

**School Attendance – Advice for Schools**

Hillingdon’s Participation Team have collated the below guidance for schools to use to support discussions with families regarding school attendance during the pandemic.

Attendance is now mandatory and the usual rules on attendance apply, including:

* parents’ duty to ensure that their child of compulsory school age attends regularly at the school where the child is a registered pupil.
* schools’ responsibilities to record attendance and follow up absence.
* the ability to issue sanctions, including fixed penalty notices, in line with local authorities’ codes of conduct.

As in normal times, Headteachers will have the discretion to authorise absence in “exceptional circumstances.” There is some flexibility for absences to be authorised in ‘exceptional circumstances,’ but this is not defined in normal times, let alone the current situation. It would be difficult to provide a list of criteria that would cover all eventualities.

Authorised absences could be granted beyond the “specific examples” set out in official guidance and could cover a pupil whose absence a Headteacher felt was merited.

We appreciate that decisions to start legal action are never taken lightly and are usually considered to be a last resort. However, the Government are clear that being in school is the best place for children’s education and wellbeing. Ultimately where parents have concerns about their child’s attendance at school, we ask that they discuss their concerns with the school.

Government guidance on school attendance can be accessed here: [School attendance: guidance for schools](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-attendance?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_source=500dc9ae-9bfe-4f77-a12b-409490bef536&utm_content=daily)

**From 19 April onwards please review the following key areas for school attendance:**

* Review and contact pupils who have not returned to find out why and if necessary, refer to key person to establish support plan.
* All children who have not returned should be discussed with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) to ensure safeguarding has been considered.
* Add any new pupils to the vulnerable group following discussions with the DSL.
* Review vulnerable pupil groups and update support package if needed.
* Where a child has a Social Worker ensure that the DSL has continued contact with the allocated Social Worker to discuss attendance concerns.
* Identify pupils at risk of not returning, including those who were previously shielding or self-isolating. Record when isolation period ends if continued due to exceptional circumstances.
* Identify support for those pupils who are not attending. Have they got access to remote learning / packs (where appropriate)?
* Daily attendance monitoring and follow up.
* Please continue to submit the DfE Educational Setting Status form daily.

**If parents feel unable to send their child(ren) to school because of health-related issues you may wish to use the questions below to explore during discussions with families:**

It is important to thank the parent for coming in to see you or for meeting you via zoom etc.

Explain that the government guidelines are that attendance is mandatory, that children should be back at school, and this meeting is to help school and family to discuss how we can help ensure that their child can come back to school as safely and quickly as possible.

You can also explain that you will keep a record of the discussion and any agreed support put in place.

It is imperative to get and record reasons given for non-attendance. You can use the following questions and we have some prompts underneath to explore it a little further.

**Can you tell me why you feel you are unable to send you child(ren) to school at this time?**

This will be useful to understand what is worrying them. When are they intending to return? When there is, a vaccine for my child’s age group is not an acceptable reason to be at home, as this could take some time.

**How has Covid 19 affected your family?**

**How has Covid 19 lockdown affected your child?**

Have they any anxieties or concerns? Have they spoken to anyone about this? Is there any support in school e.g., CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service), counsellors, learning mentors that might be able to support the child when they are in school? Is there any support in the community e.g., their GP, counsellors, or bereavement counselling? How has their sleep patterns and their behaviour with other siblings been during lockdown?

**What is the risk for your family – is there anyone in your family home that has had Covid or is at greater risk if they contract Covid 19?**

Are there members of the family who live **in the same household** who are clinically vulnerable or clinically extremely vulnerable? Have they had the illness or been shielding? Is it the child or someone else in the household? If there are people who are vulnerable outside the family home social distancing and isolation may be more appropriate for them but should not prevent a child from going to school?

**Have you discussed this with medical professionals – if so, who and what advice did they give you and if not, who could you ask medical advice from?**

You may want to seek written permission to contact those health professionals.

**How do you mange you child’s education during lockdowns?**

What education are they providing, has there been any issues with accessing or understanding the work set? Talk about the work the child is missing in school this term, is there any help that school can give, were they allocated a laptop?

**What do you do when your child is not doing schoolwork?**

Are the family still isolating, do they go out to play with friends, visit other family members or other households, go to the park, take some exercise etc.? If they have not been going out how has that impacted on their life and the children’s life, if they have been ‘out and about’ - why is this less of a risk than coming to school at least at school you would know who they were in contact with.

**Do the family need any help with accessing prescriptions, shopping, support for parent, attending or returning to work?**

Would a referral to a local support organisation be appropriate – if yes seek permission to make a referral? If you offer support and they say no, then record the support that was suggested and not taken up.

**What do you think school could do to help you send your child to school?**

Some things school might be able to do – some will not be possible within school, but it is helpful to explain what you can do and what you cannot.

* Change the start time / finish time if this is helpful to avoid many people at the school gate, could anyone else bring them to school?
* If child needs to wear a mask – is this is possible to help get them back to school?
* Show parent the changes to help keep children secure.
* Talk through bubbles / processes in school if someone is unwell with Covid.
* Sending work home until Covid is over is not a realistic prospect but it could be for a brief period whilst you talk to other professionals and look at other support.
* Are there any other people that the family might like to talk to e.g., school nurse, GP, consultants, CAMHS workers, learning mentor etc.?
* Would a discussion with the school nurse be helpful?

**Record any agreed actions when they will start and who will do them?**

From 8 March 2021 onward, if a family refuse to send their children to school this should be marked a 'U' - Unauthorised code. If, however the child attends from 19 April onward a present mark should be applied '/'

If the family still refuse to send the children to school, you need to tell them that you will seek advice from the local authority as to the next steps and that you will share the notes you have taken from today with them to help decide what may happen next. You can say that government, Hillingdon and school are keen to help families ensure that children return safely to school, but Hillingdon may take legal action if they feel that all reasonable steps have been explored and taken and the children are still out of school.

We would prefer that parents did not go down the home education route as an alternative to sending their children to school but if they do indicate this then they need to put in writing that they will elect to home educate their child(ren). Parents need to be made aware if they do this, they will lose their school place. There is no guarantee that a place would be available if they change their minds later. They would also be responsible for all financial costs. That Hillingdon or their home LA (Local Authority) will be in contact with them, and they will expect the parent to be able to demonstrate that the education is suitable for the child’s age ability and for any special education needs, they may have.

**Below are questions that have been collected from Hillingdon Headteachers over the last few weeks and the Participation team have supplied responses.**

|  |  |
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| **Questions from headteachers** | **Actions** |
| It is Important that Head Teachers are able to authorise/ not authorise an absence. However, COVID has created a new set of questions regarding attendance. What support are the LA able to provide? What are the expectations regarding the Participation team and attendance? We are hearing that we should be lenient on who we send attendance letters to due to quarantining etc?  | If school staff are in doubt, please discuss the case with the Participation Team we are here to support you and your families. This year the DfE are not publishing school level performance data. Conversations with Ofsted are more likely to praise a school for keeping a child on roll rather than their attendance if the school are putting in support and interventions to improve attendance. |
| We currently have a number of families abroad. Some families are now saying they’re not coming back until the end of March/April as they are supporting ill relatives abroad.  Previously our students were engaging in online learning. Online learning is no longer available.  Currently the absence is being marked as unauthorised. Is this correct? When do we start enforcing our attendance policy? Is it reasonable to request that the children should be in school? | The DfE recognise that it is very tricky when parents state they are coming back, however, there is no definition of cease to attend either.Schools are unable to remove a child from the school roll as the ‘off-rolling’ guidance is clear that if we can locate a family then the school cannot off roll the pupil under Ground 8 under The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006. There is no provision to take a child off roll under the circumstances mentioned ONLY if one of the other grounds are met. Schools cannot use 20 days for removing a child from roll if the child is found. Once schools/LA have obtained information that the child will return, schools cannot remove a child from roll. The Local Authority have emphasised to the DfE that it is increasingly difficult for schools to effectively safeguard children who are not in school due to children remaining abroad.  We recognise that some families are stuck overseas either because their border is closed, or no flights are going to the UK – where there is an exception the DfE have said that schools could use ‘Y’ code if borders are closed etc.This does not apply to families who state they cannot afford flights or quarantine. If families state that a member of the family has tested positive to Covid and they cannot fly this is not an exception as parents were notified 2 weeks prior to schools re-opening so plans should have been put in place to return.**For Statutory School Age Children:**If a child is removed from school without application for holiday/exceptional circumstance, then the school should:• Contact parents and find out where the children are and if they are going to return (within 6 months). **Keep on roll.**• If the parent says they are coming back, then the children need to be **kept on roll** and apply for a Holiday Penalty Notice when they return.• If the parent says they are not going to return, the school need to ascertain the new school details and confirm they are on roll there. **Child must be in educational provision before off rolling.**• If the parent says they are away for a given period and want the child taken off roll, this **cannot be done unless** the parents provide evidence that the child is receiving a full time and appropriate education. This should be checked against any school identified by the parent or parent needs to send in a letter/email saying that they are home educating and taking full responsibility for the child’s education.• There is no 20-day rule for those children whose parents have engaged with the school and identified that they will be returning (within 6 months).If a child does not return to school following a holiday/exceptional leave, then the above process starts again but the 20-day rule may apply.Schools must mark non-attendance as unauthorised. However, based on individual circumstance schools should take a view on whether or not the child can return physically with immediate effect.   |
| Do the normal attendance rules now apply? Is there an expectation that we return to managing attendance as we were pre-national lockdown?  | School attendance has become mandatory again since 8 March. However, the Local Authority appreciate that in exceptional circumstances cases should be given thorough consideration prior to any prosecution routes. These are difficult cases in difficult times. Support and engagement are our primary focus right now so that we can establish and support any underlying issues. Poor school attendance is often a symptom of wider issues for a family. Please discuss areas of concern with the Participation Team.  |
| How do we know we are being given consistent advice from the Participation Officers across the Borough? | Consistent advice is given however, often cases can differ based on individual circumstance. It is also worth noting that schools may choose to approach attendance for their school in various ways. Therefore, advice may differ between settings.  |
| Parents are more inclined to keep their children off if they are suffering with minor illnesses. Previously we would have encouraged children to come into school, however we are now concerned it may be a symptom for COVID-19. If we feel a small number of parents are taking advantage of this stance and keeping their child at home unnecessarily, particularly if there is a historical attendance concern: is there any advice you can give us to ensure it is being managed consistently and correctly?  | The Government guidance states that it is fine to send your child to school with a minor cough or cold. But if they have a fever, keep them off school until the fever goes. Please see the link below to the NHS Choices webpage entitled ‘Is my child too ill for school?’:[https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/is-my-child-too-ill-for-school/](https://gbr01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nhs.uk%2Flive-well%2Fhealthy-body%2Fis-my-child-too-ill-for-school%2F&data=04%7C01%7C%7C4f629b81b7844aecd89d08d8e964a25f%7Caaacb679c38148fbb320f9d581ee948f%7C0%7C0%7C637515965709968741%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=JNdlY8IpcRDercEJQPwl1oPkG%2FOjY2RCZdji0kzLbZg%3D&reserved=0) Could schools consider promoting this web link in communications with parents? |
| In our experience: inconsistent attendance issues with families who have either obtained private SEND diagnoses during lockdown or who are not sending their child into school due to personal preferences. Impairs ability to be firm with family as they are citing SEND (Special Educational Needs or Disability) as a reason for their absence despite all reasonable modifications and adaptations being offered. | We would suggest seeking a doctor's opinion if they believe there were 'any' reasons for continued absence from school. Unless this has been professionally enforced, we encourage attendance and communication with school. The Local Authority explain to parents very clearly about expectations and pathways a school can take for non-attendance. |
| In our experience: LBH professionals have an inconsistent knowledge of thresholds within other services in the same network, e.g., Social Workers / Participation Officers proposing that parents apply for EHCPs (Educational Health & Care Plan) without exploring all the possibilities and avenues of support first.  We are noticing an increased number of families refusing to attend school due to undiagnosed SEND and increasing barriers for school staff to assess children. However, the majority of children won’t meet the threshold for an EHCP or even ESF (Early Support Funding) and this is often a step LBH professionals suggest very quickly in the exploration process for improving attendance.  We feel that the journey to an EHCP/ ESF should be a carefully considered and methodical approach supporting families to encourage specialist involvement at a steady pace. We would like more professionals to be joined up on this view before asking for schools to do an EHCP due to attendance difficulties. When professionals rush to an EHCP it can result in difficult conversations with parents and other professionals later. | Advice may vary dependant on circumstances and information supplied to professionals by parents. Any parent can personally request a needs assessment and Local Authority officers would not be able to advise against this. If a parent claims that their child’s SEMH is significantly impacting on their child’s ability to attend school professionals should initially attempt to address this with relevant professionals, external agencies (as appropriate) including the school and parent. The definition of SEND and threshold for an Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) can be widely interpretated when a parent does not understand the resources a school has to support children. The Participation team would be keen to explore a case study on this to better understand if this advice has been inappropriately provided by officers to parents. |
| We wonder if a small group of parents are using self-isolation as a reason for poor attendance. We are monitoring how often a student has to self-isolate. We noticed a trend before the Christmas holiday.  Do you have any guidance for managing this? | It is understood that those that need to ‘shield’ have been advised to do so until the end of March. Unless a parent has received medical advice that their child cannot attend school their attendance is expected. If parents are claiming to self-isolate due to being in contact with Covid families should be advised to attend a test centre in the borough for a lateral flow test. These can be arranged almost immediately across many sites within Hillingdon. If parents are not proactive in following this route, nor do they have medical evidence to confirm this is inappropriate then non-attendance procedures should be enabled. If you require support with any cases like this the Participation Team are on hand to help. |
| Whilst all special school pupils were eligible and encouraged to attend during the lockdown, many parents chose not to send their child into school. Unfortunately, there was no code to show those pupils who were fully engaged with remote education so figures for this time period are not a true reflection of those attending education, only those attending on site education. Is there any mechanism of showing this that could be consistent across special settings? | If schools have clear evidence of engagement and parents' preference for home learning despite the on-site offer, then this should suffice for the DfE. If a pupil engaged remotely and their special educational needs catered for (as much as physically and logistically possible) then Hillingdon believe you have acted in line with Government expectations.  This year the DfE are not publishing school level performance data. Conversations with Ofsted are more likely to praise a school for keeping a child on roll rather than their attendance if the school are putting in support and interventions to improve attendance/engagement. |
| Will the Borough be making any analysis of attendance across Hillingdon schools, using new sub-codes and share with schools to get a Hillingdon picture? | This can be arranged using the DfE data return. This would be done at borough level and not broken down by school. |
| We are having to send reminders to the participation team about CMEs that we have put in. Is there a better procedure?  |
| 1. The CME (Children Missing Education) form asks so much and is quite repetitive the further you get through.  | This form is currently being reviewed by Hillingdon’s Education Safeguarding Group and changes/improvements will be shared with schools soon. |
| 2. We are being asked to do the home visits, in the past the EWO did these visits.  | Hillingdon’s Participation team are still conducting home visits regularly (several times each week) but due to increased demand on the service from all schools and partner agencies we are asking that school’s work in partnership with us to effectively safeguard pupils.  |
| 3. We are also asked to do the chasing and follow up now, when we've already stated on the CME what information we have and what we have already done. | The Participation team would be keen to understand when this has occurred so we can review the circumstances of the case. Hillingdon’s Participation team have received a significant increase in CME referrals as a direct result of Covid and Brexit. Officers have closed 670 cases since September 2020 and are currently working through an additional 350 open cases. The Local Authority have funded 3 additional full-time staff to manage this unforeseen workload so please bear with us during this time.  |
| 4. They ask us to attach a letter to the CME, but we don't tend to send a letter when they leave the country as the address we have is no longer where they live.  | We can review the form to ensure there is an option to select in this circumstance. Thank you for raising this issue with us. |

**Attendance Codes:**

Schools should return to using the attendance and absence codes in use before the outbreak (set out on page 9 of the [school attendance: guidance for schools](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-attendance)), in addition to the new category of ‘not attending in circumstances related to coronavirus (COVID-19)’:

* pupils not attending a session who meet the criteria for ‘not attending in circumstances related to coronavirus (COVID-19)’ should be recorded using code X.
* schools should continue to use code X for non-compulsory school aged pupils who are not expected to attend a session, as they did before the outbreak.

**Contact Details for Hillingdon Participation team:**

Phone Number: 01895 250858

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**Framework for complex cases on non-attendance at school:**

Things to consider:

**Increase in parent and family stressors.**

There are increased pressures on families as a result of disrupted routines and behaviours; overcrowding; isolation from family support networks; and financial pressures. Tensions in family relationships have in some cases resulted in an escalation in domestic violence.

**Exacerbated vulnerabilities for children and young people**

An extended period out of school, away from friends and trusted adults outside the home, exacerbated children and young people’s vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 outbreak. There are concerns about ‘children below the radar’ who may have become vulnerable during lockdown and are not currently known to any service.

For many children they have lost structure and routine where parents’ capacity to provide home schooling has been limited. Additionally, children at home full-time were an added pressure for the parents, particularly for carers with disabled children.

**Some children remain *‘below the radar.’***

**Adaptations for COVID-safe practice**

During COVID-19 a number of specialist services have been limited or unavailable, thus reducing the scope for, and impact of, coordinated multi-agency support for children and families.

Is the school creating clear messaging for parents about COVID-safe learning environments, and expectations of normal attendance as a source of support?

Collectively linked officers for the family and the School should review the situational risk for vulnerable children and families.

**Consider the following in decision making:**

**No COVID impact**

Risks and decisions taken in responding to risk predated COVID-19 outbreak or not affected by COVID factors.

**No Covid impact / Uncertain**

Risks and decisions taken in responding to risk predated COVID-19 outbreak or not affected by COVID factors following safeguarding checks.

**COVID-related impact**

COVID factors contributed to new or escalating risk and/or affected action by partner agencies to identify and reduce risk. Have all adaptations for COVID-safe delivery been exhausted?

It is recommended that a meeting/discussion should take place between the Participation Officer, School Attendance Officer and Designated Safeguarding Lead at the child’s school.

All parties should agree the contents of below and commit to reviewing the case and plan of support.

**CHECKLIST TO AID DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN FAMILY AND SCHOOL:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Date and time of meeting/discussion  |   |
| Who was part of the discussion, including job title? |   |
| When was the last time the child was seen?**If not seen within 10 school days, the school must conduct a home visit.** | Date, circumstance i.e., virtually / in personHow did the child present?  |
| Does the family have an open case with Social Care? If yes you **MUST** inform the Social Worker (SW) of the circumstances? Record SW view on the current school attendance.*\*this includes children open to the Children with Disabilities Team* | Yes / No – give details. |
| If No does the family have a history of Social Care involvement? If yes does the poor attendance raise new safeguarding concerns? | Yes/No - give details. |
| Does the child have a disability? With or without an EHCP. If yes give details of officers and their involvement | Yes/No - give details.  |
| Do any immediate family members have a disability? If yes, consider the child as a young carer and give details of consideration.  | Yes/No – give details. |
| Does the child have a history of poor attendance? If yes review the history and patterns – give details. | Yes/No – give details.  |
| Has any supporting evidence been received? Is it from a professional and dated recently? | Yes / No – give details.  |
| Is the absence a direct result of Covid? If yes, please summarise parents stated reason. | Yes/No – give details. |
| Record what adaptations the school have made to reassure parent that school is Covid secure.  |   |
| Have the school tried to establish when the parent plans to return the child? - Record what parent states will be acceptable for the child to return to school i.e., further reassurances / once vaccinated.  |   |
| Are the school able to offer a blended learning approach for the child based on **very exceptional** circumstances if appropriate?   | Yes / No give details of decision. |
| Detail the planned (virtual) meetings between the school and the parent and child moving forward i.e., weekly.   |   |
| Set regular review dates. This should be determined on the content of this discussion.   |  |