

# Improving School Attendance

A strategic approach to  
managing attendance  
in Wiltshire

September 2023



**Wiltshire Council**

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School attendance is everyone's business.

The vision for education in Wiltshire is clear and consistent:

That for every child in Wiltshire to achieve positive educational outcomes where they have flourished and succeeded through their educational journey and into adulthood, they need to attend school regularly where they can access an education that is tailored to their needs.

This document sets out what we all need to do to achieve this vision.

Our vision and work will support the mission and guiding themes in Wiltshire Council's Business Plan 2022-2032. Our key priorities are:

- Growing the economy
- Strong communities
- Protecting those who are most vulnerable
- An innovative and effective council

## National context / background

In May 2022 the Department for Education (DfE) published new guidance "Working Together to Improve Attendance – Guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools, and local authorities".

The guidance was effective from September 2022 with the intention that it will become statutory no sooner than September 2023.

The guidance clearly lays out the DfE requirements for improving attendance and has expectations and responsibilities for local authorities, schools, governing bodies and academy trustees.

The new guidance supports the vision of the Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza following the attendance audit conducted in 2021. The report "Voices of England's Missing Children: the findings of the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit, June 2022" outlines six ambitions:

**Ambition 1** Ask, Listen, Communicate: Decisions about children's education need to be made with children, their families and other adults in their lives.

**Ambition 2** Meet children where they are: All children receive support in school, through families of schools.

- Ambition 3** Exclusion as a trigger for intervention: Children should receive a fantastic education, regardless of setting, always, and receive targeted support following exclusion or suspension.
- Ambition 4** Letting children be children: No child should feel that they need to miss school to support or care for their family.
- Ambition 5** Attendance is everyone's business: School leaders have a relentless focus on attendance and work together with local authorities to ensure children are supported to be in school and to attend regularly.
- Ambition 6** No more 'known unknowns': Lack of information should no longer be the reason why children are not receiving a suitable education.

## Executive summary

This strategy has been developed by managers within the Targeted Education Service who have the remit for improving attendance across Wiltshire schools, in consultation with stakeholders across education, health and children's social care.

The Attendance Strategy is shared, understood, and applied by all that work with children and young people in Wiltshire.

Attendance is everyone's business in Wiltshire, and we recognise that it is everyone's role to support a child and young person to attend full-time education. Attendance is prioritised and understood as 'everyone's business' as a key focus of all frontline Wiltshire Council services.

Good attendance at school is a prerequisite to pupils' attainment, wellbeing and wider development. We recognise that some pupils, due to their own needs or those created by their vulnerabilities, will require more support to attend school on a full-time basis.

This strategy is designed to build on our existing partnership arrangements, to work together from the earliest opportunities to help parents/carers meet this legal duty, secure in the knowledge that their child is understood and well supported. Partners will provide additional needs-based support that contributes to improved school attendance.

Wiltshire Council is grateful to Knowsley Council for its support, advice and consent to use their attendance strategy as a point of reference.

## The importance of regular school attendance

Evidence shows that securing excellent attendance at school is an essential foundation of raising pupil attainment and is key to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people. Absence from school can seriously disrupt pupils' continuity of learning. Missing lessons leaves students vulnerable to falling behind, creating gaps in their learning, and diminishing their self-confidence. Not only do they miss out on taught lessons, but many children find it difficult to catch up academically and socially when they return to school.

95% attendance equates to half a day off every two weeks for a whole year.

90% attendance equates to a day off every two weeks for a whole year.

85% attendance equates to one and a half days off every two weeks for a whole year.

80% attendance equates to one whole day off every week for a whole year.

A secondary age pupil whose attendance is 80% will have missed **one whole year** of education by the time they leave school.

Good attendance habits must start from the earliest stages of education. Research shows that children who regularly miss school in Reception class will most likely go on to have poor attendance at secondary school and are five times less likely to achieve five strong passes at GCSE. We also know that poor attendance at school can lead to poor emotional health and wellbeing.

By not attending school regular children and young people are leaving themselves vulnerable to risks which can reduce their life chances. For example those who do not attend school regularly are more likely to:

- Leave school without any qualifications.
- Leave themselves at risk of other poor outcomes such as:
  - Poverty
  - Long term unemployment
  - Criminal involvement
  - Alcohol and substance misuse
  - Child exploitation
  - Social isolation and mental health problems

These are not the life outcomes and experiences we want for our children in Wiltshire. Attending school regularly is about so much more than academic attainment; it is about learning about the world, about relationships and about ourselves. It is about trying new things, making new friends, and finding our place in the world. To miss school is to miss the many, many experiences that shape the choices we make, the opportunities we have and the quality of life that we lead. Research tells us that children who attend school regularly go on to achieve better outcomes, to live healthier, wealthier and more enriched lives - and we want to make sure we are all doing everything that we can to make that happen for all of our children.

It is true that many children, families and schools in Wiltshire have great attendance. We know that there are examples of good practice happening every day in our schools. We must do more to learn from that. We know that we have some strong partnership arrangements in place that we can strengthen, to really make a difference together.

Working in partnership with schools, academies, independent schools, parents and carers, health, council services and the voluntary sector can remove barriers to attendance and result in improved and sustained attendance.

When there are specific problems with attendance, the local authority and schools will work closely to support families and children. We will take a carefully managed approach and seek to understand, encourage and support children and young people to attend school every day. Future decisions about the need for enforcement measures will be made on a case-by-case basis, recognising individual circumstances and always seeking to reduce absenteeism and maximise opportunities to attend school.

### **What are our key issues?**

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, schools, families, and local authority services have focused on a positive return to full-time attendance. There are many positive examples of children and young people attending daily and achieving well, however too many students remain persistently absent from our schools. This means that they are missing lessons, enrichment activities and opportunities to build meaningful relationships with their peers and school staff. Of particular concern is the higher rates of persistent and severe absence for some of our most vulnerable children with social workers, those eligible for pupil premium and children with special educational needs who are more likely to be absent from school, and we recognise that this is having a detrimental impact on their progress and attainment.

Our Attendance Strategy covers the next two years from 2023 to 2025 and will direct our work in improving school attendance over that time. One of our guiding principles in developing this strategy has been to build on our existing partnership working with schools, academies, partners, and stakeholders. This will ensure our local approach is not only in line with current government guidance and legislation, but that it recognises the needs of our communities post pandemic, and seeks to empower and support them. This will inspire confidence to attend school rather than exercising statutory powers to enforce it.

## What do we know already?

There are many reasons why a child or young person may be missing school. It is important that professionals working with families take the time to understand those reasons and work in a solution focused way to overcome barriers to regular attendance. It is also important that when considering poor attendance, a holistic approach is taken. This should consider the emotional, social, economic, and academic reasons why a child or young person may be missing school and how, through the support of the school and/or other agencies, barriers to regular attendance may be reduced or removed. We know that many schools and agencies do this work effectively; however, there is more that we can do to make sure that this approach is consistently applied across Wiltshire. We know that there are lots of positive examples of good practice in schools, teams, and organisations in relation to the management of attendance. In Wiltshire we also know that we need to increase the use of the earliest support available to improve attendance for example by increasing the use of early support assessments and early help at a school level to work in a solution focused way to minimise absence from school.

We also know that we need to look strategically at the range of services available to schools to support attendance and meet the requirements of the DfE attendance guidance.



We have shaped our strategy through four key priorities which have been identified through Wiltshire data and feedback from schools and service users.

Our work will focus on these four priorities:

1. Support parents and carers to understand and meet their responsibilities to ensure their children attend school regularly.
2. Ensure every pupil has access to suitable full-time education to which they are entitled.
3. Act early to identify and address attendance concerns.
4. Reduce absence, including persistent and severe absence.

To deliver these priorities, we will:

- Develop and deliver a clear and well communicated graduated response to attendance built on early intervention so that children and families get the help they need when they need it regardless of which setting they attend.
- Have a multi-agency approach so that children and families get help from the right person or service at the right time and that attendance isn't just seen as a responsibility for schools.
- Develop a comprehensive school attendance support offer in line with the DfE guidance, 'Working Together to Improve School Attendance'.
- Publish an attendance handbook for use by professionals supporting children, young people and families which will detail practical strategies for intervention and support at each stage of the graduated response to manage attendance.



### Priority One

#### **Support parents and carers to understand and meet their responsibilities to ensure their children attend school regularly.**

Parents are expected to ensure their child/ren has access to full-time education which is suitable to their age, ability and aptitude taking into account any special educational needs; (section 7 Education Act 1996); this has not changed. We recognise that some parents want to make their own arrangement for education; this strategy focuses on children whose parents and carers have chosen to register their children in a school.

This Attendance Strategy recognises the importance of parents in securing good attendance and for working together with parents and pupils to improve attendance where required and as such use a wide range of supportive measures. Therefore, ensuring that children are school ready from the first day at school until they are ready to leave is part of being a parent.

#### **We will do this by:**

- Developing communication to promote the importance of attendance through media and social media platforms.
- Ensuring all parents are aware of the potential legal consequences of non-attendance at school.
- Ensuring that media messages regularly reinforce the link between good attendance and achievement at school and emphasise how this impacts positively on improving employment opportunities and other life outcomes.
- Setting out expectations of parents and pupils that schools can adopt and use in their attendance policy to aid their work with parents and carers.
- Developing a mechanism to regularly understand parent and pupil voice in relation to understanding the barriers to attendance for children and families; this will be an important part of supportive work to improve attendance.

## Priority Two

**Ensure every pupil has access to suitable full-time education to which they are entitled.**

Section 19 of the Education Act 1996 states that:

“Each local authority shall make arrangements for the provision of suitable education at school or otherwise than at school for those children of compulsory school age who, by reason of illness, exclusion from school or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them.”

- In Wiltshire there is a Service Level Agreement (SLA) in place with Wiltshire secondary maintained and Wiltshire secondary academy schools that devolves funding to those settings to enable them to discharge the local authority responsibilities under s19. It is aimed at reducing permanent exclusion by allowing schools to explore alternatives to exclusion.
- Schools are also supported, through this funding, to make provision for pupils who are unable to attend school because of illness.

The council expects that there is robust oversight of pupils who are not accessing full-time education provision and all agencies working with those pupils should be proactive in returning pupils to full-time education. This will include challenge and support where appropriate.

- In Wiltshire, the Children Missing Out of Education (CMOE) panel reviews the education provision of pupils who are identified as not accessing or are at risk of not accessing full-time education provision. The CMOE will consider the education provision being made and may make recommendations/actions to support the inclusion of the pupil into full-time suitable provision.
- Wiltshire will develop an Attendance of Vulnerable Pupils Panel for those with the most significant issues which are not improving to consider educational neglect thresholds for social care intervention.

## Priority Three

### **Act early to identify and address attendance concerns.**

Schools will be supported to have effective management of attendance in place. School leadership, including governance, has to be confident that the school is doing all it can to encourage parents to send their children to school regularly. It is only through a whole school approach to attendance that sustained improvements can be made.

We know that some young people face a range of poor outcomes and barriers that make regular attendance at school only possible through effective partnership working and the use of Early Support Assessments. This is particularly true of those pupils who are chronic absentees who may need to access additional support from outside of the family and school.

A graduated attendance process will be used to support schools and professionals to develop actions and interventions for pupils with emerging attendance concerns and establish thresholds of responsibility.

### So, under this priority we will seek to ensure that:

Schools identify at an early stage pupils who are at risk of becoming persistently absent.

### We will do this by:

- Providing meaningful pupil and school level attendance data for schools that helps to identify those who are known to be vulnerable or at risk of poor outcomes e.g. NEET (Not in Employment Education or Training).
- School and partners put in place effective approaches, assessments and plans for pupils where attendance is a concern.
- Supporting schools to ensure attendance information is routinely shared at standard transition points.
- Ensuring young people with attendance concerns do not miss out on accessing high quality careers and information advice so as to prevent them from becoming NEET.
- Monitoring the attendance of children with a social worker through the Virtual School.

### Schools are supported to address attendance concerns.

Under this priority we will seek to ensure that schools understand what they need to do to improve attendance.

#### We will do this by:

- Ensuring that schools know how to access resources and support from local authority services and partners.
- Ensuring that schools are supported in their approaches to prevent pupils becoming persistent absentees by having access to good quality training and resources for governors, trustees, school leadership and other relevant roles.
- Supporting governors to have a good understanding of what is needed to improve and sustain school attendance so that they can hold school leaders to account.
- Supporting schools, through termly Targeting Support Meetings, to promote excellent and aspirational attendance practice that is inclusive for all pupils and using absence and attendance data to support individual pupil level planning to improve attendance.



## Priority Four

### **Work with persistently and severely absent pupils and their families using a series of formal measures to improve attendance.**

In Wiltshire we will prioritise the attendance of persistent and severely absent pupils. Our top priority group will be pupils who are severely absent with 50% or less attendance.

A range of strategies, planning and assessment will be undertaken following the graduated response to managing attendance and where targeted support interventions have not had the desired impact on improved attendance.

This will include where parents have not engaged with support services and there is no reason for low attendance.

#### **We will do this by:**

- Using a range of data to track and monitor attendance of pupils. This will be used to inform prioritisation where there is highest need - allowing professionals to provide support to tackle barriers to attendance.
- Ensuring that persistent and severe absentees have appropriate plans in place to promote a return to regular attendance at school. This will involve all relevant professionals working together to provide solutions to chronic absence.
- Directly supporting, challenging and empowering young people and families to overcome the barriers to school attendance.
- Using a range of formal and/or legal enforcement measures where other voluntary interventions have failed to improve attendance.
- Escalating cases to the Vulnerable Children's Attendance Panel for further support, advice and consideration for educational neglect thresholds.



**Wiltshire Council**

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