

Merton Virtual School - Key Information - Dec 2021

Introduction

Merton Virtual School believes that regular attendance is crucial for looked-after children to achieve their full potential both academically and socially whilst providing a significant resilience factor. The school attendance of our looked-after children is a priority and it is our expectation that all looked-after children have 100% attendance unless there are exceptional circumstances. The statutory guidance 'Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children' sets out the role of the Virtual School in ensuring effective systems are in place to track and support good attendance.

Research demonstrates the link between regular attendance and educational progress and attainment. It is important that every effort is made to encourage and support looked-after children to attend school every day and that absences are avoided wherever possible. If a child only attends 80% of the time - this equates to one day off a week, or one whole year off school every five years. 90% attendance over the course of the school year equates to one day off every fortnight.

Persistent Absence

Persistent Absence is the Department for Education (DfE) definition/threshold for measuring poor attendance.

A child becomes a 'persistent absentee' when they miss 10% or more schooling across the academic year. This equates to 19 days absence over a school year. Absence at this level will impact significantly on a looked-after child's educational achievement.

[A guide to absence statistics \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92122/16-00007-2-01-2016.pdf)

Legal Framework

Ordinarily this involves ensuring children attend school regularly and punctually during term time.

Under Section 576 of the Education Act 1996 a 'parent' includes any person who is not a parent of the child but who has parental responsibility, or who has care of the child, including foster carers.

It is government policy that schools are required to have robust systems in place for monitoring and promoting attendance.

The local policy in Merton is as follows: The VSHT should be consulted to make a request for a holiday during term time. This will only be considered in exceptional circumstances. If the VSHT agrees that the circumstances for the request are exceptional, they will consult with the HT of the school the child is on roll at for a final agreed decision.

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Roles and Responsibilities

Social Workers, Carers and Virtual School Advisory Teachers should ensure that Children in Care can:

- Attend school every day
- Arrive at school on time
- Arrive at school/education provision each day prepared for learning, with correct equipment, uniform and additional equipment as required, e.g., PE kit
- Children and young people should arrive at school/education provision having had a good night's sleep; a healthy breakfast and should be dressed appropriately for the setting, e.g., school uniform
- Children and young people should arrive at school/education provision ready to learn and in good spirits
- Social workers and carers should inform school of any issues that could potentially impact on attendance or the child's ability to focus on learning.

Carers/Parents should:

- Be aware of their duty to ensure looked-after children in their care attend school every day
- Ensure the child/young person arrives at school punctually and ready to learn each day
- Ensure they contact the school, in line with the school's attendance policy, every day of absence or, if known, in advance and state the reason for the absence
- Ensure wherever possible to arrange appointments /meetings outside of school time, e.g., dentist, etc
- Tell the school/educational provision and social worker of any problems that may impact on attendance
- Neither request to nor take children on holiday in term time. Exceptional circumstances should be discussed with the Virtual School Headteacher before any request is made to the school.

School/Education Provision should:

- Provide a safe and welcoming environment
- Encourage good attendance and punctuality through praise and rewards
- Maintain regular and accurate registers as per legal requirement
- Engage with Welfare Call's request for detailed updates on a daily basis
- Ensure that absence where reasons are unknown is relayed to Welfare Call in the daily updates
- School/education provision should contact the carer and social worker of the child on the first day of absence if no reason for the absence is provided
- Follow up unexplained absences to obtain explanations from carers and confirm if the absence is authorised or unauthorised
- Monitor individual children in care's attendance and punctuality
- Inform carers /social worker and Virtual School Advisory Teacher immediately of any concerns regarding attendance and punctuality.

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Social Workers and Independent Review Officers (IRO) will:

- Be aware of the duty to ensure looked-after children attend school every school day.
- Encourage good attendance and punctuality.
- Contact the carer/parent and child promptly if the school raises a concern about attendance.
- Make urgent enquiries if the school notifies them of an unexplained absence.
- Maintain curiosity about children's attendance and punctuality – if school does not offer information, seek out the information.
- Not request holidays in term time, unless in exceptional circumstances, and with the prior agreement of the Virtual School Headteacher
- Ensure wherever possible that appointments/meetings are made outside of school hours.

Merton Virtual School will:

- Be aware of the duty to ensure looked-after children attend school every day.
- Maintain an accurate and up to date record of attendance of all our looked-after children through the use of Welfare Call
- Encourage good attendance and punctuality through praise and rewards
- Work with social workers and carers/parents to support children in care to resolve attendance and punctuality issues
- Contact carers/parents when attendance is identified as a concern
- Support social workers, schools, colleges and carers/parents to identify causes of non-attendance and offer strategies to help improve attendance and punctuality.
- Inform CME panel of those whose attendance is of ongoing concern
- Track attendance and reasons for absence through daily checks via Welfare Call
- RAG rate each child's attendance in weekly RAG update meetings and allocate commentary and actions against those rated as Amber or Red.
- The Virtual School Headteacher will report termly attendance rates for the full term, cumulatively and provide narrative for those children or young people whose attendance is below 95%

Merton Virtual School Process for Promoting Good Attendance:

- Daily monitoring of attendance of all children in care through Welfare Call call-centre to every school or education setting for children of school age. Post 16 tracking will begin in January 2022 via Welfare Call.
- Weekly data analysis of pupil attendance and absence through RAG update meetings – Advisory Teachers, VS Business Manager and VSHT.
- Respond to exclusion notifications from Welfare Call by contacting schools and social workers to address concerns and review support strategies to prevent future exclusions/suspensions.
- Follow up on Children Missing Education (CME) cases with Social Workers, Admissions Service and Special Educational Needs & Disability Teams to ensure a school place is secured within the Statutory Framework.
- Link in with Virtual School Heads and work jointly with other LA services when issues arise with children placed outside of Merton.

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- Escalate cases of concern with regards to high level of exclusion, non-attendance and CSE through the half-termly Virtual School Education Progress Monitoring Meetings.
- Work with individual schools where there are areas of concern in relation to behaviour and use of exclusion.
- Work with schools and Social Workers in identifying suitable alternatives to exclusion on a case by case basis.
- Work in partnership with school, Social Workers, carers/parents and other involved professionals to improve attendance and educational outcomes.
- Collect and analyse details of alternative provision/reduced education offers on a weekly basis and address any matters arising.
- Monitor those pupils on reduced timetables to ensure that the timetable increases within an agreed timeframe.
- Analyse monthly absence data and review performance, with action planned strategic support to address concerns and anomalies.
- Work with the Educational Psychologist on commissioned work to address individual children's needs and provide support for schools.

Preventing Absence from School/Education setting

- Social Care senior managers must involve the Virtual School in decisions regarding potential placement moves for any child or young person in care. Senior managers within social care should, with the Virtual School Headteacher, pay due regard to the child's school place and the implications of moving schools in decisions concerning placement moves. As appropriate, SENDIS must also be involved in the decisions, ahead of any placement moves, as far as possible.

The Education Welfare Service will:

- Provide advice and guidance for all stakeholders on attendance matters and legislation ([please follow link for details of how to contact the Education Welfare Service](#)).

Guidance for supporting children in care to improve attendance and punctuality

Children in care should be encouraged to share any concerns that may be impacting on their attendance and punctuality.

Merton Virtual School expects schools to act promptly and supportively when there are concerns regarding a child's attendance.

Strategies to support a looked-after child may include:

- creating individual packages and re-integration plans where appropriate
- using attendance reports for monitoring and supporting a child or young person throughout the school day
- Providing a key person for the child to report to throughout the school day, if required

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- Providing exit cards, to use in lessons, where appropriate
- Ensuring children in care are welcomed when they return following an absence
- Supporting children to catch up with work they have missed
- Providing peer support, if required
- Regularly reviewing support in school to ensure it is effective.

Punctuality

Morning registration takes place at the start of school/college day and registration times will vary from establishment to establish. The registers usually remain 'open' for a period of time after registration (again this will vary from school to school) after which the register will be officially closed. Any child arriving after the register has been officially closed is marked as having an unauthorised absence unless there is an acceptable explanation and then the appropriate absence code will be applied.

If a child in care has a persistent late record the carer and social worker should be invited into the school to discuss and to resolve the problem. The Virtual School Advisory Teacher must be included in any meeting.

Carers and social workers must contact the school (usually the Designated Teacher) at any time if they are having difficulties in getting a looked-after child into school. They must also inform the Virtual School Advisory Teacher.

Children in Care Missing Education

Children Missing Education (CME) refers to all children who are of compulsory school age and are not on a school roll, nor being educated otherwise (e.g., privately or in alternative provision).

All schools are required to refer a child to the Local Authority for further investigation if s/he has been continually absent for more than 10 school days without permission and the school has carried out reasonable checks and failed to establish the child's whereabouts and the reason for absence. Please see ['Merton's Good Practice Guidance for Identifying and Safeguarding Children Missing Education 2017'](#) for more information.

Merton Virtual School procure the services of Welfare Call, a data collection agency. It is expected that all schools co-operate with the requests from Welfare Call for attendance information. All absences are checked by Welfare Call and phone calls are made to the carer to confirm the reason for absence. Schools and carers can also contact the Virtual School directly to inform of any issues pertaining to school absence, by emailing Virtualschool@merton.gov.uk

Deletion from Roll

Schools are permitted to remove compulsory-school-aged children from roll only under certain circumstances defined in **Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006 (amended 2010, 2011, 2013)**.

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Removing a looked-after child from the school roll is a very important decision. Children in care who fall out of the education system are likely to have poor outcomes and may be exposed to increased risk of harm. Schools must follow correct procedures to ensure that they do not breach their legal and safeguarding duties.

Children in care must not be removed from the school roll without consultation with Merton Virtual School Headteacher.

Conclusion

Given the nature of being placed in care, looked-after children can experience a number of placement changes, and this is likely to impact on their emotional well-being, learning ability, and their ability to make and keep friendship groups. It is essential for professionals to work collaboratively to support children in care to access the most appropriate education setting to meet their needs.

References

National Policy

[Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\) 2018](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/682222/promoting-the-education-of-looked-after-and-previously-looked-after-children-2018.pdf)

[The Education \(School Day and School Year\) \(England\) Regulations 1999 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukreg/1999/1100/1/1)

[Education Act 1996 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/54)

[School attendance guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\) 2020](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/90422/school-attendance-guidance-2020.pdf)

[A guide to absence statistics \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/90422/a-guide-to-absence-statistics-2020.pdf)