

**Working Together to Improve School Attendance:
Implementation of the new school attendance guidance**

Report of the Director of Children's Services

1. Introduction and Purpose of Report

- 1.1** In May 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) published new attendance guidance [working together to improve school attendance](#) and from September 2022, this guidance replaced all previous guidance on school attendance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools, and local authorities. The call for this guidance came following the obvious impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on school attendance at a national level. In January 2022 it was reported that the national school attendance rate sat at 87.4%.
- 1.2** The aim of the revised guidance is to help schools, trusts, governing boards, and local authorities maintain high levels of school attendance and improve consistency of support, through:
- Preventing patterns of absence from developing by promoting good attendance.
 - Intervening early by using data to spot patterns of absence before they become persistent and working with families to remove the barriers to attendance.
 - Targeting support for persistent and severe absentees with all local partners working together to reengage pupils.
- 1.3** For the first time, the attendance guidance clearly sets out the expectations and role of schools, trusts and local authorities and focusses on the need for early intervention and support for irregular attendance before the use of any legal sanctions such as fines.
- 1.4** The guidance is not yet statutory, but the DfE have committed to it becoming so when Parliamentary time allows. In the interim period, there is an expectation that the new guidance will be followed where possible and efforts made to implement new measures. The DfE have been clear that schools and local authorities will not be held accountable against the new expectations until they become statutory.
- 1.5** In readiness for the guidance becoming statutory, the DfE have supported local authorities to undertake a self-assessment and each local authority has been assigned a DfE school attendance advisor.
- 1.6** The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of;
- what data is telling us about school attendance levels in Stockport
 - the new expectations on schools, Local Authorities, trusts, and governing boards

- examine the extent to which Stockport has made progress in line with the expectations
- next steps to be taken

2 Expectations On Schools, Trusts, Governing Boards and Local Authorities

2.2 Expectations of schools

In the new guidance, every school will be required to:

- Have a Senior Attendance Champion on the Leadership Team.
- Have a clear school attendance policy published on their website.
- Have robust day to day processes for recording, monitoring, and following up attendance.
- Analyse their data regularly and prioritise families to work with to understand and address the reasons for absence, including any in-school barriers to attendance.
- Work with local partners to remove out of school barriers and act as the lead professional where they are the best placed service.
- Work jointly with the local authority on an agreed approach/plan for every severely absent pupil (under 50% attendance).
- Develop strategies for cohorts of pupils with poorer attendance than their peers (including groups of vulnerability).
- Inform a pupil's social worker if they have an unexplained absence or leave the school roll.
- Work with the local authority to formalise support where voluntary help has not been effective, through use of parenting contracts or other forms of legal intervention.
- Continue to inform the local authority of pupils not attending regularly or being added to or removed from the roll and share data electronically with the DfE.

2.3 Expectations of trusts and governing boards

All trustees and governors will be expected to:

- Take an active role in attendance improvement in their school(s) by regularly reviewing data, discussing, and challenging trends and helping leaders to focus their improvement efforts.
- Set high expectations of the school's leadership and hold them to account for delivery against them.
- Ensure high aspirations are maintained for all pupils, but that processes, and support are adapted to individual needs of particular types of pupils (inc. all vulnerable children).
- Ensure school staff receive training on attendance.
- For schools struggling with attendance, work with the leadership to agree a comprehensive attendance action plan.
- Multi Academy Trusts and federation trustees and governors will also be required to share effective practice on attendance across their schools.

2.4 Expectations of local authorities

Local authorities are expected to:

- Rigorously track local attendance data to devise a strategic approach to attendance.
- Monitor and improve the attendance of children with a social worker through their Virtual School
- Have a School Attendance Support Team which provides the following four core functions free of charge to all schools (regardless of type and including independent schools):
 - a) Communication and advice by ensuring every school has a named point of contact within the Local Authority.
 - b) Termly targeting support meetings with every school to identify and agree actions for pupil who need attendance support.
 - c) Multi-disciplinary support for families where school attendance is an area of concern.
 - d) Work with schools to take forward legal intervention.
- Have an agreed an approach for severely absent pupils.
- Additionally, the DfE have advised local authorities that they expect attendance to be made a corporate priority.

3 Progress So Far

3.2 Preventing patterns of absence from developing by promoting good attendance.

3.2.1 One of the key aspects of the guidance is that Local Authorities recognise the importance of school attendance and make it a key focus of frontline services. Stockport Family established an integrated approach to attendance and the mantra that “attendance is everybody’s business” in 2016. Staff across social care, early help, health, education services and beyond are aware that attendance is a key priority for our children’s outcomes in the Borough and should be in all school age children plans across the continuum of need, i.e., from universal support through to those children in need of statutory social care intervention.

3.2.2 As part of this vision Stockport has:

- Maintained an Education Welfare Team with a focus on the statutory duties around enforcement action and children missing education, as well as the provision of advice and guidance to schools.
- Developed a Team Around the School model which ensures early help is available to families where there are barriers to school attendance. This includes linked early help workers, social workers, and school nurse to all secondary and primary schools across the borough.
- Put in place requirements to examine attendance data whenever a case is referred into the Multi Agency Safeguarding and Support Hub (MASSH) as a standard element of triage.

- Developed practice and processes to enable the school nurse offer to include medical action plans to improve attendance of pupils where absence is related to illness.
- Developed the “Anxiety Based School Avoidance” resources to work with pupils and parents where this is the cause of absence (Education Psychology and Education Welfare Service).
- Provided a focus on supporting and improving the school attendance of autistic pupils in mainstream settings.
- Ensured rigorous attendance tracking and attendance support for cared for children through the virtual school team.

3.2.3 Since the publication of the new guidance Stockport Family has also:

- Disseminated and discussed the new guidance at the Stockport Family Leadership Forum
- Raised awareness of total Stockport attendance rates across the Borough and the new guidance with key school attendance leads through the development of a fortnightly attendance briefing and termly attendance meetings.
- Re-launched the “Anxiety Based School Avoidance” resources and trained over 130 staff in its use.
- Worked in partnership with the mental health in school teams (MHST), a newly created early intervention programme commissioned as part of the NHS Long Term Plan and delivered by Pennine Care in partnership with the VCSFE, schools and Stockport Family: [Stockport Young People's Mental Health Support Team: Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust](#).
- Reviewed Team around the School processes to ensure appropriate focus for those children not achieving a good level of attendance, this includes closer alignment of school inclusion team and the role of the SENDCo.

3.3 Intervening early by using data to spot patterns of absence before they become persistent and working with families to remove the barriers to attendance.

3.3.1 Another key element of the new guidance is the need for every authority to have an effective attendance strategy based on detailed analysis of local data. This includes absence data by type, e.g., whether it is authorised or unauthorised, and by cohort, e.g., absence by schools or absence for pupils from vulnerable groups. The work since the new guidance was released has been essential to form the basis of developing an attendance strategy. In particular, the work undertaken to ensure we have good available live data on attendance across the borough has been crucial.

3.3.2 In Stockport we:

- Collect live attendance data for all school children on roll in maintained schools and academies (with one exception).
- Collect attendance data for all cared for children, children with a social worker, children on free school meals and children with an Education, Health, and Care plan (EHCP).

- Collect and take action for children who are not on a school roll in Stockport. This includes children who are electively home educated.
- Utilise school census data.
- Have developed a data warehouse for school attendance.
- Make use of data to inform service design and delivery and to provide advice and guidance to schools.

3.3.3 Since the publication of the new guidance Stockport Family has also:

- Regularly shared local authority, national and statistical neighbour attendance rates with schools via the fortnightly email briefing.

3.3.4 Furthermore, the new guidance sets out new expectations of the Virtual School. This means the Virtual School must extend its duties to **all** children with a social worker by providing advice, support and monitoring school attendance.

3.3.5 In Stockport the Virtual School is well placed to deliver on these extended duties. The local authority has maximised grant funded monies to ensure that each footprint across the borough has a named linked virtual schoolteacher. The positive impact of this is now being seen for those children with a social worker, for example, consultations are now taking place between the virtual schoolteacher, social workers, and schools.

3.3.6 Further work is required through the attendance strategy that clearly sets out practice guidance and principles for the Virtual School.

3.4 Targeting support for persistent and severe absentees with all local partners working together to reengage pupils.

3.4.1 Stockport Family has a dedicated Education Welfare Service to carry out statutory duties in relation to school attendance. Furthermore, in 2021 the Education Attendance Team merged with the Education Access Team following a recognition that school attendance and school exclusion are often interlinked. This has set Stockport in a strong position to deliver on the expectations of Local Authorities in the guidance as set out in section 2.

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3.4.3 All schools have a named Education Welfare Officer who provide advice and guidance and maintained schools and academies have had regular visits from the officer to discuss pupils with low attendance. This now includes termly school attendance

meetings. In addition to this and through the delivery of a Team around the School, each school have a linked social worker, early help worker and school nurse.

3.4.4 This allows for schools to call in for advice, support, and referral into Stockport Family where school attendance is an emerging concern.

3.4.5 The core functions of the Education Welfare Officer up until the publication of the guidance has been to:

- Lead on enforcement casework using through parent contract meetings and case work.
- Issue Education Penalty Notices to tackle episodes of unauthorised Leaves of absence.
- Work in partnership with key partners. This can include attendance at multi-disciplinary planning meetings such as a Child Protection conferences and core groups, team around the child meetings and joint home visits with lead professionals.
- Since the publication of the new guidance this offer has been further enhanced to ensure the education welfare service meets all of the finer details prescribed by the new DFE guidance, which include:
- Refreshing our guidance document for Stockport schools to reflect DFE expectations. This document has been approved by the Department of Education and disseminated to all schools.
- All independent schools now have a named Education Welfare Officer and receive a termly visit.
- Providing termly attendance meetings for School Attendance Leads to come together with the Education Welfare Team to learn about new development and discuss key issues.

3.4.6 In the coming months opportunity will be taken to consider the use of another legal intervention; Education Supervision Orders (ESO). These are court orders that formalise attendance plans made by local authority staff in partnership with parents and schools to bring about a return to regular school attendance. The use of ESO locally and nationally is very low.

3.4.7 However, given the reference made to ESO in the new guidance, opportunity should be taken, in consultation with legal services, to explore how ESOs may be an additional tool to improving school attendance.

3.5 Prioritising Severe Poor Attendance

3.5.1 The guidance says that **all** partners must make severely absent pupils (with attendance under 50%) the priority for support as they are likely to need more intensive support across a range of partners.

- 3.5.2 If severe unauthorised absence continues after all avenues of support, e.g., quality first teaching, whole school approaches, early help, the DfE is clear that it is likely to constitute neglect and child safeguarding process should be evoked.
- 3.5.3 In Stockport, all Education Welfare Officers are able to identify severely absent pupils from the data and through school attendance meetings, which creates the condition for swift action should any officer believe that a child is being neglected.

4 Conclusions

- 4.2 Children and young people's attendance at school has been a long-standing priority for Stockport Family, schools, and other key partners. School attendance has been impacted nationally due to the covid-19 pandemic and is a key priority for all local authorities nationally and taken up as a priority by the Childrens Commissioner for England.
- 4.3 Stockport has good processes and practice in place and there is strong evidence of effective working with the education welfare service and across the partnership towards improving levels of school attendance and seeing access to education as a critical factor in improving children's outcomes and opportunities in life.
- 4.4 The recent guidance (to become statutory) has provided a real opportunity in the academic year 2022/23, for a refreshed focus on promoting school attendance post pandemic as 'everybody's business' and this has been made a key priority focus in this year's PPRA.

5 Next Steps

Following the implementation of the new guidance over the last year and the work with key partners, there are a number of key next steps planned for this academic year:

- 5.2 An overarching and co-produced attendance strategy to be completed, using detailed analysis of local data and in partnership with schools and multi-disciplinary professionals, children and young people and their families. This attendance strategy will report into Stockport's Early Help Board and Stockport Family Partnership Board.
- 5.3 School attendance levels with a particular focus on those most disadvantaged children, will be reported through the Portfolio Performance and Resources Agreement (PPRA).
- 5.4 Work with the legal services to consider the use of education supervision orders as a tool to support and promote school attendance.
- 5.5 Re-fresh and re-energise the workforce through a focused practice week on 'school attendance'. This will provide further opportunity to capture the voice of the child on their views about school attendance.

5.6 Refresh processes for working with severely absent pupils (child with school attendance under 50%).

Background Papers

There are none. Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Katie Cooper on 0161 474 4160 or alternatively email Katie.Cooper@stockport.gov.uk