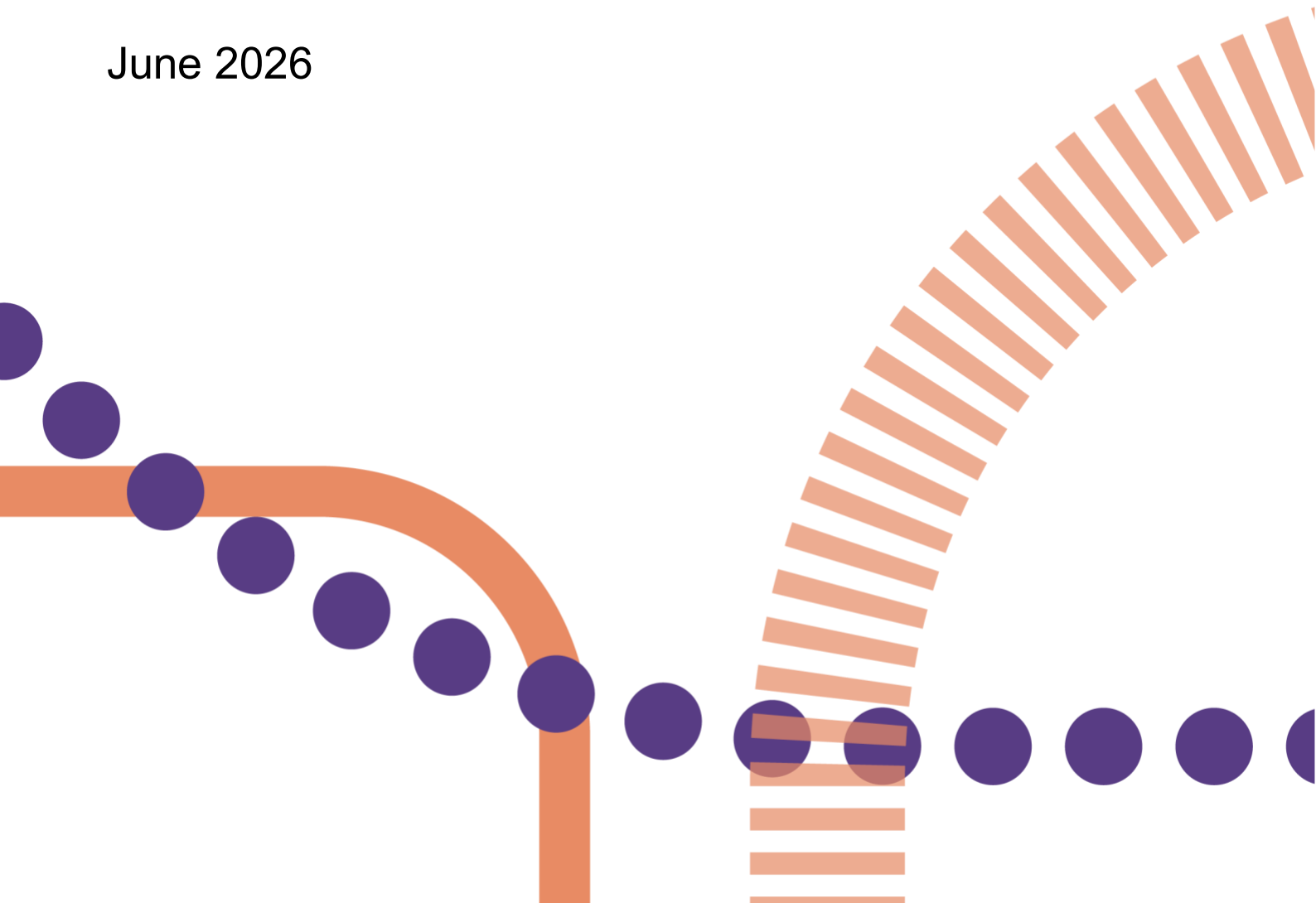


Safeguarding children not in school

Why being out of school increases the safeguarding risks for vulnerable children

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Introduction

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 seeks to strengthen the ability of local authorities to fulfil their existing education and safeguarding duties toward children in their areas who are not in school (including home educated children). In light of these forthcoming changes, this paper sets out learning for safeguarding practitioners about why being out of school increases the safeguarding risks for some vulnerable children.

Elective home education is not inherently a safeguarding risk, and many parents choose to educate their children at home thoughtfully and with positive outcomes. Additionally, for some children school may not feel like a protective environment for a variety of reasons, including factors relating to neurodiversity, mental health, social anxiety and bullying. The learning in this paper relates to circumstances where children have low school attendance or are electively home educated or missing education alongside additional vulnerabilities.

Who is this document for?

Multi-agency practitioners and managers working in universal services such as schools, health services, police, and social care settings as well as voluntary organisations and services relating to youth wellbeing, substance use and youth justice.

How to use this resource

Multi-agency practitioners should use this resource as a practical guide to strengthen their approach to identifying and responding to safeguarding concerns around children who are home educated, have low school attendance or who are known to be missing education.

Why is it important for children and young people?

The law entitles every child of compulsory school age to an efficient, full-time education suitable to their age, ability, aptitude, and any special educational need they may have. It is the legal responsibility of every parent to make sure their child receives that education either by attendance at a school or by education otherwise than at a school.

School attendance: Where parents decide to have their child registered at school, they have an additional legal duty to ensure their child attends that school regularly. A pupil is persistently absent when they miss more than 10% of school. A pupil is severely absent if they miss more than 50% of school.

Elective Home Education (EHE) is a term used to describe a choice by parents to provide education for their compulsory school age children at home (or at home and in some other way which they choose) instead of sending them to school full-time.

Children Missing Education (CME) are children of compulsory school age who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school. CME includes children who are in the process of applying for a school place; have been offered a school place for a future date but have not yet started; are receiving elective home education that has been assessed as unsuitable; or have been recorded as CME for an extended period, for example where their whereabouts is unclear or unknown.

What is the evidence base?

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published a report about [safeguarding children in elective home education](#) in May 2024. It looked at 27 serious safeguarding incidents involving 41 children who suffered abuse or neglect and were being electively home educated.

- 6 children died and 35 were seriously harmed
- 10 children suffered physical abuse
- 8 children had their access to food restricted, were malnourished and underweight
- 10 children suffered sexual abuse
- 20 children experienced physical neglect

The report explored the learning from safeguarding reviews about the risk of harm factors and actions that could be taken at a local and national level to help protect vulnerable home educated children, including the introduction of a national register.

Learning from “[Why did it take so long to respond?](#)” (April 2026), the Panel’s thematic analysis about child neglect also highlights the importance of education as a protective factor. The analysis highlighted that poor school attendance also reduces the protective factor of school and removes other indicators of neglect from the sight of key practitioners. The report notes that for school aged children, it is often the education practitioners who are the first to notice early signs of abuse or neglect. Therefore, when attendance is poor, that oversight cannot be relied upon to be as effective.

Key facts and figures

Between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025, 274 serious incident notifications and rapid reviews were submitted to the Panel. There were 94 notifications for children who were school age (4- to 15-years-old) at the time of the incident.

Twelve of the school age children (13%) were not enrolled at a school at the time of the incident, with 7 of these children receiving elective home education (EHE).

[Data](#) published by the Department for Education (DfE) in February 2026 indicates that:

- 126,000 children were electively home educated in the 2025 autumn term.
- 175,900 children were EHE at any point during the 2024/25 academic year.

For children who attend school, national data continues to show sustained concerns in relation to school attendance, including high levels of persistent and severe absence. This reinforces the importance of treating concerning attendance patterns as a safeguarding as well as an educational issue.

DfE published [data](#) for the last academic year also showed that:

- 18.14% of pupils were persistently absent in 2024/25 (i.e. missed 10% or more sessions). In 2018/19, 10.86% of pupils were persistently absent.
- 2.39% of pupils were severely absent in 2024/25 (i.e. missing 50% or more sessions). In 2018/19, 0.85% of pupils were severely absent.

Common issues

Safeguarding reviews for children who are not in school and have experienced abuse or neglect highlight several common issues and themes. Practitioners should have regard to the key issues below and the examples in the blue boxes seek to identify some of the challenges that may be encountered.

- **Reduced visibility** – children who are missing education or who are home educated may have weak or no links with people outside the immediate family. This means that signs of abuse, neglect, or distress may not be seen by any professionals i.e. school nurses, safeguarding leads, teachers, and pastoral staff. While learning from reviews shows that children were sometimes visible to individual services (such as health or housing) they were not recognised collectively as missing education. This lack of shared understanding meant that no agency identified the increased safeguarding risk created by the child's absence from school and their resulting reduced visibility.

- There are fewer adults outside the home are regularly checking on the child.
- Behavioural, emotional, or physical indicators of harm are less likely to be noticed.
- Professionals lose a key opportunity to intervene early.

- **Unknown to all services** – children missing education, unlike those who are home educated, are often unknown to all services and not monitored. Local authorities do have a duty under section 436A of the Education Act 1996 to make arrangements to identify, as far as it is possible to do so, children missing education. Safeguarding practitioners are encouraged to link up with CME teams, which should be in place in every local authority.

- Children may have never attended school.
- Children may have never been registered anywhere.

- **Loss of support** - schools provide children with routine, relationships, and opportunities to talk. Some children who are missing education, removed from school for the purposes of home education, or have low attendance, may have limited opportunities for disclosure as daily points of contact with teachers, lunchtime staff and peers are not available to them. This lack of consistent access to pastoral support can prevent the school from noticing deterioration.

- Children can lose access to trusted adults or peers to whom they might disclose worries, concerns or abuse.
- Children can miss routine welfare checks (health, mental health and wellbeing).
- Teachers and peers are unable to flag concerns.

- **Multiple vulnerabilities** – for some children struggling with a range of vulnerabilities, withdrawing them from school (e.g. for home education or if they stop attending school), can increase the level of risk and reduce oversight at exactly the wrong time.

- Domestic abuse.
- A parent struggling with their mental health.
- A disability or special educational needs without receiving adequate support.

- Previous involvement from children’s social care.

- **Causes for concern** – learning from safeguarding reviews demonstrates that some parents intentionally withdraw their child from school.

- To avoid contacts with multi-agency practitioners.
- To conceal incidents of neglect or abuse.
- To limit a child’s access to the outside world including the internet, social networks, and peers and at times.
- In response to a safeguarding referral being made by the school.

- **Neglect** - persistent low attendance is often one of the earliest indicators of neglect. Where low attendance was treated primarily as an education issue, opportunities for earlier safeguarding intervention were missed.

- Irregular routines.
- Unmet basic needs.
- Missed health appointments.
- Parental explanations that changed over time.

- **Exploitation** - not attending school at all and not receiving a suitable education otherwise than at school, can increase a child’s vulnerability to all types of exploitation. As outlined in the Government’s ‘[Working together to improve school attendance](#)’ guidance: “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. Research has shown associations between regular absence from school and a number of extra familial harms, including crime (the proportion of children that had been cautioned or sentenced for any offence that had ever been persistently absent was 81% and for serious violence offences was 85%).”

- Criminal exploitation
- Sexual exploitation
- Modern slavery

Hallmarks of good practice

- **Multi-agency working** – no single person or agency can fully understand a child’s circumstances and lived experience on their own. To ensure children receive timely and appropriate support, agencies should work together to identify whether a child is home educated, missing education or has low attendance.

When engaging with children, all agencies should always ask about education arrangements and school attendance. Evidence shows that it is often this type of interaction between a practitioner and a child that leads to uncovering the bigger picture of the child’s lived experience.

- **The role of health** - ensure the active involvement of health practitioners and services (e.g. GPs) as they may sometimes be the only professionals who see a child who is home educated, missing education or has low school attendance.

Poor mental health can be a driver for low school attendance. Appropriate mental health support options should be considered for the child or young person concerned.

- **Building trust** - maintaining regular and meaningful contact with the child (not just the parent) and where possible ensuring that the contact is face-to-face.

Ensure the child has safe opportunities to speak, including private conversations where needed, and have early engagement with the whole family when parents consider home education (this can help to build trust and clarify responsibilities).

- **Identifying risk** - treat persistent or worsening low attendance and children missing education as potential safeguarding indicators, rather than solely education concerns, and ensure these patterns and any chronology that has been put together are discussed within multi agency safeguarding arrangements.

Recognise vulnerability and contextual risk factors including neurodiversity in the child and parents, parental mental or physical health, and religious and cultural isolation.

- **Information-sharing** - information should be actively shared between health, education, police, and children's social care as well as understanding and ensuring clear roles and responsibilities amongst practitioners when concerns arise.

Strengthen and train relevant EHE teams so that they understand how to escalate concerns and work closely with multi-agency partners.

- **Assurance and oversight** – put in place clear mechanisms to track vulnerable children who have been removed from school, are not home educated or enrolled elsewhere, and to identify vulnerabilities at the point of removal from school. Where concerns exist develop multi-agency plans for support and intervention.

Use appropriate legal powers where relevant, including School Attendance Orders.

Reflective questions for practitioners

- Do we have a clear enough picture of the child's day to day lived experience, learning, relationships, and environment? Are we confident that home education is a positive choice rather than an attempt to avoid professional oversight?
- Are we in contact with multi-agency professionals (health, early help, community services) who can provide alternative insight into the child's welfare?
- Are there indicators of additional vulnerabilities, such as parental ill health, domestic abuse, neglect, or social isolation?

- Do all agencies hold the same understanding and information about the child's situation, or are there inconsistencies?
- For those children who are missing education, what attempts have been made to locate or see the child? Are there any signs of exploitation or trafficking?
- Are moves between areas, schools, or services being effectively managed, preventing children from falling through gaps?
- Is there a clear lead professional or named contact coordinating information?
- Have we properly explored and balanced parental rights with our safeguarding duties?
- Has the child previously struggled with attendance, behaviour, or exclusions that signal unmet needs relating to neurodiversity or mental health factors?

Reflective questions for leaders

- Do we have an accurate and up to date picture of the children in our area who are electively home educated, missing education or persistent low attendees at school?
- Are we confident that information about electively home educated children, those missing education or that have low school attendance is being shared appropriately across all agencies?
- Do all practitioners routinely ask about education when engaging with a child/parents?
- Do multi-agency practitioners know when and how to escalate safeguarding concerns relating to electively home educated children?
- Does the partnership know which electively home educated children may be particularly vulnerable (e.g., those with previous child protection concerns or known to early help)?
- Are we confident that professional curiosity is consistently applied when engaging with relevant families?
- Do we have a clear process for seeing a child alone where concerns exist?
- Do leaders actively model a culture where curiosity, respectful challenge, and escalation are expected?
- How regularly do leaders review relevant data, themes, and emerging risks?
- Do leaders receive assurance that EHE and CME work contributes to wider safeguarding priorities (e.g., attendance, contextual safeguarding, exploitation)?

Case study

The following example from a safeguarding review demonstrates how missing education can be linked to risk of exploitation.

A 17-year-old boy who lived with his mother and younger sibling suffered significant injuries following an attack by intruders. This was linked to child criminal exploitation.

The family arrived in the country when the child was about 13. They experienced periods of instability across several local authority areas. They faced challenges linked to housing, language barriers and vulnerability, with the family requiring help from an interpreter for some communication with services.

The child was known to one of the area's safeguarding hubs due to incidents of truancy and cannabis use with possible county lines involvement. He struggled to secure a consistent school place and was declared as "Not in Education, Employment of Training" (NEET).

Poor information sharing between agencies meant that there were gaps in knowledge including having the most up to date address for the family. A referral relating to the child's sibling was not linked to his case which reinforced gaps in multi-agency practice oversight of the whole family and their associated vulnerabilities.

Learning points:

- Stronger multi-agency information sharing and clarity around professional roles during strategy meetings is essential, particularly when children have moved across areas and fragmented service histories exist.
- Not overlooking possible child criminal exploitation indicators including better recognition of exploitation pathways, especially for older children who are known to have had sporadic involvement across agencies.
- Exploring the vulnerabilities of a child who has had inconsistent school placement and is known to be NEET.
- Recognising that some children may be "hiding in plain sight" – for example those recently arrived into the country may have "minimal" footprints to services until a serious incident occurs.
- Ensuring equality, language and cultural considerations are taken into account so that parents and carers can share concerns or disclosures (including possible CCE) effectively and safely. This includes making sure there is access to information for parents and carers when English is not their first language.

Where can I find out more?

Find more information on the Panel's new learning hub at: <https://childsafeguarding.independent-panel.uk/>, where you can access videos, webinars, podcasts and other information about this topic.

Other useful resources include:

- Department for Education: [Children missing education: statutory guidance for local authorities and schools](#)

- Department for Education: Working together to improve school attendance
- Department for Education: Elective home education: Guidance for local authorities and schools about children educated at home.
- Department for Education: Improving the attendance of children with a social worker