Norfolk Children’s Services Attendance Strategy – ‘School Attendance is everyone’s business’

Final Draft November 2021

“School life provides a crucial platform where the critical components of healthy development can be nurtured. It is not just a place of academic learning; it is somewhere to belong, to achieve, to have meaning and purpose and is an arena for social and emotional development in preparation for adulthood. This SCR requires a culture shift both in terms of how multi-agency services value the multi-faceted benefits of school and a redesign of service intervention so that schools are placed at the very heart of multiagency provision.” (NSCP Serious Case Review)

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1. Purpose

2.1 Norfolk County 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 wellbeing 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 wellbeing.

2.2 It is recognised that attending school regularly can be a protective factor for children and young people. Learning from national and Norfolk Safeguarding Children Partnership serious case reviews and child practice reviews highlight 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.

2.3 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.

2.4 This Attendance Strategy has been 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 consequence:

- 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.

2.5 This strategy has been developed by the School Attendance Strategy Working Group. The strategy will distil learning from audit, case reviews and relevant local and national developments.

The strategy links to the following workstreams and activity:

- Early Help & Prevention
- Virtual School for In Care and Previously in Care including the extension of the role of the Virtual School for Children with a Social Worker
- DfE Well-being in Education Grant
- Family Network Advisers
- Pathfinder
- Vulnerable Adolescent Strategy
- Child exploitation

2.6 This strategy is informed by the learning gathered from participating in the joint DfE & Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities action learning set regarding whole family work and school attendance and a meeting with representatives from the DfE and regional attendance leads during the Autumn Term 2021. The strategy working group mapped the current practice against the DfE advice *Improving school attendance: support for schools and local authorities* to identify strengths as well as the areas for further development. The full mapping can be found at Appendix 1.

2.7 The delivery of the strategy will be driven by Norfolk’s Vital Signs for Children which frame practice expectations as follows:
FLOURISH frames the outcomes we want to see for the Children and Young People we work with:

- Family and friends
- Learning
- Opportunity
- Understood
- Resilience
- Individual
- Safe & secure
- Healthy

2.8 The key priorities of the Strategy are described and developed in Section 5. They can be summarised as:
2. Context

The roles and responsibilities of school, parents and local authorities are clearly defined with statutory guidance and advice as follows:

Statutory guidance & advice

- Improving school attendance: support for schools and local authorities
- School behaviour and attendance: parental responsibility measures
- Children missing education
- Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children
- Supporting pupils with medical conditions at school
- Keeping children safe in education
- Alternative provision
- Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school
- School exclusion

Local guidance & policy framework

- School attendance – guidance for schools
- Attendance procedures
- Children missing education – guidance for schools
- Children missing education - procedures

In Norfolk, the Local Authority’s statutory responsibilities for school attendance and tracking pupil movement are overseen by teams within the Education, Quality
Assurance, Intervention & Regulation Service and there is a clear offer of training, support and guidance available to schools. Moreover, school attendance has been a priority for Children’s Services leadership and this strategy has been developed with representatives from across Children’s Services Team including Family Support, Virtual School, Community & Partnerships and YOT.

In response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Local Authority implemented robust processes to track and ensure that vulnerable children receiving the support of a social worker were attending education settings whenever possible. As a consequence of the hard work of schools, social workers and the Attendance Team, absence rates for these children fell consistently during the period of partial school closures. Attendance rates for children with a social worker remained above the national average and the percentage of children with a social worker attending school was amongst the highest in the region.

Despite the efforts made to improve pupil attendance, this continues to be a significant challenge for many schools in Norfolk. Norfolk’s figures for both overall and persistent absence are consistently higher than the national average and higher than in many other local authorities that are statistically very similar to Norfolk. The issue is one that affects secondary, primary and special schools alike; too many children are persistently absent from school. Comparative data can be found at Appendix 3 of this document.

3. What is working well?

4.1 To support the development of this strategy, current practice has been mapped against the DfE advice *Improving school attendance: support for schools and local authorities* to identify strengths as well as the areas for further development. The full mapping can be found at Appendix 1. Whilst it is clear from the data that we need to do more to improve rates of school attendance in Norfolk, the following strengths were identified:

4.2 **Response to partial school closures**: In response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Local Authority implemented robust processes to track and ensure that vulnerable children receiving the support of a social worker were attending education settings whenever possible. As a consequence of the hard work of schools, social workers and the Attendance Team, absent rates for these children fell consistently during the period of partial school closures. Attendance rates for children with a social worker remained above the national average and the percentage of children with a social worker attending school was amongst the highest in the region.

4.3 **Support to schools**: The school attendance guidance, training and toolkit created by the Attendance Service provides a framework for schools to prevent and address poor school attendance including pathways for planning and legal intervention. Every school in Norfolk is allocated an Attendance and Entitlement Officer (AEO) who can provide pupil specific consultation. In order to share good practice, the Attendance Service co-ordinates attendance networks that are held on
a termly basis. In addition to the training and guidance available, the service provides a duty line that operates every day during term time.

4.4 Legal Intervention: The Attendance Team ensures that the full range of Parental Responsibility Measures including fast track, parenting contracts, parenting orders, education supervision orders, penalty notices, school attendance order and prosecution are utilised in order to secure regular school attendance. There is clear process and policy outlining how and when the Attendance Service will use its enforcement powers and how schools will refer for intervention. We support schools with implementing the fast-track case management system for any poor attenders whose absence is recorded as unauthorised. The fast-track paperwork has been designed in a way to incorporate a parenting contract as well as a signs of safety approach.

4.5 Multi-agency working: We are routinely sharing information about children with a social worker with schools and request information from them about attendance to identify children that are persistently absent and sharing this with the relevant teams who are supporting those children.

In July 2021, School Attendance was a Key Line of Enquiry for Children’s Services Senior Leadership Team and a dip sample of cases from across all localities undertaken to determine whether multi-agency plans were effective to address attendance where this was an issue. The dip-sample provided some examples of good practice whilst assessed need was not always reflected in the child’s plan, where it was, attendance did appear to improve.

In response to the learning from this work, we are currently piloting attendance surgeries for FAST & Family Support Teams in City. These surgeries will provide an opportunity for practitioners to meet with members of the Attendance Team to discuss cases where attendance is of concern and identify strategies for addressing these barriers. The pilot will run initially in this area in the Autumn Term 2021 and be rolled out as part of the Attendance Strategy being developed.

A School Attendance Strategy Working Group was formed in September 2021 with representatives from across Children’s Services Team including Family Support, Virtual School, Community & Partnerships, YOT to distil learning and develop an attendance strategy.

The importance of children having access to a full-time, suitable education quick guide (April 2021) was revised in April 2021 and disseminated to all Children’s Services staff. The document highlights the central importance of school attendance along with clear practice expectations.

Joint protocol between health services and schools in respect of the management of pupil absence from school when medical reasons are cited, developed in 2016 in response to learning from a serious case review. It provides a framework for information sharing between health professionals and schools in Norfolk to promote the health and well-being of school children in relation to the management of sickness absence.
4.6 **Children not on a school roll:** A robust policy framework is in place to support the LA to fulfil its statutory duties in relation to children missing education. As a result, we have an up-to-date and accurate CME register and processes for tracking pupil movement within and outside of Norfolk. We have linked with additional partners such as HMRC to increase the range of checks we have available to trace missing children and have developed systems to ensure that children who are not on a school roll have access to education provision.

There has been a significant investment in staffing to support the work of Service to Home Educators since December 2020. Whilst we have seen a rise in the numbers of home-educated children within the County, additional staffing has supported the LA to make contact with home educating families, become more responsive to needs and intervene in a timely manner when there are concerns about home education.

4.7 **Support for Looked After and Previously Looked After Children:** The support for children who are looked after and previously looked after provided by the Virtual School is a strength. Following Ofsted’s focused visit in October 2021, inspectors concluded:

*The virtual school is a vital part of the team around each child in care. Advisers work creatively and tirelessly to ensure the best educational support for the child. When children have to move placement, every effort is made not to disrupt their education.*

Attendance figures have been impacted by COVID 19 and subsequent school closures. Prior to the pandemic, attendance for Norfolk looked after children in the Autumn Term of 2019 was 94.1%, compared to 94.5% nationally. In the Spring 2020 Term, up until national school closures, provisional calculations suggest attendance was 92.8%. Of those children and young people absent, 2.2% were unauthorised absences.

As schools returned in Autumn 2020, provisional calculations suggest attendance was 94% in Norfolk, with no national comparators available, before school closures again in Spring 2021. As schools returned again in Summer 2021, provisional calculations suggest attendance was 91.3%.

This is a priority area for the Virtual School. The weekly data dashboard provides analysis and has been recently refined to ensure further detail is available. Advisers within the team follow up individual cases and attend the PEP Meetings to ensure there are plans in place to increase attendance and this is monitored. PEP training has been reviewed and will include an increased focus on attendance and the barriers and strategies.

4. **Strategic Priorities**
**Priority 1: Relationships & Communication** – We will consult with a broad range of stakeholders to identify what is working well, what they are worried about and 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 including media campaigns
- 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.

**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 at all points of transition and respond to attendance concerns at the earliest opportunity.
All pupils

Trauma informed practice
Consistent and restorative approaches to addressing challenging behaviour
A strong focus on relational practice

Targeted Groups

Early Identification
Mental health and well-being support
Engaging with families
Multi-agency and community sector response
Academic engagement and support

Staff

Attendance networks
Inclusive school leadership & whole school approaches

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;
• family network and trauma informed approaches are embedded in practice;
• through clear signposting schools, children and their families have access to appropriate support making full use of Voluntary Community Sector partners;
• we continue to 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.

In order to test the effectiveness of practice models, we will undertake some pilot programmes with targeted schools.

Priority 3: Systems & Data - Through access to contemporaneous data, the LA will have a clear understanding of the current local picture and how this compares to national trends. As a result, the system will be responsive to emerging need and LA Teams respond to the data strategically, offering tailored support in response 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 which outlines respective teams’ roles and responsibility 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.
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:

• Enhance the existing offer of training, support and guidance to schools based on consultation, learning from audit 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.
• Provide opportunities for practitioners to problem solve, reflect on practice, coach and shadow others.
• Identify, collate and share good practice 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.

5. Monitoring & Oversight

An Action Plan has been developed and will be updated on a regular basis. This will address the priorities identified within the Strategy.