



## Isle of Wight Safeguarding Children Partnership



### PRACTITIONER BRIEFING

*“Improving attendance is everyone’s business. The barriers to accessing education are wide and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individual pupils and families.... At all stages of improving attendance, schools and partners should work with pupils and parents to remove any barriers to attendance by building strong and trusting relationships and working together to put the right support in place... It cannot solely be the preserve of a single member of staff, or organisation, it must be a concerted effort across all teaching and non-teaching staff in school, the trust or governing body, the local authority, and other local partners.” [Working Together to Improve School Attendance 2022](#)*

## Thematic audit: multi-agency response to low school attendance for vulnerable children

A thematic audit considering the multi-agency response to potential safeguarding concerns apparent from low school attendance was undertaken by the Isle of Wight Safeguarding Children Partnership (IOW SCP), Performance and Quality Assurance Subgroup in July 2023. The audit responds to an IOWSCP Business Plan priority to assess the multi-agency response to disrupted attendance for vulnerable children. We would like to extend our thanks to the multi-agency panel and practitioners who supported the audit.

A thematic audit includes information from a range of sources, including learning from reviews, data and research and policy papers. A case file audit was also undertaken. This helps to make sure any recommendations for practice reflect the current local and national context.

The case file audit provided information on current practice and how we are recognising and responding appropriately to vulnerable children where their education attendance is of concern. It provided an opportunity to acknowledge effective multi-agency practice already in place and offer some assessment of how well partner agencies are working with children and families in line with their responsibilities as set out in [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#), [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) and [Keeping Children Safe in Education](#).

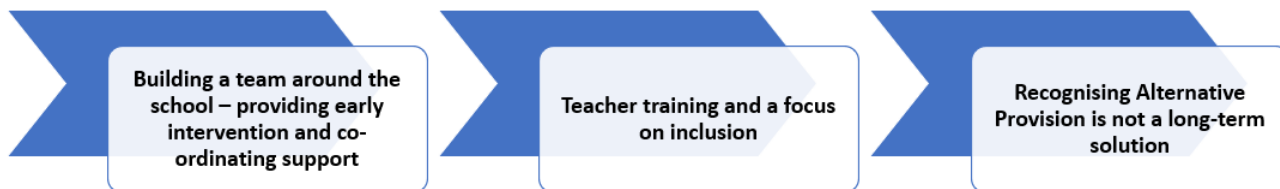
Safeguarding vulnerable children is a critical aspect of ensuring their well-being and protecting them from harm. One important factor in safeguarding vulnerable children is monitoring and promoting school attendance. Regular school attendance not only provides children with access to education but also serves as a protective factor against various risks they may face.

### LEARNING FROM THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Post COVID there has been a national and local increase in non-school attendance. The [Centre for Social Justice](#) notes the number of severely absent pupils, those absent more than 50% of their school time, has doubled and this cohort of children are disproportionately likely to be vulnerable.

[Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#) provides guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools, local authorities and partners. It sets out how we should work together to tackle absence, focusing on a ‘**support first**’ approach. Where there is concern around a child’s mental health and emotional wellbeing, there is further guidance: [Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance](#).

In February 2023 the Children’s Commissioner, Dame De Sousa, published their response to the Education Select Committee’s Persistent Absence Inquiry, titled “[Attendance is everyone’s business](#)”. Dame De Sousa noted three areas to improve school attendance:



In April 2022, the Commission on Young Lives published a [thematic report: Inclusion not Exclusion](#). The report highlights the importance of a multi-agency and community approach to supporting attendance.

A study in May 2023 considered “[Persistent absence for unauthorised other reasons](#)” and asked who is at risk. This study suggests that the following factors, in descending order, were found to be most important for predicting whether a pupil was at risk of becoming persistently absent:

- 1 Number of suspensions
- 2 Social care activity
- 3 Alternative provision
- 4 Free School Meals eligibility

Reports and research, such as the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review: [It was Hard to Escape](#), and the [Oxford SCP Child Safeguarding Practice Review: Jacob](#), highlight the importance of a child attending school and how exclusions from school can be a trigger point for risk of serious harm and the importance of acting upon critical/reachable moments. [NSPCC Learning from case reviews](#) published in February 2023 echoes this point and highlights the importance of schools attending and contributing to strategy meetings and child protection conferences.

## KEY STRENGTHS FROM IOW SCP CASE FILE AUDIT








- ✓ The referral for Early Help or Children’s Social Care Services was clear and timely and included consideration of the child’s educational experience and attendance.
- ✓ Where it was applicable, relevant agencies, services and settings contributed effectively to the assessment and the views of children and adults were sought.
- ✓ There was evidence of effective transition planning from schools, in partnership with the parents and the child, recognising the child’s interests and views.
- ✓ There was evidence of regular case supervision, and case management decisions were recorded.
- ✓ In line with the family approach, it was noted that some plans had support in place that considered the needs of family members.
- ✓ The effective work of agencies demonstrated a variety of mechanisms to support and safeguard children’s school attendance.
- ✓ The panel noted the flexible, collaborative and tenacious responses of agencies involved in plans supporting children and families.

*“It is recognised that children missing education can act as a vital warning sign to a range of safeguarding issues including neglect, sexual abuse and child sexual and criminal exploitation.”*  
[Working Together to Improve School Attendance 2022](#)

## WAYS IN WHICH SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IS LINKED TO SAFEGUARDING VULNERABLE CHILDREN

- 1. Early identification of issues:** Regular school attendance allows teachers and staff to observe any changes or patterns that may indicate potential issues or concerns affecting the child's well-being. This includes signs of neglect, abuse, mental health problems, or other vulnerabilities.
- 2. Monitoring well-being:** School attendance provides an opportunity for teachers and staff to monitor the overall well-being of vulnerable children. It enables them to notice any physical, emotional, or behavioural changes that may require intervention or support.
- 3. Building relationships:** Regular school attendance allows vulnerable children to build positive relationships with their peers and trusted adults and foster peer friendships and social inclusion.
- 4. Providing structure and routine:** For many vulnerable children, attending school offers stability, structure, and routine in their lives. This can be particularly beneficial for those experiencing chaotic or unstable home environments.
- 5. Preventing exploitation:** By attending school regularly, vulnerable children are less likely to be targeted by individuals seeking to exploit them or engage them in harmful activities outside of the school environment.

### KEY MESSAGES FOR PRACTITIONERS:

-  **THINK HOLISTICALLY:** Plans to improve attendance and engagement in education should include the following three elements: a focus on the child's relationships (parents and carers, peers and school staff); agency and control (child and young person's views and choices where appropriate); and practical support.
-  **KNOW AND USE THE POLICY:** Where there are periods of absence due to medical conditions or mental health issues impacting on school attendance, a health needs assessment should be in place to ensure necessary reasonable adjustments. The IWC has a [policy for access to education for school age children and young people with medical needs](#).
-  **WORK COLLABORATIVELY:** Where school attendance meetings are held within school, and there are medical/health issues impacting on attendance, school nurses should be routinely invited and relevant information shared with the GP.
-  **BE CLEAR:** Practitioners should be encouraged to move away from generic terms such as Health, Local Authority given the range of organisations/services and roles within the health sector and the Local Authority.
-  **KNOW THE CHILD:** Tools such as [Day in the Life](#), from the Hampshire and IOW Neglect Toolkit, are useful for understanding a child's daily lived experience/routine and considering any potential impact on school attendance.
-  **KNOW YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES:** Practitioners to understand their roles in promoting good school attendance as outlined in [Summary table of responsibilities for school attendance](#)
-  **RISK OF EXPLOITATION:** Reminder that any agency can undertake a CERAf where there are concerns around child exploitation – the risk of exploitation may be heightened by non-school attendance.

## SUPPORTING RESOURCES

- DfE [toolkit](#) for schools on 'Communicating with families to support attendance'.
- The Isle of Wight Education and Inclusion Service are looking to deliver CPD in 2023-24 to all schools with an SLA (Service Level Agreement), in relation to communicating with families to support attendance. This will be at no extra charge. Please contact [eis@iow.gov.uk](mailto:eis@iow.gov.uk)
- The Isle of Wight Education and Inclusion Service will be offering half termly drop ins for families throughout 2023-24. This will be for families to talk about all things attendance and sessions will be offered at Isle of Wight Family Hub venues. To find out more about this, contact [eis@iow.gov.uk](mailto:eis@iow.gov.uk)
- A letter to school leaders from the Chief Medical Officer on [mild illness and school attendance](#)
- The [IOWSCP](#) offers a range of training and resources to support practitioners in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.
- Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad umbrella term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. Supporting resources for Emotionally Based School Avoidance include [good practice guidance for schools and other support agencies](#), [information for parents and carers](#) and [information booklet for young people](#)
- A [Child Exploitation Risk Assessment Form](#) (CERAF) should be completed as soon as potential concerns regarding any form of child exploitation are identified. Guidance on how to complete a CERAF can be found [here](#) or by watching a short guidance video [Help on how to complete a CERAF](#).