

Schools should set and maintain high expectations for the attendance, engagement and punctuality of pupils who are anxious about attending school. It is important to recognise that, in many instances, attendance at school may serve to help with the underlying issue as much as being away from school might exacerbate it, and a prolonged period of absence may heighten their anxiety about attending in future.

- The new DfE guidance does not say that mental health related absences should always be authorised. [Mental health issues affecting a pupil's attendance: guidance for schools - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mental-health-issues-affecting-a-pupil-s-attendance-guidance-for-schools)
- It states that the new guidance should be read in conjunction with the DfE School Attendance Guidance which states that 'if schools have reasonable doubt about the authenticity of an illness, they can request medical evidence (this applies whether it is physical or mental health). [Working together to improve school attendance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance)
- Therefore, if schools have reasonable doubt and can evidence their doubts, they can ask for medical evidence and can decide whether it is appropriate to authorise absences.

Should school staff ask for medical evidence of a mental health-related absence?

- It is important that children and parents/carers do not feel as though their concerns about mental health have gone unheard which is why, as explained in the Working together to improve school attendance guidance, schools must record absences as authorised where pupils of compulsory school age cannot attend due to illness (both physical and mental health related).
- There is no need to routinely ask for medical evidence to support recording an absence as authorised for mental health reasons. This is because, in general, primary care health professionals such as General Practitioners are unlikely to be able to offer such evidence to support one-off absences related to mental health.
- In instances of long-term or repeated absences for the same reason, however, seeking medical evidence may be appropriate to assist in assessing whether the child requires additional support to help them to attend more regularly, and whether the illness is likely to prevent the child from attending for extended periods.
- If a parent proactively seeks out a note from a GP, it does not imply a need for absence unless this is explicit in the GP letter.
- The GP Lead has recommended that schools seek permission from parents to collaborate with health professionals including GPs. This is to ensure that health professionals/GPs have a full picture of the child's needs and then make the appropriate recommendations.
- If parents do not give permission schools can still write to health professionals outlining any concerns they may have, what support they have and are trying to implement, thereby ensuring health professionals have further context from the school's perspective.
- It is important that schools take heed of the statutory guidance contained within the DfE Guidance – Supporting Pupils at School with Medical Conditions - www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-for-children-with-health-needs-who-cannot-attend-school

How to handle situations where parents/carers do not engage or agree with support offered

- Parents/carers have a duty, under section 7 of the Education Act 1996, to ensure that their child of compulsory school age (5 to 16) receives an efficient full-time education either by attendance at school or otherwise, and so share in the responsibility of ensuring good and regular attendance.
- As such, we would encourage parents/carers and schools to be open and work together to create a plan for attendance that fits with the needs of the child. Working with parents/carers and pupils to understand the barriers to their attendance and, where appropriate, making reasonable adjustments to overcome those specific barriers is an effective way of building confidence and reducing anxiety about attending.
- Parents/carers should engage with support offered by the school and be reminded of the importance of regular attendance and the emotional and mental wellbeing benefits of attending school for children and young people. They should feel reassured that the school has a plan for their child, and parents/carers should feel supported in their responsibility of ensuring the child's regular attendance at school.
- Any reasonable adjustments or support put in place by schools should ensure that the time the child spends in school is prioritised as much as is possible.
- In some instances, parents/carers themselves might be living with mental health problems or experiencing wider vulnerabilities or challenging life circumstances. This may affect their ability to provide support and care, and so it is important to recognise the need for practical, whole-family support and/or early help support where necessary, to try to address the causes of poor attendance. For example, where applicable, the family's support worker might act as a convenor of any additional support offered and is a key party to join any conversations about a child's attendance.
- Where support offered is not engaged with, or where all other options have been exhausted or deemed inappropriate, schools should work with LAs to consider whether to formalise support or to enforce attendance through legal intervention in the normal way under their existing powers.

When to inform the Local Authority (LA) about an attendance concern

If Authorised Absence for Medical or Health reasons:

- Schools must inform the Local Authority ESMA Teaching Service where pupils are likely to miss more than 15 days of school, and work with the family to provide educational provision whilst determining with the LA whether alternative provision should be provided under section 19 of the Education Act 1996, as outlined in statutory guidance.
[Education Support for Medical Absence \(ESMA\) teaching service - Hertfordshire Grid for Learning \(thegrid.org.uk\)](https://www.thegrid.org.uk)

If Unauthorised Absence:

- Please contact your area Statutory Attendance and Participation Team duty line to seek advice and guidance.

West Duty Area: **01442 454778**, email attendancedutywest@hertfordshire.gov.uk

East Duty Area: **01992 555261**, emails attendancedutyeast@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Safeguarding partners should work together with appropriate relevant agencies to safeguard and promote the welfare of local children, including identifying and responding to their needs.