

Paperwork Feedback

for witness statements and exhibits

Thank you for completing the witness statements and supporting documents for the unpaid penalty cases.

I have reviewed the materials and would like to share some suggested improvements to help ensure your documents meet legal requirements and reflect best practice. Please consider the following points when completing your paperwork:

ALL UNAUTHORISED ABSENCES

Witness Statement

Legal and Procedural Accuracy

- The witness statement must be legally compliant (support documents and examples are available on Schoolsnet).
- Each parent must have a separate witness statement, and the children are listed together. Parents are tried separately.
- The witness statement should only reference the parent it concerns, e.g. "CHILD lives with PARENT," rather than "CHILD lives with PARENT and PARENT."
- If the parents are separated, the parent of the witness statement must be identified as a parent of the witness. Refer to the wording in the template.
- All references to signatures must include a written signature (electronic is acceptable). N.B. There is one at the bottom of the declaration and when the witness statement is complete; there is also a space for a signature in the footer of each page.
- Show the child(ren)'s date of birth when introducing them e.g. CHILD is # years old (DOB DATE)
- Distance from the school should be in miles and to one decimal place e.g., 1.2
- The definition of *regular attendance* must be a direct copy from the attendance policy and included as a full sentence.
- The attendance percentage cited should reflect the whole academic year, as shown on the attendance certificate.
- Schools should not include expected attendance percentages in policies or witness statements e.g. 97% attendance (as per guidance since 2023).
- The witness statement should include a summary of what each exhibit shows, rather than relying on the exhibits to tell the story. This helps ensure the statement provides a clear narrative, with the exhibits supporting it as evidence.
- Hearsay must be avoided; only include information that the witness has directly seen, heard, or done themselves. Statements based on second-hand accounts are not admissible in court.

Layout and Formatting

- Documents must be scanned in the correct order and orientation.
- All highlighting and unnecessary brackets should be removed from the documents.

- Font, spacing, and use of formal English should be consistent throughout, e.g. '...', see exhibit AA01.'
- Check for correct use of singular/plural forms.
- If the Headteacher is the witness, use the pronoun "me" when referring to the decision to unauthorise the absence (e.g., holiday requests).
- Dates should appear in the DD/MM/YYYY format. If an alternative format is used (e.g. "1st June 2025"), it must be applied consistently and always include the year.

Clarity and Tone

- Avoid redundant phrasing (e.g., "not authorised as an exceptional circumstance as it was not deemed exceptional"). A brief reason may be given or simply state that it did not meet the school's threshold.
- Ensure sentence flow is natural and avoid placing full stops mid-sentence, especially when referencing exhibits.
- Avoid bullet points in the statement, as the text will be read aloud.
- Ensure the documents read clearly and professionally, with logical structure and appropriate tone.
- The witness statement provides a chronological narrative of all the support in place and the events that happened; the detail should be here and the exhibits should be available as a corroborative check.

Exhibits

Legal and Procedural Accuracy

- All exhibits must be clearly labelled using the witness's initials followed by 01, 02, etc. This includes the front page of the attendance policy.
- Each exhibit must be signed and dated by the witness, with the label.
- Exhibits must appear in chronological order in the statement and appear in order when presented.
- If exhibits are the same for both parents, the same labels can be used. If there are differences, labels must reflect this accordingly.
- Attendance certificates should:
 - appear chronologically (for each child) rather than as one exhibit.
 - show the academic year's attendance, including the dates of absence and show a present mark after the absence.
 - include the Headteacher's signature and the date it was signed.
 - the pupil's full name and date of birth.
- The entire attendance policy must be included and be checked against the *Paperwork Checklist* (available on Schoolsnet).
- Notices to Improve do not need to be exhibited by schools; as they and Penalty Notices are issued by the LA, they are a part of our exhibits for the case.

Layout and Redaction

- Labels must appear clearly on the top right corner of the front page of each exhibit, so they are visible when printed.
- All sensitive information must be fully redacted, including:
 - Names of other pupils (e.g., if another child informed the school of a holiday).
 - References to the other parent (if not the subject of the current case).

OTHER/COMBINATION UNAUTHORISED ABSENCES

Support First: Evidence of Early and Sustained Intervention

As part of Gloucestershire's 'Support First' ethos, it is essential that schools demonstrate the support offered to pupils and families prior to issuing a Notice to Improve, and during the improvement period. This ensures that legal intervention is clearly a last resort, and that the school has been relentless in offering help.

Please review the following areas and ensure they are clearly evidenced in your submission:

- *Timeline of Support: Include a clear chronology of actions taken from the first signs of concern to the point of legal escalation. This should align with attendance data and show sustained effort.*
- *Relational Support: Evidence how the pupil was welcomed back, how their voice was captured, and how their wellbeing was monitored (e.g. trusted adult, buddy systems, praise postcards, incentives).*
- *Family Engagement: Show how the school worked with the family, including:*
 - *Home visits*
 - *Informal and formal meetings*
 - *Offers of Early Help or referrals to external agencies*
 - *Attendance Contracts or My Plans*
 - *Communication tailored to family needs (e.g. translated documents, flexible meeting formats)*
- *School Actions: Detail how the school adapted its approach, such as:*
 - *Modified timetables or wrap-around care*
 - *Use of Attendance Champions*
 - *Collaboration with professionals (e.g. TiC+, School Nurse, Inclusion Officer)*
 - *Consideration of Section 19 or Education Supervision Orders*
- *Evidence of Declined Support: If support was offered but not engaged with, this should be noted factually and respectfully, with dates and outcomes.*
- *Monitoring and Follow-Up: Include how the school monitored the improvement period and reviewed progress with the family.*

This section should appear in the witness statement narrative, not just in the exhibits, to ensure the court sees the full context of support offered.