfare

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EDUCATION WELFARE

A Guide to Non School Attendance, Statutory Responsibility and Referral to Education Welfare

Education Welfare work to ensure that the Local Authority's statutory duties and other responsibilities for safeguarding children in relation to school attendance, elective home education, children missing education, child employment and performance licencing are carried out to the highest possible standard.

The Education Welfare Service promote and enforce regular attendance at school for all children, including looked after children, vulnerable learners and those students with a statement/education health care plan, in order for them to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available to them.

Work is undertaken on behalf of children in partnership with their parents, schools and other professionals to enable each pupil the maximum opportunity to benefit from their educational entitlement.

Education Welfare will address inequality of opportunity where it is identified and will challenge discriminatory and unprofessional practices or statements whenever they occur.

School Attendance and the Law

Section 7 of the 1996 Education Act states that parents/carers must ensure that children of compulsory school age receive efficient full-time education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude to any special educational needs they may have, either by regular attendance at school, alternative educational provision or otherwise. If a child is registered at a school, parents/carers have primary responsibility for ensuring that their child attends regularly.

Education Welfare aim to improve school attendance as quickly as possible by advising schools and empowering parents to undertake their legal responsibility to ensure their children access education by regular school attendance, without the need to issue warning notices, fixed penalty notices or undertake legal intervention. However, if such action is necessary in order to protect children's education and secure a successful outcome, statutory intervention will be used. Our processes are therefore designed to use legal sanctions seamlessly within our case management system.

Children Missing Education

There are many circumstances where a child may become missing from education.

Children may be missing from education because they are suffering from abuse or neglect. Where this is suspected schools should follow local child protection procedures. EWO's should check that a referral has been made and checks are carried out in line with NCC Children Missing Education procedures.

Children of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) Families

Research has shown that many children from these families can become disengaged from education, particularly during the secondary school phase. It is therefore vital that schools inform the LA when a GRT pupil leaves the school without identifying a new destination school,

particularly in the transition from primary to secondary so that they can attempt to facilitate continuity of the child's education.

Although many are settled, some GRT families move regularly and their children can be at increased risk of missing education.

Families of Armed Forces

Families of members of the Armed Forces are likely to move frequently – both in UK and overseas and often at short notice.

Missing Children / Runaways

Children who go missing or run away from home or care may be in serious danger and are vulnerable to crime, sexual exploitation or abduction as well as missing education.

Children who have offended or are at risk of doing so are also at risk of disengaging from education.

Elective Home Education

A parent may choose to home educate their child. The EWS must investigate these cases (within the law) and ensure the child is receiving suitable education.

Changes to CME Regulations

The government has now responded to Consultation on improving information in identifying children missing education. The proposed amendments are intended to achieve this through strengthening the regulations so that LAs work with schools to obtain the information they need

Schools

The register is a legal document. We need to use it as evidence in court. Data inaccuracies hinder the ability of the LA to progress attendance cases to prosecution. You must have clear procedures for completing the register. Teachers must complete it accurately. The attendance register must indicate if an absence of a pupil is authorised or unauthorised. Absence can only be authorised by a Head-teacher or another member of staff, who is acting on the Head-teacher's authority.

To monitor attendance effectively, you should:

- use the same registration procedures throughout your school
- use different codes for authorised and unauthorised absence
- keep track of pupils during the day
- identify vulnerable learners
- have a system, possibly spot checks, to tackle truancy after registration
- provide guidelines for form tutors on keeping registers and improving attendance
- provide clear and accurate information to the EWO.

The school should always follow up any absences to:

- ascertain the reason;
- ensure the proper safeguarding action is taken if necessary;

- identify whether the absence is approved or not; and
- identify the correct code to use before entering it on to the school's electronic register or management information system which is used to download data to the School Census.

A high level of input is provided by schools to families where there are attendance concerns, but this good work is often not recorded. It is important that all early intervention is well documented. This will enable EWO's to reiterate to parents the previous work undertaken by school to address the attendance concerns.

Where a parent is not engaging, contact must have been attempted in different ways at various times of the day.

These should include:

- Telephone contact, date and time of contact should be recorded along with any discussion and initialled.
- Letters to the parent/carer individually advising on the level of non-attendance. All correspondence should be signed and dated and should state the parents' full name and title and the child's. All documents should be stored in the student's file as evidence of work undertaken.
- Meetings with pupil and parent/carer at home or in school to gather information to address the issues i.e. The parents/child's personal perception of any difficulties, e.g. curriculum, bullying or relationship problems with a member of staff. Other factors contributing to non-attendance.

Always:

- Record discussion and agreed action points with the parent/carer and keep on the child's file.
- Review the actions and outcomes and respond to any issues that remain outstanding.

Where appropriate:

- Draw up an Attendance Contract or Action Plan between school/parents/carers/pupil. The contract /plan should set out the expectations placed on the school, family and pupil. It should include realistic expectations with regards to improvement and the family/pupil's individual circumstances should be addressed within the contract.
- Monitor and review the contract.
- Where there are underlying concerns, the school should seek the parents' consent to invoke an Early Help Assessment (EHA).

The Education Welfare Officer will support and advise school on attendance matters, including the development of whole school attendance policy and strategies.

Referrals into Education Welfare

A referral to Education Welfare (EW) can be made if a student's attendance falls to between 92% and 90%, there is a minimum of six unauthorised absences, you have tried to address the concern, *and*, you have previously advised the parent in writing that the referral is being made.

School should refer to EW if pre-referral work with the family has been undertaken and recorded and attendance meets EW referral criteria (see above) a referral form must be completed together with all supporting evidence.

Please Note: Schools are required to make referral to EW if a pupil has had 20 or more continuous *unauthorised* absence sessions.

Before referring the case to Education Welfare the school need to ensure that where there is no improvement in the pupil's attendance and there are unauthorised absences they:

- Formally write to parents/carers to advise them of their intention to refer the case to Education Welfare
- All actions and decisions are appropriately and clearly evidenced.
- Additional information is considered.
- Any initial biases or misjudgements are challenged to ensure parent's concerns are dealt with appropriately.

To prevent delay, it is important that the referral form is completed in full and appropriate evidence provided.

The EWO will consider the appropriate level of contact with the parent.

The parent will be written to and the EWO will undertake an investigation (case work). A home visit may be undertaken after risk assessment checks have been made.

Legal Intervention/Action

Referrals that are progressed for consideration for legal action (Local Authority's Statutory Duty)

If a parent/carer fails to meet their legal responsibility in ensuring their child receives a suitable education either by regular attendance at school, alternative provision or otherwise, legal action may be considered. These include Penalty Notices, Education Supervision Orders, Attendance Orders or Prosecution.

With certain exceptions a minimum absence of ten sessions (five school days) *which are unauthorised* must be recorded against the pupils name within a 6-12 week school period. This guidance is in accordance with the Local Code of Conduct for Penalty Notice (see attached document).

Unauthorised absence is where the school has either not received a reason for absence, or the reason given is unacceptable. It is the Head teacher who determines whether or not the absence is authorised.

Exceptions to the above may include Leave of absence in term-time, for which no permission has been sought from the school, or permission sought but refused, or child has not returned by the agreed date and no acceptable reason for delay has been received. (NB The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2013 (Statutory Instrument No 756) amends regulation 7 of The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006 to the effect that Head teachers are prohibited from granting leave of absence *except* where an application has been made in advance and they consider there are exceptional circumstances relating to the application.

Penalty Notices

A Penalty Notice is an alternative to prosecution for a S444 (1) offence. If a Penalty Notice remains unpaid, then prosecution must follow for the offence of unsatisfactory school attendance, and not due to the non-payment of fine.

- Penalty Notices will be used in accordance with Northumberland Council's Penalty Notice Code of Conduct.
- A Penalty Notice gives the parent the opportunity to discharge themselves of their legal responsibility.
- Failure to pay the Penalty Notice may result in a prosecution under Section 444 of the Education Act 1996.

Prosecutions may be undertaken where:

- The parent has ignored previous advice.
- Fixed penalty notice has failed to secure good attendance.
- The parent demonstrates a blatant disregard for the law and has acted to the detriment of another.
- Any other instance where circumstances warrant it.

The final decision to prosecute will be made by the Service Team Manager /Principal Education Welfare Officer in conjunction with the EWO and Legal Services.

Following a decision to prosecute, the maximum time for a case to be presented to the Magistrates Court will usually be six week to eight weeks.

- Legal services will formally lay information of the offence before the Courts Legal Advisor to the Magistrates', to secure the summons and will serve the court papers on the defendant.

Where a case is contested (not guilty plea entered) school *may* be called to give evidence in the Magistrates Court.

Prosecution

To ensure uniformity, consistency, fairness and objectivity in relation to legal enforcement, all cases will be treated on their merits and progressed appropriately. The CPS Code for Crown Prosecutions, states that prosecutors must consider:

- Sufficiency of evidence i.e. reasonable prospect of conviction, and,

- the public interest e.g. staleness of offence, health of the offender.

The parent/carer will need to demonstrate that they meet at least one of the statutory defences within S444 Education Act:

- Absence with leave. Leave in relation to school means leave granted by any person authorised to do so by the Governing Body or proprietor of the school (authorised absence).
- The child was prevented from attending school by reason of illness or any other unavoidable cause. The illness **must** relate to the child and not the parent or carer (*Jenkins v Howell* 1949).
- The child did not attend on a day set aside for religious observance. (The relevant religion is that of the parent.) Religious observance relates to recognised festivals e.g. Eid or Diwali.
- The school is not within walking distance and the Local Authority have not arranged transport or boarding accommodation near the school, or registration at a closer school. (It is important to check with 'School Transport' to see if the parent has made an application for transport). Walking distance is 2 miles where the child is under eight years old, or 3 miles in other instances. The distance defence does not apply if the school at which the child is failing to attend is the parents preferred choice.
- The child is of no fixed abode (i.e. a Traveller) and the parent proves:
 - the parents' occupation requires constant travel;
 - the parent has registered the child at school as regularly as business permits;
 - the child is six years old or over and has made at least 200 appearances in the previous 12 months.(under review).

When considering Prosecution the Local Authority must be fair, independent and objective and not let any personal views or any witness influence decisions or be affected by improper or undue pressure from any source.

Education Welfare and the Local Authority must always act in the interests of justice and not solely for the purpose of obtaining a conviction.

To prosecute in the case of Non School Attendance the Local Authority must be satisfied that there is sufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction.

For a successful prosecution under s 444(1A), (aggravated offence) it must be proven that the parents knew the child was regularly absent from school i.e. the child was with the parents at times when he/she should have been at school, or where there is an written agreement.

Education Welfare will advise the school of the disposal handed down to the parent. The school will be responsible for monitoring the child's attendance post Court and for advising Education Welfare of any breaches referring back to into the Service.

Education Supervision Orders

ESO considerations arise before proceedings are instituted and must be considered in all cases. Education Supervision Orders are considered on a case by case basis on the individual circumstances known about the child and parent(s) and should be underpinned by critical analysis of the no order principle.

Consideration needs to be made to as to the appropriateness of seeking an Education Supervision Order (ESO). If the decision is not to seek an ESO the reasons must be given.