

Managing School Attendance – A practice guide for schools

Surrey Attendance Service (SAS)

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The importance of school attendance

In Surrey improving attendance is everyone's business. The DfE '**Working Together to Improve School Attendance**' guidance is clear that improving attendance must be a collaborative endeavour involving the teaching and non-teaching staff in a school, the trust or governing body, the council and other local partners. It should not solely be the responsibility of a single member of staff, or organisation.

The barriers to accessing education are extensive and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individuals and families. The foundation of obtaining a good attendance is that school is a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils are eager to be and ready to learn.

To remove any barriers to attendance schools, Surrey County Council and partners should collaborate with pupils and parents at all stages of improving attendance. This can be achieved by developing strong and trusting relationships and working together to ensure the right support is in place.

Surrey Attendance Strategy – 'Attendance is everybody's business'.

The Surrey Attendance Strategy sets out the following 5 key priorities for the council and wider partnership:

1. To improve attendance of our vulnerable groups at the earliest opportunity.
2. To ensure that there is a joined-up partnership response in supporting children experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA).
3. To ensure that the full range of legal interventions available to the council to improve school attendance are being used.
4. To work with schools to share good practice and develop consistent approaches to improving school attendance.
5. To ensure that children who are Educated Other Than at School are supported to access appropriate school placements as soon as it is possible.

What are a school's legal responsibilities for managing school attendance?

The law requires:

- All schools to have an admission register and an attendance register.
- That school governing bodies, academy trusts, and other school proprietors have regard to the statutory DfE guidance '[Keeping Children Safe in Education](#)'.
- Schools to put in place appropriate safeguarding responses for children who go missing from school.

- All schools to notify the council when a pupil's name is to be deleted from the admission register.
- All schools (including academies) to inform the council of any pupil who fails to attend school regularly or has been absent without the school's permission for a continuous period of 10 days or more.

Expectations of Schools

All schools have a continuing responsibility to proactively manage and improve attendance across their school community.

Attendance is the essential foundation to positive outcomes for all pupils and should therefore be seen as everyone's responsibility in school.

The most effective schools consistently promote the benefits of good attendance at school, set high expectations for every pupil, communicate those expectations clearly and consistently to pupils and parents, systematically analyse their data to identify patterns to target their improvement efforts, and work effectively with the council and other local partners to overcome barriers to attendance.

They also recognise that attendance cannot be seen in isolation and that the foundation to good attendance is a calm, orderly, safe and supportive environment in which all pupils want to attend and can learn and thrive.

To manage and improve attendance effectively, all schools are expected to:

- Develop and maintain a whole school culture that promotes the benefits of high attendance.
- Have a clear school attendance policy which all staff, pupils and parents understand.
- Accurately complete admission and, with the exception of schools where all pupils are boarders, attendance registers and have effective day to day processes in place to follow-up absence.
- Regularly monitor and analyse attendance and absence data to identify pupils or cohorts that require support with their attendance and put effective strategies in place.
- Build strong relationships with families, listen to and understand barriers to attendance and work with families to remove them.
- Share information and work collaboratively with other schools in the area, the council, and other partners when absence is at risk of becoming persistent or severe.

Day to day processes

Schools must have robust day to day processes to track and follow up absence and poor punctuality which are rigorously applied across the school.

All schools are expected to develop processes that meet the needs of their pupils and contexts. As a minimum this should include arrangements to:

- Proactively manage lateness and set out in their attendance policy the length of time the register will be open, after which a pupil will be marked as absent. This should be the same for every session, and depending on the structure of the school day, not longer than either 30 minutes after the session begins, or the length of the form time or first lesson in which registration takes place.
- Expect parents to contact the school when their child is absent to explain the reason and put in place processes to contact parents on the first day of absence where a reason has not been provided. If absence continues without explanation, further contact should be made to ensure safeguarding.
- Identify any absences that are not explained for each session and contact parents (and where appropriate foster carers and/or social workers) to understand why and when the pupil will return. Where absence is recorded as unexplained in the attendance register, the correct code should be inputted as soon as the reason is ascertained, but no later than 5 working days after the session.
- Where reasonably possible, schools should hold more than one emergency contact number for each pupil. This is good practice to give the school additional options to make contact with a responsible adult.
- Regularly inform parents about their child's attendance and absence levels. Schools should avoid headline percentages and instead make this understandable for parents (e.g. the amount of time missed and the impact on the pupil's learning).
- Hold regular meetings with the parents of pupils who the school (and/or the council) consider to be vulnerable or are persistently or severely absent to discuss attendance and engagement at school.
- Identify pupils who need support from wider partners as quickly as possible and make the necessary request for support.
- Make the necessary statutory data returns to the council.
- Support pupils back into school following a lengthy or unavoidable period of absence and provide support to build confidence and bridge gaps.

Unexplained absences and pupils at risk of being deleted from the school roll

If children have unexplained absences, schools should make urgent enquiries with the parents/carers to ascertain the reason for absence and notifying the allocated Social Worker if there is one.

Where schools are unable to make contact and absence remains unexplained, they should seek advice from the Surrey Attendance Service. Schools must formally notify Surrey Attendance Service of any child who has 10 days of unexplained absence and may be at risk of being removed from the school roll so that joint 'reasonable enquiries' can be conducted.

Persistent Absence

A pupil becomes a 'persistent absentee' (PA) when their attendance drops to 90% or below for any reason whether the absences are authorised or not. Over a full academic year this would be 38 sessions (19 school days; equivalent to 1 day or more a fortnight across a full school year). Absence at this level is causing considerable damage to a child's educational prospects. It is expected that schools are monitoring the attendance of children at risk of becoming persistently absent and intervening at the earliest point to identify and resolve any barriers.

Severe Absence

Severe absence refers to pupils who are absent for 50% or more. Severely absent pupils may find it more difficult to be in school or face bigger barriers to their regular attendance and as such are likely to need more intensive support across a range of partners.

All partners should work together to make this group the top priority for support - this may include specific support with attendance or a whole family plan, but it may also include consideration for an education, health and care plan or an alternative form of educational provision where necessary to overcome the barriers to being in school.

Suggested process for when attendance becomes a concern:

Universal offer

Schools are expected to regularly monitor attendance of all pupils and have robust daily processes to follow up absence.

- Phone calls home to discuss reasons for absence
- Informal conversation with the pupil when they return to school after an absence
- Raise attendance concerns with key school staff and any external professionals working with the pupil

Informal support

Phone call with parent to discuss any issues and explore why absences are ongoing

If absences are due to illness. Liaise with health. Consider implementing an Individual Health Care Plan.

Meet with the family and complete an **Attendance Assessment** document. Ensuring barriers to attendance are explored. It is expected that at this stage schools would:

- Consider alternatives i.e., reduced timetables, changes in classes, ELSA etc.
- Implement rewards and recognition for any improvements, regular catch ups with the child
- Raise concerns with appropriate staff i.e., SENCO, Senior Leadership, Attendance Lead, SAS can be contacted for guidance if needed.
- Signpost parents and/or make referrals for support to other agencies as appropriate.
- Issue a letter of expectations regarding attendance to parents.

Formal support (attendance contract/agreement)

Invite parent/carer to a school attendance meeting. Purpose of the meeting is discuss attendance concerns and put in place an **Attendance Contract (Attendance Agreement for independent schools)**. Schools should:

- Invite key professionals (health, social care, SEND etc) to the meeting in order to ensure any out of school barriers can be addressed.
- Consider alternatives i.e., reduced timetables, change to classes, ELSA, etc
- Consider issuing of a Notice to Improve letter
- Where parents do not attend initial meeting, they should be given at least 1 further opportunity to meet before issuing a Notice to Improve letter
- Raise for discussion at Targeted Support Meeting or seek advice from Surrey Attendance Service.

Monitoring period. If appropriate call a review meeting to review attendance contract/parenting agreement.

If there is no improvement in attendance schools should consider requesting either a Penalty Notice be issued, or SAS consider prosecution

Attendance Assessment

The attendance assessment will support schools to explore and record family dynamics and who is living in the family home. It will also help schools to investigate barriers to regular attendance and where additional support might be required to address the barriers.

An example Attendance Assessment is available in the Surrey Model Attendance Letters and Forms pack. This will be available via the Surrey Education Services hub from September 2024.

Attendance Contract / Agreement

To address irregular attendance, schools can implement an Attendance Contract under section 19(2) of the Ant-Social Behaviour Act 2003. These are formal written agreements between the school and the parent. There is no obligation for schools to offer an Attendance Contract, however the DfE guidance is clear that one should have been explored before considering a legal intervention such as an Education Supervision Order or Prosecution. Surrey Attendance Service will expect to see that an Attendance Contract has been offered prior to any request for legal intervention.

Parents cannot be compelled to enter an Attendance Contract. If they decline this should be formally recorded as an intervention by school. Where parents do not attend Attendance Contract meetings without notification or good reason, the school should make further attempts to contact them and arrange another meeting.

Attendance contracts do not have a minimum or maximum duration. Each individual attendance contract should set out the duration it will be in place, and most are for between 3 and 12 months but can be longer if needed.

An example Attendance Contract is available in the Surrey council Model Attendance Letters and Forms pack, but schools should also refer to chapter 6 of the working together to improve school attendance guidance for more details on the purpose and contents of an Attendance Contract.

Pupils with medical conditions or special educational needs and disabilities

Some pupils face greater barriers to attendance than their peers. These can include pupils who suffer from long term medical conditions or who have special educational needs and disabilities.

Their right to an education is the same as any other pupil and therefore the attendance ambition for these pupils should be the same as they are for any other pupil.

That said, in working with their parents to improve attendance, schools should be mindful of the barriers these pupils face and put additional support in place where necessary to help them access their full-time education. This should include:

- Having sensitive conversations and developing good support for pupils with physical or mental health conditions. For example, making reasonable adjustments where a pupil has a disability or putting in place an individual healthcare plan where needed. Considering whether additional support from external partners (including the council or health services) would be appropriate, making referrals in a timely manner and working together with those services to deliver any subsequent support.
- Working with parents to develop specific support approaches for attendance for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, including where applicable ensuring the provision outlined in the pupil's education, health and care plan is accessed. In addition, schools should work with families to help support routines where school transport is regularly being missed and work with other partners to encourage the scheduling of additional support interventions or medical appointments outside of the main school day.
- Establish strategies for removing the in-school barriers these pupils face, including considering support or reasonable adjustments for uniform, transport, routines, access to support in school and lunchtime arrangements. Ensure joined up pastoral care is in place where needed and consider whether a time-limited phased return to school would be appropriate, for example for those affected by anxiety about school attendance.
- Ensure data is regularly monitored for these groups including at board and governing body meetings and in Targeting Support Meetings with the council so that additional support from other partners is accessed where necessary.

Pupils with long term illnesses or other health needs may need additional support to continue their education, such as alternative provision provided by the council.

The council is responsible for arranging suitable education for children of compulsory school age who, because of health reasons, would otherwise not receive suitable education. Please see further information on supporting pupils with medical conditions at school and the Surrey Medical Policy

[Surrey Medical Policy \(surreylocaloffer.org.uk\)](https://www.surreylocaloffer.org.uk)

In all cases, schools should be sensitive and avoid stigmatising pupils and parents. They should talk to pupils and parents and understand how they feel and what they think would help improve their attendance. This will enable schools to develop individual approaches that meet an individual pupil's specific needs.

Expectations of Surrey County Council

Persistent absence is almost always a symptom of wider issues in a pupil's life, and barriers to attendance are often specific to local contexts and go beyond the school gates.

Surrey County Council, statutory safeguarding partners and other local partners have a crucial role in supporting pupils to overcome barriers to enable all children to access the full-time education to which they are entitled.

As a minimum, the DfE guidance advises that all local authorities are expected to:

- **Rigorously track local attendance data** to devise a strategic approach to attendance that prioritises the pupils, pupil cohorts and schools on which to provide support and focus its efforts on to unblock area wide barriers to attendance.

- **Have a School Attendance Support Team** which provides the following core functions free of charge to all schools (regardless of type):

1. **Communication and advice:** regularly bring schools together to communicate messages, provide advice and share best practice between schools and trusts within the area.
2. **Targeting Support Meetings:** hold regular conversations with schools, using their attendance data to identify pupils and cohorts at risk of poor attendance and agree targeted actions and access to services for those pupils.
3. **Multi-disciplinary support for families:** provide access to early help support workers to work intensively with families to provide practical whole-family support where needed to tackle the causes of absenteeism and unblock the barriers to attendance.
4. **Legal intervention:** take forward attendance legal intervention (using the full range of parental responsibility measures) where voluntary support has not been successful or engaged with.

- Monitor and improve the **attendance of children with a social worker** through their Virtual School

Surrey Attendance Service (SAS)

The Inclusion Service will be redesigned to create the Surrey Attendance Service (SAS). All Surrey schools, academies and non-maintained independent schools will have an allocated Attendance Advice Officer.

Targeted Support Meetings

The DfE Working together to improve school attendance guidance requires the council to offer targeted support meetings to schools. These meetings will be termly conversations between the Surrey Attendance Service and

schools, using the school's attendance data to identify pupils and cohorts at risk of poor attendance, agree targeted actions, explore access to services for those pupils and advice on legal interventions.

The format of the termly conversations will be dependent on a school-by-school basis, and it may be helpful for schools and their link Attendance Advice Officer to briefly plan the content of the meeting in advance.

It is good practice for schools to scrutinise their data including overall whole school data, cohort specific data (persistent absence and severe absence as well as groups of pupils such as those with SEND, medical needs etc) and names of individual pupils to discuss ready for the meeting.

The purpose of this meeting is to work together as equal partners with the allocated time prioritised in a way that benefits both school and SAS to:

- Review of actions from any previous Targeted Support Meetings (where applicable).
- Discussion of overall trends in the school's data and any emerging patterns or issues to identify support require at an early stage.
- Discussion about the school attendance policy where appropriate.
- Review of existing good practice and interventions taken by the school to improve absence levels.
- Agreeing joint approaches for all severely absent (SA) pupils and examining the overall position for SA pupil and trends for the reasons for absence within this group.
- Agreeing joint actions for persistently absent (PA) pupils where they have barriers to attendance that require a multi-agency response to overcome them and looking at the overall position for PA pupils, trends for reasons for absence and identifying cases where support may be needed from the council or other partners.
- Review of all the schools Pupils Missing Out on Education (PMOOE) return including pupils accessing alternative provisions or on part-time timetables.
- Identification and discussion about any pupils at risk of being deleted from the school roll with no known destination.
- Summarising any key actions moving forward.

Referrals to Surrey Attendance Service for issue of a Penalty Notice

Referrals should be made via the EYES Establishment Portal and **must** include the following evidence:

- Detailed chronology, including dates and what action was taken
- There are 10 unauthorised absences in the proceeding 10 school weeks.
- Copy of the attendance certificate (with comments / reasons for absence detailed)
- Communication log – which should include details of telephone calls/emails/texts made to and received from parent(s)/carer(s).

- Letters sent to parents/carers regarding attendance, including the expectations letters and Notice to Improve.
- Notes of any meetings held/actions agreed to address school attendance concerns.
- Evidence of referrals for support, including internal school support, which have been made on behalf of the pupil/family within the past 6 months. If no such referrals have been made, please be prepared to provide an explanation as to why.
- Evidence of previous Penalty Notices issued.

Referrals to Surrey Attendance Service for Prosecution

Schools can make a referral to the Surrey Attendance Service for consideration of legal intervention where:

- pupil attendance is below 90% and
- there are at least 10 unauthorised absences in the proceeding 10 school weeks.
- Within the **8** school weeks prior to referral, schools **must** be able to evidence that Parent(s)/Carer(s) have been offered a meeting, in writing, stating a specific time and date for the meeting AND providing parents with at least 7 days' notice in advance of the scheduled meeting. Following the scheduled meeting (whether attended by parent/s or not), a letter has been sent to parent(s)/carer(s) advising that attendance remains an ongoing concern and a referral to the The council will be made for consideration for legal intervention.

Referrals should be made via the EYES Establishment Portal and **must** include the following evidence:

- Detailed chronology, including dates and what action was taken
- Copy of the attendance certificate (with comments / reasons for absence detailed)
- Communication log – which should include details of telephone calls/emails/texts made to and received from parent(s)/carer(s).
- Letters sent to parents/carers regarding attendance.
- Notes of any meetings held/actions agreed to address school attendance concerns.
- Copies of Attendance Assessment and Attendance contract/agreement.
- Notice of referral to Surrey Attendance Service issued to each parent
- Evidence of referrals for support, including internal school support, which have been made on behalf of the pupil/family within the past 6 months. If no such referrals have been made, please be prepared to provide an explanation as to why.
- Evidence of previous Penalty Notices issued.
- For pupils subject to a Team Around the Child (TAC), Team Around the Family (TAF) or Child Protection Plan, you must provide: information

about the actions taken to improve attendance in the child or family's plan, outcomes of action taken and confirmation that the decision to make an enforcement referral was discussed and agreed with the lead professional.

Links:

- [Working together to improve school attendance](#)
- [Keeping Children Safe in Education](#)
- [Children missing education: statutory guidance for local authorities](#)
- [Information sharing advice for safeguarding practitioners](#)
- [Children Act 1989](#)
- [Education Act 1996](#)
- [Education Act 2002](#)
- [The Education \(Pupil Registration\) \(England\) Regulations 2006](#)
- [The Education \(Penalty Notices\) \(England\) Regulations 2007](#)
- [The Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#)
- [The Education \(Penalty Notices\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2024 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

Other relevant Surrey County Council documents can be found on Surrey Education Services Hub -

- [Managing School Attendance – A legal guide for schools](#)
- [Attendance model letters and forms](#)
- [Penalty Notice Code of Conduct](#)