

Supporting Social Workers to Improve School Attendance

Guidance for embedding education and attendance into safeguarding practice.

Introduction

School attendance is a vital protective factor for children and young people. It supports academic progress, social development, emotional wellbeing, and access to safeguarding. For children with a social worker under a child in need (CIN) or child protection (CP) plan, poor attendance can be a symptom and a cause of wider vulnerability.

“Attendance has fallen for all pupils since the pandemic with children in need particularly affected. In 2021 to 2022, all social care groups (apart from looked-after children) were over twice as likely to be absent than the overall pupil population. Improving attendance is a priority for both social care and education.” (DfE, 2024)

This guidance supports social workers and family workers across Achieving for Children (AfC) to monitor, respond to, and improve school attendance as part of their statutory role. It draws on national guidance, local practice, and the extended role of the Virtual School to promote school attendance for children with a social worker. It offers practical steps to embed attendance into everyday safeguarding practice.

Support for pupils with a social worker

Parents are expected to:	Schools are expected to:	Academy trustees and governing bodies are expected to:	Local authorities are expected to:
<p>Work with the school and local authority to help them understand their child's barriers to attendance.</p> <p>Proactively engage with the support offered.</p>	<p>Know who the pupils who have, or who have had, a social worker are.</p> <p>Understand how the welfare, safeguarding, and child protection issues that they are experiencing, or have experienced, can have an impact on attendance – whilst maintaining a culture of high aspiration for the cohort.</p> <p>Provide additional academic support and make reasonable adjustments to help them, recognising that even when statutory social care intervention has ended, there can be a lasting impact on children's educational outcomes.</p> <p>Work in partnership with the local authority at a strategic and individual level, sharing data on attendance including, at an individual level, informing the pupil's social worker if there are any unexplained absences and if their name is to be deleted from the register.</p>	<p>Regularly review attendance data and help school leaders focus support on the pupils who need it.</p>	<p>Ensure that all Children's Social Care practitioners understand the importance of good attendance for pupil's educational progress, for their welfare and their wider development – and understand their role in improving it.</p> <p>Through the work of Virtual School Heads, they should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake systemic monitoring and data sharing of the attendance of children with a social worker in their area: developing and implementing targeted cohort level interventions to improve attendance. • Provide advice, challenge and training to schools on how to promote and secure good attendance for children with a social worker. • Develop whole system approaches, with social care, to support the attendance of children in need.

(DfE, 2024)

Why Attendance Matters

- **Protective Factor**
Regular attendance reduces exposure to harm and increases access to trusted adults.
- **Educational Progress**
Absence leads to gaps in learning, reduced attainment, and long-term disadvantage..
- **Safeguarding**
Persistent absence may indicate neglect, exploitation, or emotional distress.
- **Statutory Duty**
Social workers must promote education and challenge absence as part of safeguarding.

Legal and Statutory Framework

Social workers have a duty to promote education and act on poor attendance under the following legislation and guidance:

- **Children's Act, 1989**
Duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.
- **Children and Families Act, 2014**
Emphasises multi-agency collaboration and support for SEND.
- **Education Act, 1996**
Establishes parental responsibility for ensuring regular school attendance.
- **Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2023**
Requires education to be considered in all safeguarding assessments.
- **Promoting the Education of Children with a Social Worker, 2021**
Sets expectations for Virtual Schools and social workers to champion education.
- **Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, 2024-2025**
Clarifies statutory duties for schools and local authorities to monitor and act on attendance, especially for children with a social worker.
- **Working Together to Improve School Attendance, 2024**
Provides updated guidance and toolkits for multi-agency attendance support.
- **Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2025**
Defines poor attendance as a safeguarding concern and potential indicator of educational neglect.

"Children missing education, particularly on repeat occasions, can act as a vital warning sign of a range of safeguarding issues including neglect, abuse, and exploitation." ([KCSIE, 2025](#))

Educational Neglect

When absence becomes a safeguarding concern.

Educational neglect should be considered when:

- The child is not accessing any education (including alternative provision)
- The family is not engaging with support.
- The child is at risk of harm due to lack of supervision, structure, or unmet needs.

Attendance below **50%** should be treated as a safeguarding red flag, requiring immediate review and multi-agency plan.

Embedding Attendance in Everyday Practice

Social workers must ensure data is discussed and recorded at every statutory meeting. If attendance is below 90% or declining, it must be flagged on the CIN/CP plan with SMART actions and review dates.

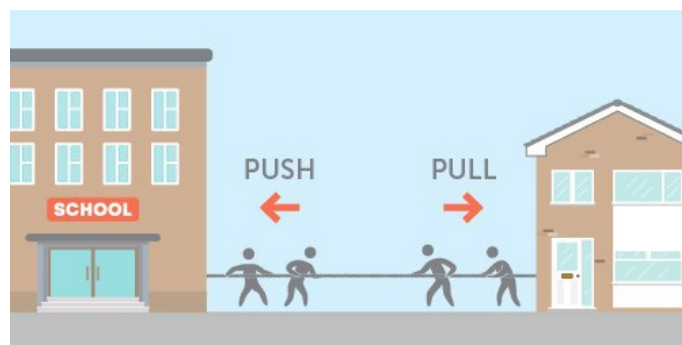
- **Frame poor attendance as a safeguarding issue**, not only an educational one.
- **Include attendance in all CIN and CP plans**, with SMART actions and review points.
- **Explore the child's view**: What does school mean to them
- **Use data meaningfully**: Express attendance in days missed and learning lost (e.g. 90% attendance = 19 days per year missed)
- **Escalate concerns early**: Use the [Attendance Escalation Flowchart](#) and involve the EWO where needed.
- **Record attendance discussions** in case notes, supervision and statutory reviews.

Understanding Barriers to Education

Push and Pull Factors

Children and young people may face a mix of:

- Push factors: Bullying, unmet SEND needs, anxiety, poor relationships with staff or peers
- Pull factors: Caring responsibilities, family beliefs, lack of routine, unsafe home environments.



Understanding these factors is essential for effective planning.

AfC's [Attendance Barrier Assessment Tool](#) supports structured exploration of these issues and aligns with the ERSA framework.

Attendance Escalation

Attendance Escalation Flow Chart

The [Attendance Escalation Flowchart](#) helps social workers assess risk and determine next steps. It supports:

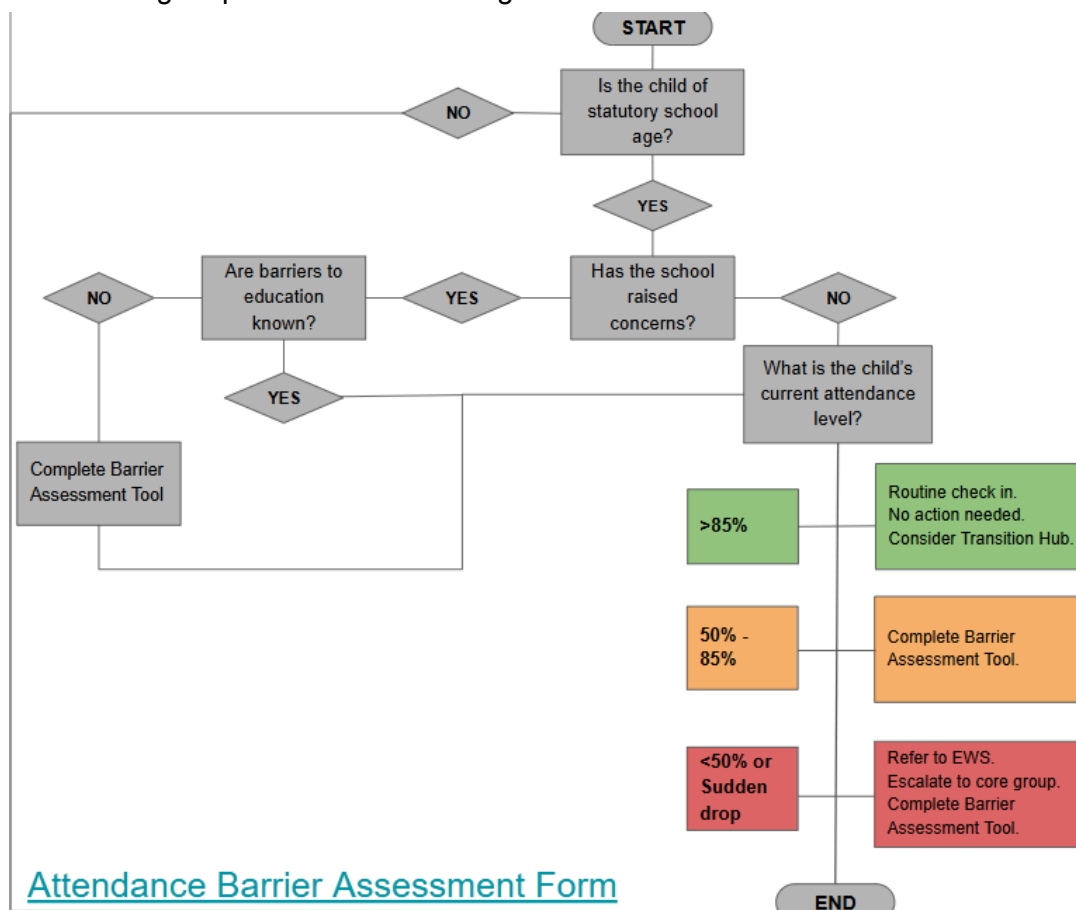
- Early identification of attendance concerns
- Structured decision-making
- Multi-agency collaboration
- Consistent safeguarding responses
- Escalation to Child Protection (CP) planning where persistent poor attendance under a CIN plan indicates educational neglect

Use the flowchart when:

- Attendance drops or becomes persistently low
- A child subject to a CIN plan continues to demonstrate poor attendance, suggesting educational neglect as a credible factor for escalation to CP
- School raises a concern
- During assessments, TAFs, and statutory reviews

After escalation:

- Add attendance actions to the child's plan
- Set clear targets and review dates
- Arrange a professionals' meeting if needed



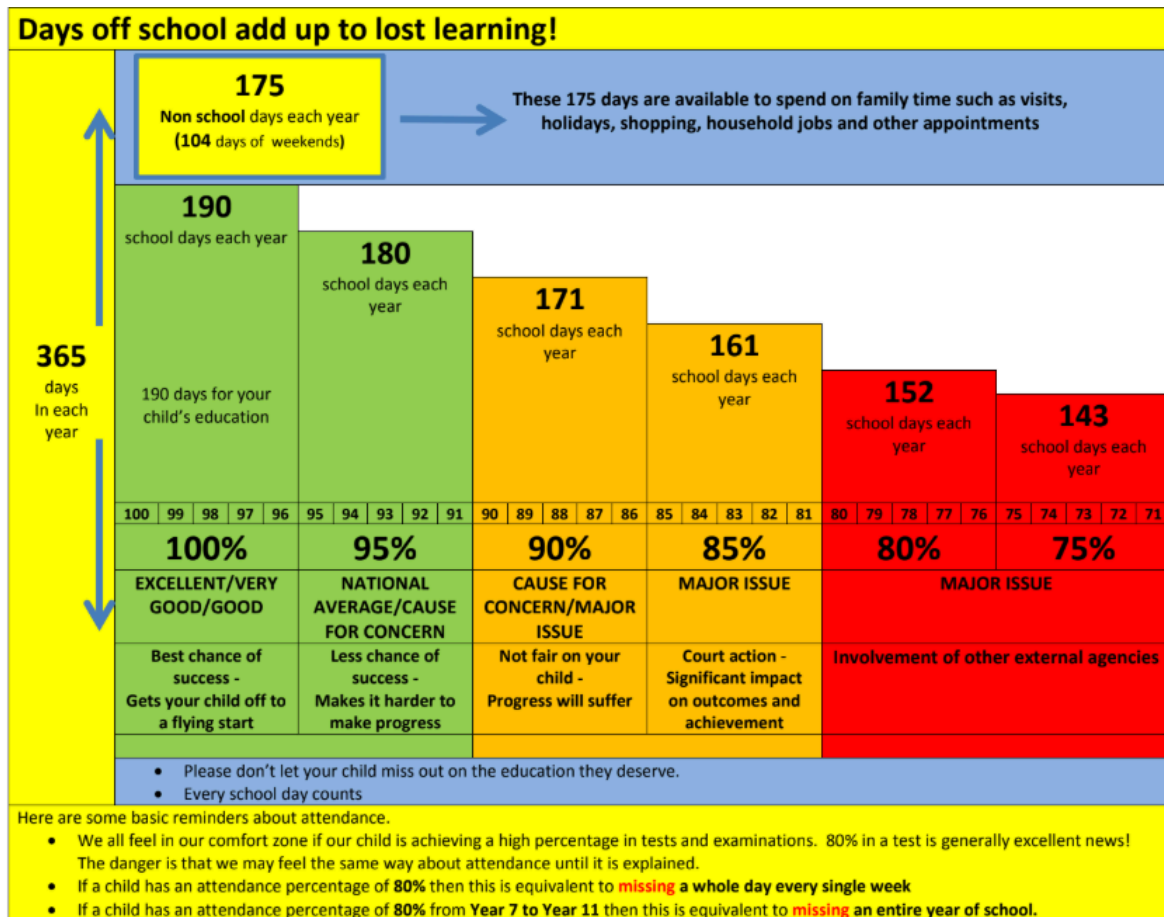
Summary: Attendance as a Shared Safeguarding Responsibility

Improving attendance is not only an educational goal, it is a safeguarding factor. The evolving legal frameworks, including the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and KCSIE 2025, place greater accountability on social workers, schools, and local authorities to act early, collaborate effectively, and ensure every child receives their right to education.

Statutory Links

- [Working Together to Improve School Attendance \(DfE\)](#)
- [Keeping Children Safe in Education \(KCSIE 2025\)](#)
- [Promoting the education of children with a social worker and children in kinship care arrangements: virtual school head role extension \(DfE\)](#)

Appendix 1



One year in school is equivalent to 950 1 hour long lessons Five years in school is equivalent to 4750 1 hour long lessons Eleven years in school is equivalent to 10450 1 hour long lessons And all of this comes down to set of grades on a sheet of paper in an envelope					
Attendance %	Missed Days	Missed weeks	Over 5 years	Annually	Impact over 5 years
100%	0	0	0	Excellent	
99%	1.9	0.38	9.5	Very Good	
98%	3.8	0.76	19	Very Good	
97% ¹	5.7	1.14	28.5	Very Good	
96%	7.6	1.52	38	Good	
95% ²	9.5	1.9	47.5	National average	Quarter Year missed
94%	11.4	2.28	57	Below Nat. average	
93%	13.3	2.66	66.5	Below Nat. average	Approx. Third year missed
92%	13.3	2.66	66.5	Requires improvement	
91%	17.1	3.42	85.5	Requires immediate improvement/worrying	
90% ³	19	3.8	95	Cause for concern	Half year missed
89%	20.9	4.18	104.5	Serious concern	
85% ⁴	28.5	5.7	142.5	Major issue	
80% ⁵	38	7.6	190	Major issue	1 Year missed
¹ 97% and above – pupils with attendance at this level throughout their school career, will make the most progress and this should lead to better prospects for work, college and university.					
² 95% - pupils with attendance at this level should reach their target grades and should have good prospects and opportunities for work, college and university but they are just below the national average rate of attendance					
³ 90% - pupils with attendance at this level are missing a month of school per year and are likely not to reach their target grades. Progress will be negatively affected and their attendance will be viewed negatively by employers, further and higher education.					
⁴ 85% - pupils with this attendance will find it very difficult to keep up and their chances of achieving their potential will be significantly damaged					
⁵ Any attendance percentage below this will make it impossible for pupils to keep up with the work. An EPN (Education Penalty Notice) will be issued.					