Working together to improve school attendance

Working Group

Walsall Council

IMPROVE
outcomes and
customer experience

IMPROVE
employee satisfaction
and engagement

IMPROVE
service efficiency
and performance

Terms of Reference

1. Role/Purpose

The working group will provide strategic direction and leadership to ensure that there is representation from the school sector when producing an Attendance Strategy that Walsall borough can adopt.

2. Term

This Terms of Reference is effective from September 2022 and will be ongoing until terminated by agreement between the parties.

3. Membership

The working group will comprise:
- Robyn Turner, Business Development & Statutory Specialist Officer, Walsall Council
- Cathy Draper, Executive Headteacher, Short Heath Federation
- Kate Bargh, Executive Headteacher, North Star Federation
- Kelly Vaughan, Headteacher, Pool Hayes Primary School
- Catherine Lee, Headteacher, Greenfield Primary School
- Ellen Taylor, Headteacher, Little Bloxwich CE VC Primary School
- Simon Rogers, Headteacher, Walsall Academy
- Luke Salkeld, Headteacher, St Francis of Assisi Catholic College Seona Baker - Light House Federation

4. Roles and Responsibilities

Members of the working group will commit to:
- Attending working group meetings;
- Read written materials sent in advance of meeting;
- Work in good faith and collaboratively with other working group members;
- Share information and develop shared understanding of the issues with other working group members;
- Gather and relay feedback from their respective area to the workgroup whenever needed; Provide progress updates of group activities to their organisations as often as needed; Actively participate in the working group meetings.

5. Meetings

All meetings will be chaired by Robyn Turner – Walsall Council.

6. Amendment, Modification or Variation

This Terms of Reference may be amended, varied or modified in writing after consultation and agreement by working group members.
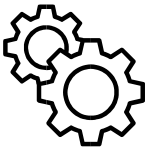
Expectations of schools

Develop and maintain a whole school culture that promotes the benefits of high attendance

Have a clear school attendance policy which all leaders, staff, pupils and parents understand

Accurately complete admission and attendance registers and have effective day to day processes in place to follow-up absence

Regularly analyse attendance and absence data to identify pupils or cohorts that require support with their attendance and put effective strategies in place

Build strong relationships with families, listen to and understand barriers to attendance and work with families to remove them

Share information and work collaboratively with other schools in the area, local authorities, and other partners when absence is at risk of becoming persistent or severe

Expectations of academy trust boards and governing bodies of maintained schools
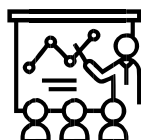
Recognise the importance of school attendance and promote it across the school's method and policies

Ensure school leaders fulfil expectations and statutory duties

Regularly reviewing attendance data, discussing and challenging trends, and helping school leaders focus improvement efforts on the individual pupils or cohorts who need it most

Ensure school staff receive adequate training on attendance

Share effective practice on attendance management and improvement across schools

Expectations of the local authority

Rigorously track local attendance data to devise a strategic approach to attendance that priorities the pupils, pupil cohorts and schools on which to provide support to and focus its efforts on to unblock area wide barriers to attendance
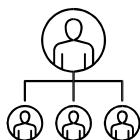
Have a School Attendance Support Team which provides:

Communication and advice

Targeting Support Meetings

Multi-disciplinary support for families

Legal Intervention

Monitor and improve the attendance of children with a social worker through their Virtual School Head

Each local authority is expected to provide the 4 core functions outlined in the new guidance free of charge to all schools. **These core functions should not, therefore, be traded or require service level agreements from schools. This does not mean local authorities cannot trade other elements of attendance management and improvement to schools and trusts, for example delivery of school level responsibilities (as set out in section 1) or training for attendance staff.**

Key principles for effective multi-agency working with the Local Authority and wider partnership
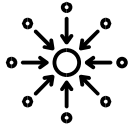
A collaborative culture across early help services that puts the needs of the pupil and wider family at the core of its action

Combined staff training and development across early help services, so all staff understand the importance of absence as a symptom of wider need and the benefits of improving attendance to effective outcomes for the whole family.

Common systems and processes across all local authority family facing teams, including single assessments, planning and case management.

Setting clear 'success measures' as part of individual and family plans and jointly owning these across all services working with the family.

An integrated management structure between local authority's School Attendance Team and other early help services.

Where families have multiple needs, aligning of the routes to support to ensure that they receive a holistic, co-ordinated package of support in order to increase the chance of successful outcomes.
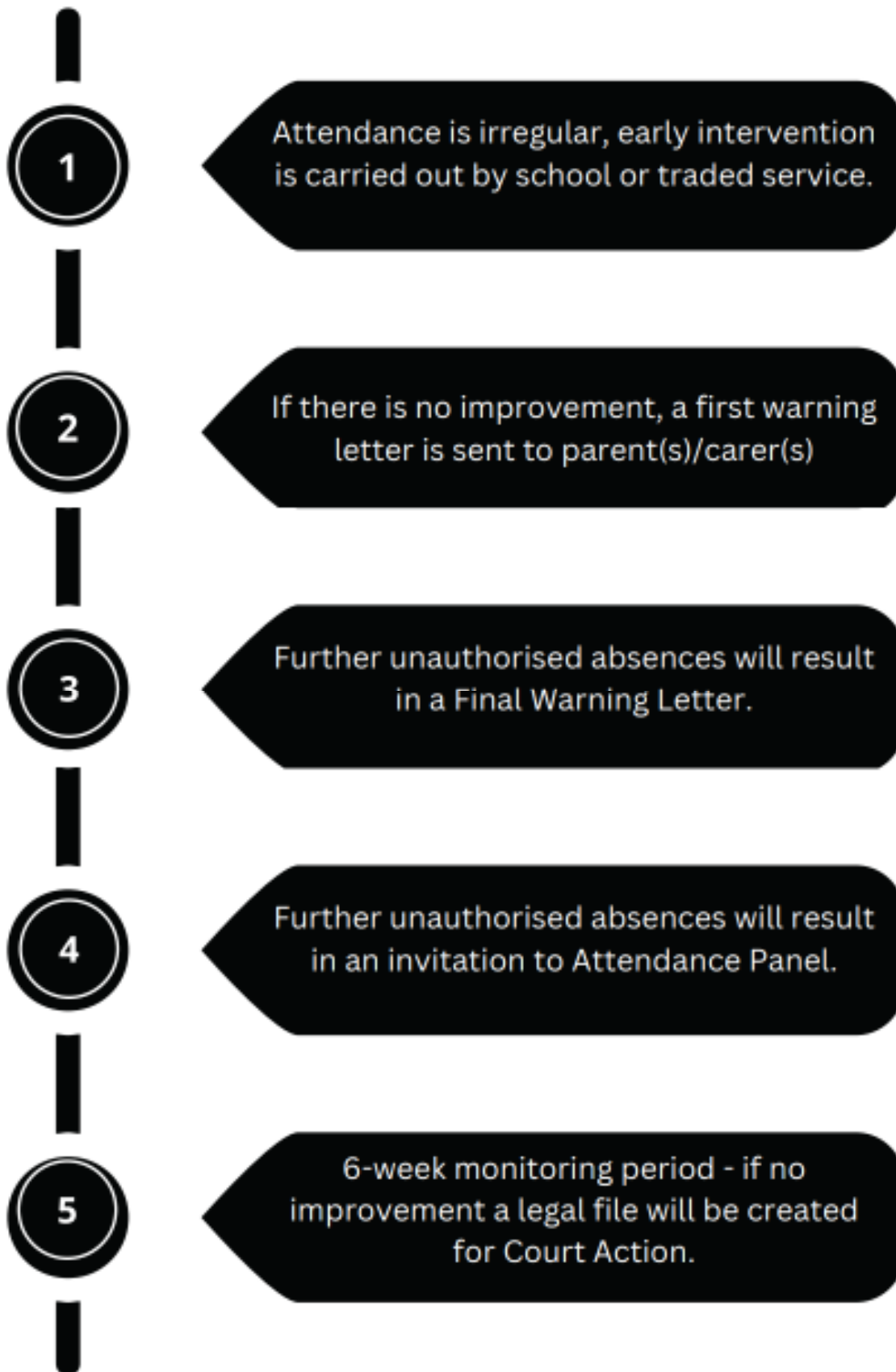
Current Local Performance

		AY21/22			
		Authorised absence rate	Overall absence rate	Unauthorised absence rate	Percentage of persistent absentees (10% or more sessions missed)
West Midlands		5.40%	7.50%	2.10%	26.20%
England		5.50%	7.60%	2.10%	22.50%
North West	Bolton	5.00%	6.90%	1.13%	29.10%
	Rochdale	4.70%	7.60%	2.20%	25.40%
	Tameside	4.50%	7.30%	2.70%	23.10%
Yorkshire and The Humber	Doncaster	5.40%	8.40%	2.50%	26.10%
	Rotherham	5.20%	8.30%	3.00%	25.80%
East Midlands	Derby	5.30%	7.80%	2.45%	23.70%
	Dudley	5.70%	8.00%	2.20%	26.00%
	Sandwell	4.70%	7.40%	2.60%	25.30%
West Midlands	Stoke-on-Trent	4.70%	8.20%	3.50%	28.20%
	Telford and Wrekin	5.60%	7.80%	2.20%	25.20%
	Walsall	5.00%	7.60%	2.70%	26.00%
	Wolverhampton	4.50%	7.00%	2.50%	23.20%
East of England	Peterborough	5.20%	7.90%	2.70%	26.20%

Current Local Performance

A comparison between the overall absence rates and Persistently Absent rates for Walsall Local Authority, its statistical neighbours, and the national absence rates is shown in the graph above.

For statistical purposes, Walsall is compared to the Local Authorities of Bolton, Rochdale, Tameside, Doncaster, Rotherham, Derby, Dudley, Sandwell, Stoke-on-Trent, Telford and Wrekin, Wolverhampton, and Peterborough. The Government designates statistical neighbours to every Local Authority which are deemed to have similar characteristics.

Current process for Attendance Management

1 Attendance is irregular, early intervention is carried out by school or traded service.

2 If there is no improvement, a first warning letter is sent to parent(s)/carer(s)

3 Further unauthorised absences will result in a Final Warning Letter.

4 Further unauthorised absences will result in an invitation to Attendance Panel.

5 6-week monitoring period - if no improvement a legal file will be created for Court Action.

Purpose

Walsall Council is committed to working with schools and other partners to improve school attendance and punctuality across the Local Authority. Underpinning this commitment is the understanding that there is a strong correlation between good school attendance and achieving positive outcomes for children. There is a wide range of evidence as to the health and well-being benefits of school-age education, and the Chief Medical Officers have been clear that time out of school can hold back young people's development and well-being.

It is recognised that attending school regularly can be a protective factor for children and young people. Learning from serious case reviews highlights the importance of having access to a school place to a child's life and the need to place school life at the heart of multi-agency planning and provision. It is therefore important to ensure that schools and settings offer a safe environment, positive relationships, high-quality teaching and learning, and opportunities to develop social and emotional skills.

In our work with children and families, we are committed to ensuring that all staff advocate the child's right to a full-time and efficient education. This means that our work with children, parents, and schools should be underpinned by the key principle that any child, regardless of their characteristics, needs, or the type of school they attend, deserves access to a full-time, high-quality education that allows them to flourish and paves the way to a successful future.
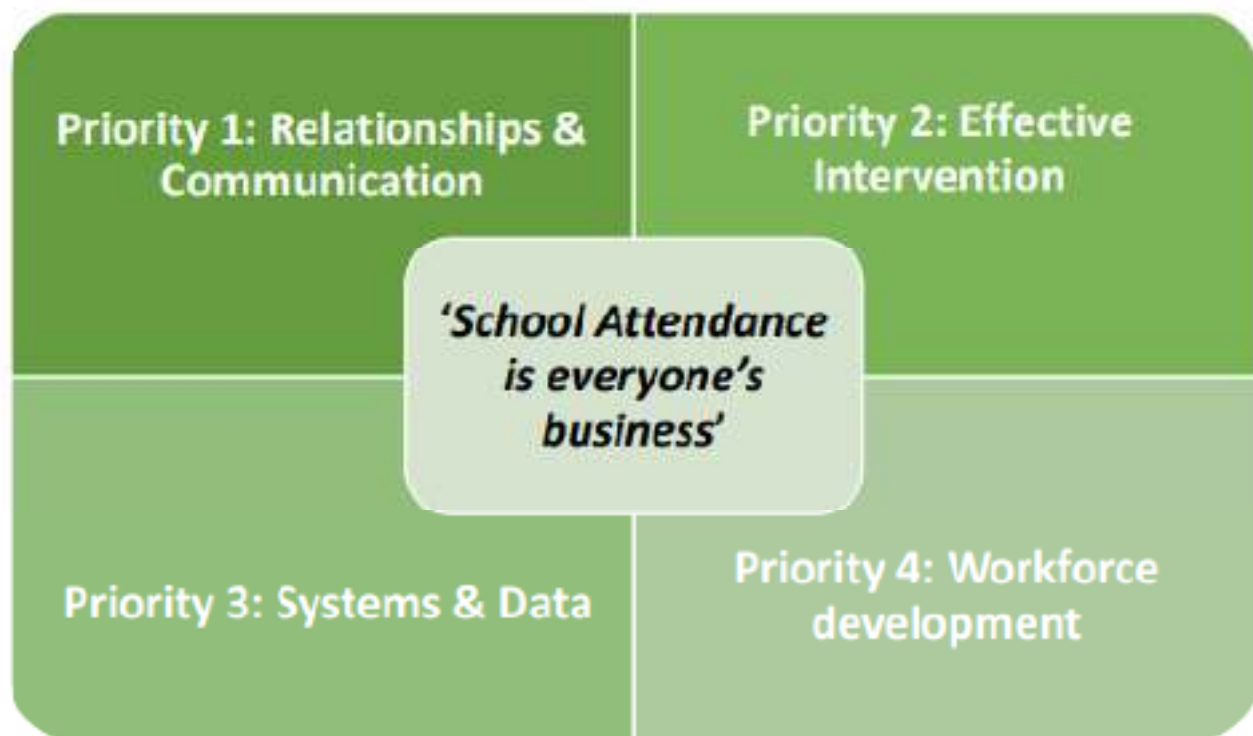
An Attendance Strategy needs to be developed to help the Local Authority, schools, settings, and other services understand what we need to do to work in a more coherent way, making the best use of resources available, in order to ensure that:

- All children and young people can make the most of the opportunities provided by attending school;

- Systems are developed to provide the LA with accurate and contemporaneous attendance data;

- Data is used to identify patterns and trends and systems are responsive to these supporting schools to intervene early and prevent escalation of concerns;

- Through training and guidance, the workforce understands the LA's responsibilities for school attendance, they know who to contact for support and are confident to address concerns about school attendance;

  - Responses to concerns about pupil absence at an individual, institutional, and locality level are co-ordinated across teams. Schools, parents, and children are clear about what support is on offer as well as their responsibilities.

As a result:

- Teams across the LA take collective responsibility for improving school attendance and there is consistent response to planning;

- Overall attendance improves and levels of persistent absence reduce;

- Children are safeguarded because they attend school regularly and any issues are identified and responded to at the earliest opportunity;

- Parents understand the contribution they can make to their child's wellbeing, achievement and good attendance and know where to go to access help and support.

Strategic Priorities

Priority 1: Relationships & Communication

Priority 2: Effective Intervention

'School Attendance is everyone's business'

Priority 3: Systems & Data

Priority 4: Workforce development

Strategic Priorities

Priority 1: Relationships & Communication – We will consult with a broad range of stakeholders to identify what is working well, and what they are worried about in order to determine what happens next.

Poor school attendance is more than one incident or experience; it is a result of a series of events, interactions, and experiences inside and outside the school walls. There are many stakeholders involved who experience and respond to the challenge of school absence in different ways, bringing different perspectives and approaches to change. Understanding how these factors and stakeholders relate to one another and identifying underlying patterns can help us look for opportunities to intervene early and reduce the likelihood of escalation.

How we will do it:

- Consult with schools, children, parents, and carers to understand the barriers as well as enablers to good school attendance and what they need help with to achieve this;

- Work in partnership with schools to give clear messages about school attendance to parents through a variety of methods;

- Co-ordinate strategies and services to ensure that messages on attendance are consistent and that information is shared appropriately;

- Connect with targeted services including Voluntary Community Sector partners to understand current service delivery and how their work can support the promotion of good school attendance.

Discussion points:

1.1 Should a survey be set up for the parents/carers and pupils linked to the schools within the working group? Could this include schools within the same trusts/clusters as the working group schools? The purpose of the survey would be to understand the barriers and enablers to good school attendance and what support is needed to achieve this. ✅

1.2 Do Schools feel that they would benefit from:
- Weekly/Monthly Newsletters - separate from the current updates circulated to schools?
  Annual training (September?) for Attendance Leads?
- Monthly ' drop-in' sessions (virtually?) or circulation of FAQ?
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1.3 Co-produce an Attendance Policy for the LA which clearly outlines the staged approach to improving attendance, strategies to improve attendance etc.?

1.4 Do Schools feel that they have a clear understanding of support available from other services/agencies/professionals?

1.5 Would a 'model attendance policy' or policy checklist be useful? ✅

Strategic Priorities

Priority 2: Effective Intervention – We will create a clearly defined pathway for schools, families and other professionals to support them to set clear expectations about attendance, identify and support vulnerable groups and respond to attendance concerns at the earliest opportunity.

How we will do it:

We will review and revise current practice models and guidance so that:

- All plans seek to identify and tackle the root causes of absence;

- The link between school attendance and safeguarding is clearly understood;

- Through clear signposting schools, children and their families have access to appropriate support making full use of Voluntary Community Sector partners;

- Consistently apply the full range of parental responsibility measures where required.

- There is a multi-agency response for the most vulnerable learners where interventions have not supported them to access a full-time education

Discussion Points:

2.1 Discuss current practice, warning letter system, and attendance panel. What needs to change, and what is effective? ✅

2.2 New referral route for statutory intervention ✅

2.3 Parental Responsibility Measures - uniform parenting contract? Discuss ESO.

2.4 Termly Targeting Support Meetings - inform of allocations. What should these meetings look like? ✅

2.5 Vulnerablity Panel?

Strategic Priorities

Priority 3: Systems & Data - Through access to contemporaneous data, the LA will clearly understand the current local picture and how this compares to national trends. As a result, the system will be responsive to emerging needs. LA Teams will respond to the data strategically, offering tailored support at a locality, institutional, and pupil level.

How we will do it:

- Drive forward the live data feed to enable the use of contemporary data to target interventions and reduce absence.

- Develop a clear system for monitoring all relevant data that outlines respective teams' roles and responsibilities and frequency of the activity.

- Share data and emerging patterns and trends routinely with school leaders and attendance leads individually and collectively through networks and in training.

- Support schools to understand and own their data, analyse it accurately, identify trends and compare it with the national picture, have a clear picture of the reasons for absence, understand their attendance profile, and have in place actions for improvement.

Discussion Points:

3.1 New DfE data sharing - any concerns or queries arising from Schools?

3.2 Current data sharing - consultation in June with new proposals. Existing Statutory Requirements of Schools to make returns to the LA in line with the Education Regulations 2006 including: o   The name and address of any pupil who fails to attend school regularly or has missed school for 10 school days or more without the absence being recorded as authorised. Local authorities should agree on the frequency this must be shared with all schools in their area.

This should be done no less frequently than once per calendar month.
   o   A letter sent by the LA to parent(s)/carer(s) when notification is received?

3.3 The LA has to track data - how should the findings be shared with Schools?

3.4 Are Schools confident with analysing their data, would training be beneficial?

Strategic Priorities

Priority 4: Workforce development - Everyone who works with children, young people and their families has a role to play. These roles should complement each other and work together to support raised attendance. In order to achieve this, we will seek to develop the skills of the workforce ensuring they have the knowledge, understanding and skills to meet the needs of our young people and respond effectively to concerns about school attendance.

How we will do it:

- Create an offer of training, support, and guidance to schools based on consultation, learning from audits, and needs analysis. This will include training for governors and academy Trusts.

- Create a training offer for staff in other services to ensure our partners understand their role in supporting good school attendance and understand where to access further advice and support.

- Identify, collate and share good practices highlighting the impact of those interventions for children and their families as well as on school standards

- Develop an attendance self-assessment for schools to evaluate the whole school approach to managing school attendance

Discussion Points:

4.1 Training - what is needed and for who?

4.2 Which services do Schools currently struggle with?

4.3 How is good practice usually shared between Schools? How could this improve?

4.4 Self-assessment - would this support Schools to identify areas of improvement?