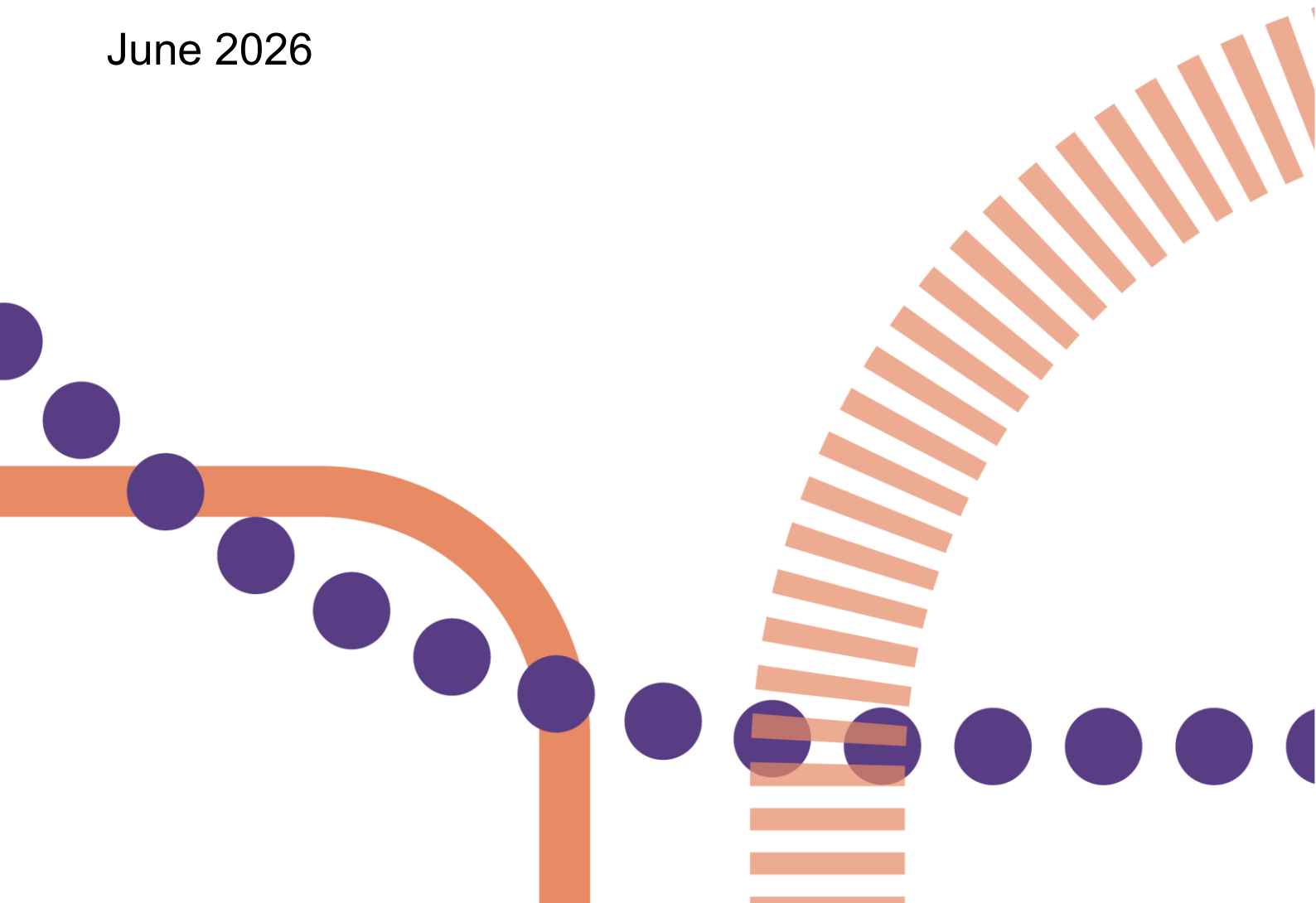


Safeguarding children not in school

Safeguarding responsibilities across statutory agencies

June 2026



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 briefing paper sets out learning for safeguarding practitioners about the safeguarding responsibilities held by different statutory agencies.

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, 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 understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to vulnerable children who have low school attendance, are home educated, 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, 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 (the 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 the 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.

[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

This section highlights common themes or issues about the roles and responsibilities of different agencies. Not all agencies, organisations or individuals are listed because the focus is on specific issues identified in child safeguarding reviews. Multi-agency working is crucial to ensure children receive timely and appropriate support. All agencies should work together to identify whether a child is home educated, missing education or has low attendance.

Evidence from safeguarding reviews suggests there is inconsistent understanding of roles among agencies. Statutory partners (education, health, police and local authorities) often have differing interpretations of responsibilities for children who are not in school.

Local authorities

Section 436A of the Education Act 1996 places a statutory duty on local authorities to identify children living in their areas of compulsory school age who are not in school and are not receiving a suitable education.

The DfE's [EHE guidance](#) makes clear that, to help them fulfil this duty, local authorities should make informal enquiries as to the suitability of home educated children's education at least once a year.

Additionally, the DfE has recently produced guidance to [support social workers and other practitioners to improve the attendance of children with a social worker](#).

- Local authorities' safeguarding duties apply to home educated children in the same way as they do for children educated at school.
- EHE teams in local authorities and multi-agency safeguarding teams often operate separately, limiting joined up safeguarding responses. This results in safeguarding concerns not being triangulated across agencies reducing the likelihood of timely intervention.
- Increasing numbers of children not in school can result in resource pressures for local authority EHE teams

Education

The DfE's [CME guidance](#) for local authorities and schools focuses on how they should work together to identify and support children missing education to receive a suitable education. This includes a [summary of responsibilities](#) for schools, academy trusts and governing bodies.

- Children can slip between systems because no single agency takes ownership at critical points (e.g., withdrawal from school).
- Schools must notify a child's removal from roll, but parents do not have a duty to inform the school or local authority when they begin EHE.
- If parents don't tell a school that they want their child removed for education otherwise than at school then (unless another condition for removal applies) the parent risks school attendance fines.

Health

Where a child is home educated, missing in education or has low school attendance, it is usually health professionals (including nurses, GPs or hospital staff) that will still have access to them. Yet the role of health agencies and health practitioners is often overlooked or misunderstood.

List of health support that can be missed if children are not in school:

- Compensatory care delivered by school staff (food, hygiene, medication oversight, checking parents are attending appointments).
- Mental Health Support Teams. Often school funded as first level mental health support, with/without direct access to CAMHS.
- CAMHS. Particularly Tier 3 Community mental health care.
- National Child Measurement Programme (reception, Year 6, 8 and 10) checking for malnutrition and obesity, faltering growth).
- School input into neurodiversity assessment plans.
- Vision screening.
- Drop-in sessions for confidential physical, sexual, and emotional health advice
- Access to the school nursing service which may provide a confidential and safe space for disclosures. Onward referral to services is also lost.
- Health promoting advice, smoking cessation.
- School nurse involvement in non-attendance, looking at non-attendance as a consequence of health, or non-attendance as a driver of poor health.
- Scoping of NHS services already involved in a child's life and engaging them in supporting attendance.

Policing

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 DfE's 'Working together to improve school attendance' guidance: "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%)."

Children missing education are at heightened risk because responsibility is often unclear. Where no single agency holds oversight, attendance and whereabouts issues can persist without escalation. This is particularly evident where families move frequently, disengage from services or where information is not proactively shared between safeguarding partners.

Hallmarks of good practice

- All statutory agencies sharing prompt notifications with each other about children who are missing from education, or home educated or have low attendance.

- Agencies working together to establish early, clear, and supportive engagement with parents. For example, a school, local authority EHE officer and a health professional jointly meet with parents to explain what EHE entails, explore any concerns, and identify known vulnerabilities.
- Health professionals (e.g., GP, school nurse) asking routinely about a child's education and wellbeing during health appointments and recording any non-attendance at health checks as a potential safeguarding flag.
- Sharing information and improving coordination when children move between local authorities. When a family moves, the local authority confirms the transfer with the receiving authority and ensures that the child is not "lost" between areas or statutory agencies.
- Multi-agency collaboration to share information at the point where a child is removed for home education or known to be missing education. For example, when a parent notifies a school of withdrawal, the school informs the local authority EHE team, the child's GP, and relevant health services.
- Statutory agencies working together at the point that a child is removed from school for home education or is known to be missing education to review any known vulnerabilities such as previous social care involvement, missed health appointments, parental mental health and known domestic abuse history.
- Conducting joint visits where risk factors are known. For example, where there is domestic abuse, parental mental health, or a history of neglect, visits are conducted jointly with EHE teams, children's social care, police, or a health professional. This would help ensure that professional oversight is increased and concerns are not minimised.

Reflective questions for practitioners

- Do I fully understand my statutory responsibilities (as set out in government guidance) regarding children who are home educated, missing education or have low attendance?
- Am I clear about what my agency is legally required to do versus what is good practice when engaging with children who are home educated or missing education?
- Have I escalated concerns appropriately when responsibilities or actions are unclear?
- What relevant information do other agencies hold that we have not yet sought or triangulated?
- Are there gaps in my knowledge about EHE, CME or children with low attendance or statutory guidance that I should revisit?
- Do I recognise that there can be increased safeguarding risks for children who are out of school and how does this affect my practice locally?

Reflective questions for leaders

- Am I assured that practitioners in my organisation understand their statutory duties in relation to EHE, CME and low attendance particularly around safeguarding and information sharing?
- Are health practitioners (particularly those working in mental health crisis teams, neurodiversity services and emergency departments) all clear that they may be the only professionals who may see this group of children? Are they confident on the need to ask questions around school, school attendance and the child's general well-being? Do they know how to ask?
- How do I know that practitioners are clear on the distinction between legal requirements and good practice?
- What mechanisms do we have to test whether staff correctly understand their obligations around children missing education or being withdrawn for home education?
- How am I assured that practitioners are aware of any new guidance as soon as it is published, including the [recent guidance for social workers and practitioners](#)?
- Am I confident that children do not “slip” between systems” due to unclear responsibility ownership at key transition points (e.g. withdrawal from school, moves between local authorities)?
- Are EHE teams and CME leads sufficiently resourced to meet the growing numbers of children who are home educated?
- Do multi-agency practitioners receive clear, consistent training in responding to EHE, CME and low attendance? Are they aware of/have they read the government's [EHE](#) and [CME guidance](#)? How do we know?
- How well does my organisation learn from safeguarding incidents relating to children who are out of school?
- Are we assured that no child is “unseen” by professionals for extended periods?
- How does our partnership ensure that persistent absence and children missing education are recognised as potential indicators of neglect and responded to through safeguarding pathways, not only education processes?

Case study

The following example from a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review demonstrates how missing education can be linked to neglect. Read the full LCSPR available on the [Swindon Safeguarding Partnership website](#).

Alan is 17 years old and experienced significant neglect linked to long term disengagement from education. His family are White British and consists of his father, stepmother and several siblings and stepsiblings.

Alan had previously been subject to child protection planning in infancy because of parental substance use, domestic abuse and siblings removed from his mother's care. As he grew older, chronic non-attendance, deterioration in his presentation and increasing neglect continued without timely escalation.

Professionals became increasingly concerned when it emerged that Alan had spent almost all of his time in his bedroom and had not attended school for nearly two years. He presented with severe physical, emotional and nutritional neglect, including very low body weight, poor skin condition, muscle wastage and deteriorating mental health.

Education staff raised repeated concerns about Alan's non-attendance, health services attempted to monitor his physical and emotional needs, and social workers persisted in trying to build a relationship despite his reluctance. Yet professionals repeatedly missed opportunities to review thresholds or coordinate multi agency action, influenced by assumptions that he would not engage with statutory services. Threshold decisions failed to reflect Alan's cumulative history, resulting in missed opportunities for statutory intervention.

Learning points:

- Being out of school removed a key protective factor for Alan. His long-term non-attendance meant no daily professional oversight and delayed recognition of escalating risk.
- Chronologies and effective information-sharing are essential to understanding why a child has disengaged from education.
- Persistent absence should always be treated as a safeguarding concern and prompt multi agency action, not seen only as an attendance issue.
- Practitioners should avoid making assumptions about a young person's capacity or willingness to engage, as these assumptions can undermine timely safeguarding action.
- Adolescents who are isolated at home require persistent engagement to understand their lived experience and ensure they remain safe.

Where can I find out more?

Find more information on the Panel's new learning hub:

<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](#)