

## **Gloucestershire Virtual School Attendance Policy-June 2025**

### **Statutory Guidance and Responsibilities**

Statutory DfE guidance recognises that children in care start with the disadvantage of their pre-care experiences and often have special educational needs. Virtual Schools have a key role to ensure these children have the maximum opportunity to reach their full educational potential.

As corporate parents, local authorities should have high aspirations for the children they care for. For children in care, as part of a local authority's corporate parent role, the Virtual School needs to be the educational advocate that parents are for others.

Local authorities have a duty under the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children they care for. This includes a specific duty to promote the child's educational achievement, wherever they live or are educated. The authority must, therefore, give particular attention to the educational implications of any decision about the welfare of those children.

Regular school attendance is essential for pupils to get the most out of their school experience, including their attainment, wellbeing, and wider life chances. The pupils with the highest attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 have higher rates of attendance over the key stage compared to those with the lowest attainment.

### **Attendance**

This attendance policy outlines the work that Gloucestershire County Council's Virtual School undertakes to meet its duties in relation to the education of their children in care. The Virtual School Management Board has adopted this policy and all schools and settings with our children in care on roll are expected to comply.

The policy identifies the roles and responsibilities of schools, academies and other alternative providers, social workers, foster carers/parents, and the Virtual School in promoting and improving attendance for children in care.

The Virtual School is committed to improving and sustaining attendance for its children and young people in all educational settings, as it recognises the links between attendance, attainment, safeguarding, and future life opportunities.

The key to consistent attendance is undoubtedly high-quality teaching and learning experiences and positive relationships with key trusted adults and peers for our

children and young people. This is best achieved through educational settings adopting earlier intervention strategies as part of a whole-school approach to behaviour and attendance.

The primary responsibility, for ensuring that children in care go to and attend school, rests with the social worker and the parents / carers (as appropriate). Tackling non-attendance is the responsibility of schools in partnership with agencies, foster carers/parents, and the young person.

### **Virtual School Expectations**

Children in care should be given the same opportunities as all children. They will attend school from the beginning of their entitlement in Reception to the end of the summer term in Year 11. Statutory school age children are expected to have attendance of 95% plus.

#### Illness

Children are expected to attend school and should only be absent if they are too unwell to attend. When children are unwell and unable to attend, parents/carers (as appropriate) **must** notify the school of the child's absence in line with the school's policy on reporting absences. This is often expected to be a daily phone call or email. For Gloucestershire children in care who are unable to attend school for prolonged periods through medical needs, attendance concerns should be notified to Gloucestershire County Council by use of the Section 19 portal. If children are too unwell to attend school over a prolonged period, the social worker will inform the Child in Care nurse.

#### Unexplained absence

When there are unexplained absences, the Virtual School expect these to be followed up by the school's attendance officer. Virtual School staff will follow up any unexplained or unauthorised absences by contacting school attendance officers.

Any other circumstances where children may have authorised absence from school will be at the discretion of the headteacher of the school the child attends in consultation with the Virtual School.

#### Exceptional Circumstances

The Virtual Head **will not** support absence from school for children in care unless there are clearly exceptional circumstances. These circumstances must be outlined

by the social worker and show that they are significant and outweigh any disadvantages to being absent from education for a minimum time.

### Punctuality

Children in care are expected to attend school on time, and where required, will need to be brought and collected by carers or another authorised adult to ensure that this happens.

### Persistent Absence

Non-attendance will be treated as a serious matter by all agencies concerned. Any actions to support children's attendance will be taken in their best interests and will be included in their Personal Education Plan. Careful attendance monitoring and early intervention, by the school, must be taken as soon as attendance falls below 95% or there is an attendance concern.

### Use of the Personal Education Plan for promoting good school attendance

Where children have attendance of 95% plus, they will receive a termly Pupil Premium Plus reward. This will be discussed and agreed at their PEP meeting.

There will be an attendance improvement plan included in the PEP document which outlines the responsibilities of the pupil, carer/parent, social worker, school, and the Virtual School. Attendance targets will be set.

Where there are entrenched problems of non-attendance and there is no resolution, there will be an escalation to senior managers of agencies involved to consider the best course of action. The Virtual School escalation policy will be activated.

Children and young people must be involved in the discussions and their views and ideas for possible solutions considered.

The reasons for poor or significant attendance issues are scrutinised each month by the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service with the Virtual School.

## Roles and Responsibilities

### Foster Carer/Residential Home- Key worker/Parent:

- Promote the child's educational progress and attendance (we all need to be education champions).
- **Be positive about the value of education and have high expectations. Be ambitious and aspirational for children in care.**
- Ensure children in their care attend school with all appropriate equipment and uniform. Carers support the children's learning which includes the travel to and from school.
- Contact the school and social worker if there are any attendance concerns and work with the school and other professionals to resolve them.
- Arrange any medical and other appointments outside school hours wherever possible and take family holidays outside of school term time.
- Follow the school's procedures on reporting all school absence.
- Listen to the child to find out why they are not attending (for example, friendship difficulties, gaps in learning) and share these with other professionals.
- Attend and raise any concerns at the Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting and Child in Care (CiC) review meeting.

### Social Worker and IRO:

- Social workers lead the co-ordination of, and attend, Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings.
- **Be positive about the value of education and have high expectations. Be ambitious and aspirational for children in care.**
- Have primary responsibility for ensuring the child has an up-to-date Care Plan including the health arrangements and education in the form of an up-to-date PEP.
- Avoid school moves for all students and especially those in Years 10 and 11 in line with DfE guidance.
- If school moves are unavoidable, they must be authorised by the Virtual School Head via a School Move Protocol.
- Any school move and/or transition must be planned in consultation with the Virtual School and the EHCP Annual Review/SEND team as appropriate.
- Where possible, ensure that placement moves do not impact on school stability and inform the Virtual School of any placement instability. Ensure P1 and P2 commissioning forms include educational information.
- Where there are attendance concerns, listen to the child to find out why they are not attending and feedback to schools and the Virtual School so that an action plan can be developed within the PEP.

- Help carers to support the child's education and discuss any attendance concerns.
- Ensure transport is in place to support school attendance (if appropriate).
- If there are attendance concerns related to or thought to be related to health needs, the social worker must liaise with the named child in care nurse and invite them to the next PEP meeting.

#### **Education Setting:**

- Follow the Virtual School's Attendance Policy for Children in Care
- **Be positive about the value of education and have high expectations. Be ambitious and aspirational for children in care.**
- Ensure the pupil has a safe place at school and a key trusted adult.
- Ensure that there is a system of first day calling for children in care so that carers are telephoned if the child fails to attend school. For post-16 students ensure there is a system to follow up for non-attendance in line with the policies of the post-16 setting.
- Investigate and challenge the reasons for any unauthorised absence
- Inform the social worker and the Virtual School as soon as attendance becomes a concern.
- Add attendance targets to the PEP if school attendance falls below 95%.
- Complete an attendance improvement plan, as part of the PEP, if school attendance falls below 90%
- Work with the Virtual School to ensure early intervention to avoid the use of suspension and exclusion for a child in care.
- Listen to the child to find out why attendance is an issue and what the barriers to good attendance are and share these with the social worker and the Virtual School.
- Invite the foster carer, social worker, and Virtual School Education Advisor to discuss reasons for absence and strategies to improve attendance.

#### **Young Person:**

- Talk to a key adult at home about any difficulties at school.
- Attend school regularly and on time, except where absence has been authorised. Register for the morning and afternoon sessions and attend all lessons.
- Engage with all adults to support school attendance and use the Pupil Voice on their EPEP to communicate any concerns they have about attending school.

#### **Virtual School:**

- Work with children, schools, carers, social workers and IROs to monitor and improve attendance.

- Attend PEP meetings, where possible, and quality assure the process ensuring that school attendance has a high profile.
- Offer advice, guidance, and training regarding good school attendance for children in care.
- Use Pupil Premium Plus funding, where appropriate, to support good school attendance.
- Ensure, during the PEP Meeting, all school attendance concerns have been discussed and all adults are aware of their responsibilities.
- Use Virtual School's Escalation policy if there are barriers that are not being addressed by the team around the child to support good education attendance in line with KCSIE.

### **Suspension and Exclusion**

The Virtual School will work with schools to ensure early intervention to avoid the use of suspension and exclusion for children in care.

When a child in care is suspended, the school **must** notify the social worker, parent/carer (as appropriate) and the Virtual School including the dates and reasons for suspension.

The school will invite the social worker, carer/parent (as appropriate) and the Virtual School Education Advisor to the re-integration meeting. If a headteacher is considering permanent exclusion of a child in care, they will follow all DfE guidance for exclusion and notify the Virtual School Head. If the headteacher makes the decision to permanently exclude a child in care they will consider using the Virtual School child in care transfer protocol.

<https://www.goucestershire.gov.uk/schoolsnet/your-pupils/exclusions/>

<https://www.goucestershire.gov.uk/media/gxlq1nks/permanent-exclusion-children-in-care-transfer-protocol-head-teacher-guidance.pdf>

### **Elective Home Education (EHE) and Educated Other than at School (EOTAS)**

The local authority has a statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of the children they care for. This includes creating a culture of high educational aspirations and striving for accelerated progress and age-related attainment or better for children in care. There must be robust procedures in place to monitor the attendance and educational progress of these children.

When a child is in the care of Gloucestershire Local Authority, the authority will seek

to ensure the child meets their full educational potential by having access to full-time, quality first teaching and to develop their social skills with their peers and secure their wellbeing in their local community.

The principles of elective home education, where a parent chooses for philosophical reasons the right to educate their child, no longer applies when the child is in care of the local authority who shares responsibility as the corporate parent.

When children who have been electively home educated enter care, the Virtual School will support the child's social worker to find a suitable school placement as a priority.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-education-of-looked-after-children>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/elective-home-education>

EOTAS packages can only be agreed by the SEN team in exceptional circumstances for children in care and when all other avenues for education have been fully explored.

The Virtual School Head will need to be consulted and agree to an EOTAS package for a child in care.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-for-children-with-health-needs-who-cannot-attend-school>

### **Suggested School Attendance Policy Statement for Children in Care**

The Virtual School expects all schools to robustly apply their own Attendance Policy to all children in care on their school roll. We encourage our schools to adopt the following statement as part of their own attendance policies:

*The school recognises that children in care form a vulnerable group of learners. Regular attendance is essential for pupils to get the most out of their school experience, including their attainment, wellbeing, and wider life chances.*

*For the most vulnerable pupils, regular attendance is also an important protective factor and the best opportunity for needs to be identified and support provided. Children being absent from education for prolonged periods and/or on repeat occasions can act as a vital warning sign for a range of safeguarding issues.*

*For these reasons, when monitoring and following up attendance issues the school will prioritise children from vulnerable groups including children in care. If a child in care is not attending or there are concerns about their attendance, the school will*

*immediately seek advice from the Local Authority's Virtual School and the child's social worker, as well as communicating with the child and parent/carer.*

This policy is to be used in conjunction with Gloucestershire Virtual School Attendance Processes document.

This policy is reviewed annually and will next be reviewed in June 2026.