

# HSCP Briefing for Multi-Agency Practitioners



March 2024

*"She knows she is loved here."*

## HSCP Thematic Audit

School attendance is an area of concern on a national and local level, in particular following the impact of COVID-19 and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. As noted in [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#) (Department for Education), 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"**.

Hampshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) conducted a thematic audit in autumn 2023 to support one of its priorities; identifying, understanding and responding to valuable children with disrupted school attendance.

The term 'valuable child' comes from a child telling their social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic that they were attending school as they were a valuable child. They had misheard the term vulnerable. For this reason and in response to the quote from the headteacher the HSCP Executive agreed to retitle the audit removing the word vulnerable and replacing with valuable.

HSCP would like to thank the school senior leader that shared the quote above with the audit panel, demonstrating how children are loved, cared for and valued within their school.

## Key messages

**KNOW YOUR ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY** in supporting children's engagement in education. Read the guidance document [Summary table of responsibilities for school attendance](#).

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**THINK YOUNG CARER:** The Carers Trust & The Children's Society define a young carer as: "A person under 18 who provides or intends to provide care for another person. They often take on practical and/or emotional caring responsibilities that would normally be expected of an adult." Does anyone you are working with fit this definition? For more information access the [HSCP Young Carers Strategy Guide](#).

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**KNOW THE CHILD AND THOSE INVOLVED IN THEIR CARE:** The [Day in the Life tools](#), found in the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Neglect Toolkit, are useful for gaining an insight into a child's everyday experiences and routine and help you know the child well. Revisit the [Understanding Unidentified Adults Toolkit](#) to refresh your knowledge.

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**CHECK IT OUT:** A [Child Exploitation Toolkit](#) has been launched across Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton (HIPS). This includes links to the Child Exploitation Risk Assessment Form (CERAF) and the Community Partnership Information Sharing form (CPI)

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**MAKE SURE:** When you complete an Inter-agency referral form (IARF) for Children's Services ensure you include the context of the child and the concern, and consider any cumulative impact and risk.

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**THINK CHILD, THINK FAMILY, THINK CHILD AGAIN:** Parent-oriented issues, such as poor mental health, can have a significant impact on the child. Keep focused on the child and keep actions and plans Specific, Measurable, Achievable and Timebound. Make sure the impact of actions is Evaluated and actions are Revised where needed. Keep actions and plans SMARTER.

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**TAKE SOME TIME TO:** Check out the resources available to you and your colleagues on the [HSCP website](#).

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# If you do one thing:

**Recognise that engagement in education is a significant protective factor for children. Encourage attendance and engagement whenever you can. When working with children who have a one plan (Early Help) or a child in need plan or child protection plan, make it a multi-agency responsibility to consider if the child is attending and engaging in school/education and what support the child and family may need.**

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School attendance is a complex area, with significant legislation and guidance around it. For the multi-agency workforce, the following points are important.

- 1) The law entitles every child of compulsory school age to an efficient, full time education suitable to their age, aptitude, and any special education needs they may have. It is the legal responsibility of every parent to make sure their child receives that education.
- 2) A child is defined as **persistently absent** when their overall attendance is less than 90%. Over an academic year this **equates to one day every two weeks**.
- 3) A child is defined as **severely absent** when their overall attendance is less than 50%. Over an academic year this **equates to be absent from school more than being present**. For example, missing all or part of every morning of a school day.
- 4) The majority of absence is authorised by the school for reasons of ill health for example, but some absence is **unauthorised**. This is where the school have not given permission for the child to be absent. This will include **all unexplained or unjustified absences and arrivals after registration has closed**.



# Thematic audit

The thematic audit was commissioned by the Scrutiny Group of the HSCP to provide a broad overview of the current work in supporting valuable children with disrupted school attendance. This included children with early help, child in need or child protection plans.

Thematic audits are an important part of the assurance work of the HSCP. They offer a window to frontline practice, and we thank the practitioners who supported us with this work. As part of the thematic audit, a tabletop analysis of local and national work was undertaken relating to disrupted education. This included:

- National and local guidance.
- National research and learning.
- Local learning, arising from case reviews and previous audits.
- A review of child safeguarding practice reviews published in England between April and August 2023.
- A multi-agency case file audit was undertaken. The case file audit found evidence of effective practice alongside some areas for development which are considered below.

## Key findings

A “support first” approach is important in promoting good school attendance and engagement with education for every child.

Guidance is available for a range of practitioners regarding their role and responsibilities in supporting engagement in education. This includes:

- [Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance](#) (DfE, February 2023).
- [Summary table of responsibilities for school attendance](#) (DFE, May 2022).
- [Keeping Children Safe in Education](#) and [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#). General practitioners have agreed to five principles when working with children and considering school attendance.

### IDENTIFIED THEMES

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A number of themes were identified from the multi-agency case file audit:

The impact of parental mental ill health, domestic abuse and parental substance misuse on the child and their engagement in education was a theme and can be considered as **parent-oriented issues**. This was coupled with a strong theme of parental variable or non-engagement. Assessing whether a parent “can’t or won’t” engage is not straightforward and can often be a combination of both and relates to the later point about specific actions and plans.

**Children arriving late to school** (and frequently) after registration has closed was a theme. It was very evident that this has a considerable impact on children. Missing the start of the school day is very significant for many children as this can be when schools put in place lots of mechanisms to support children to be able to engage with the school day, helping with self-regulation, breakfast, self-care and hygiene needs, right books and equipment and having a check in with a familiar adult. It can be deeply upsetting for a child to come into an already busy school environment with their needs unmet. It does not contribute to a positive school experience.

**Young carers** continue to be a theme that has been repeated from two previous audits in 2022/23. This audit confirmed the previous audit findings that often young carers were not formally recognised and therefore were not receiving appropriate child centred support. The impact of being a young carer was evidenced within this audit having a significant impact on school attendance, including frequent lateness.

The **family care arrangements** varied across the children considered as part of the audit. While agencies were able to confirm the main carers for all the children it was less clear what work was being undertaken with others who had caring or parental responsibility to support the child.

The circumstances of some children and families would have benefited from the use of **resources and tools** such as the:

- [Neglect Toolkit](#)
- [Community Partnership Information forms \(CPI\)](#).
- [Child Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework \(CERAF\)](#).

The panel noted the need to consider the **cumulative impact of neglect** when working with families, where a long trajectory through services can be seen. Equally the panel noted similar journeys in development for some children within the audit and the need to consider this within referrals to Children’s Social Care. The “normalisation of neglect” remains an area practitioners should consider and be open to challenge on.

It was also noted that it is important for **referrers to provide context** when making a referral, evidencing when an event has happened a number of times in a short period. The referral should consider the associated cumulative impact and risks to the child.

The impact of family members who are **neurodivergent** was also considered due to some challenges for the subject child. While those challenges were noted as different, the outcome in both situations was reduced school attendance.

It was noted for two children that **actions** that are developed to support children and their families to create and drive change should be **tightly framed, specific and monitored for impact**.

The use of **alternative provision** (education outside school arranged by schools themselves or the local authority) was considered. While it may be considered of benefit in the short term it must again be **tightly framed, specific, achievable and monitored for impact**. The [Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel De Sousa](#), noted alternative provision is not a long-term solution for children.

## EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

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A range of effective practice was identified from the multi-agency case file audit. This included:

- School providing a safe place for the child.
- Multi-agency practitioners being tenacious and having the confidence to escalate concerns.
- The protective factor for a child of being within a school and school community.
- Schools offering additional support, through clubs and in the holidays.
- Schools and children's social care working collaboratively, knowing their roles and responsibilities clearly and remaining child focused, sharing information and maintaining positive working relationships with the parents.
- School attending to the smaller things and delivering big messages at the same time: "She knows she is loved here," "We make sure she has breakfast and has her hair brushed". This is important to this child.
- A school with an Attendance Strategy Group, working to identify and eliminate barriers to attendance.



# Resources to support practice

## Thresholds

[Hampshire and Isle of Wight Thresholds Chart](#)

## Training and Toolkits

[Strengthening Parental Relationships \(a toolkit is also available for parents and carers\)](#)

[Adopting a Family Approach toolkit](#)

[Neglect toolkit](#)

[Safeguarding Adolescents \(a toolkit is also available for parents and carers\)](#)

[Understanding Unidentified Adults toolkit](#)

[Child Exploitation toolkit](#)

[Training - Hampshire SCP](#). Find courses that support your safeguarding practice.

## Want to know more?

**Read the DfE study May 2023, [Persistent absence for unauthorised other reasons: who is at risk? \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#).** This study noted the following factors were found to be most important for predicting whether a child was at risk of becoming persistently absent for unauthorised reasons the following school year (listed in rank order):

1. Number of suspensions
2. Social care activity (current or previous child in need and child protection)
3. Alternative provision
4. Free school meals eligibility