SKYLARK FEDERATION

Children Missing Education (CME)

September 2026

Guidance:

- Children missing education: statutory guidance for local authorities and schools - GOV.UK
- Summary of responsibilities for children missing education
- Children missing education: Policy and procedure checklist - GOV.UK

Definition

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 (EHE) that has been assessed as unsuitable
- have been recorded as CME for an extended period, for example where their whereabouts is unclear or unknown

CME are not children who:

- are receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school (for example, pupils who are electively home educated or attending alternative provision) which is suitable to the child's age, ability, aptitude and any special educational needs they may have
- are EHE but the local authority has not had an opportunity to assess whether the education being provided is suitable
- are registered at a school, even if they are persistently or severely absent from that school

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Regardless of their circumstances, the law entitles every child of compulsory school age to an efficient, full-time education which is suitable to their:

- age
- ability
- aptitude
- any special educational needs they may have

This may include suitable education through regular attendance at school, alternative provision or otherwise (for example, EHE).

CME are at significant risk of underachieving, having poorer health outcomes, being victims of harm, exploitation or radicalisation, and becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) later in life.

No single individual at a school, local authority or related service can have a full picture of a child's needs and circumstances. If children and families are to receive the right help at the right time, everyone who comes into contact with them has a role to play in identifying concerns, sharing information and taking prompt action to help in the identification and support of CME.

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is everyone's responsibility. In order to fulfil this responsibility effectively, all individuals involved in identifying and supporting CME should make sure their approach is child centred.

School Responsibilities

All Children

- On a day-to-day basis monitor pupils' attendance through their daily attendance register, and work to address poor or irregular attendance in order to prevent children becoming CME.
- Take action without delay where there is a concern that a child's safety or well-being is at risk. If school staff have safeguarding concerns about a child, they should take immediate action, following their child protection policy and involving their designated safeguarding lead.
- Carefully follow guidance on removing or adding pupils' names from or to the admission register, which in some specific cases will involve joint actions to be undertaken between the school and local authority

Children at risk of becoming CME or suspected CME

- Ensure that they have in place arrangements whereby all unexpected and unexplained absences are promptly enquired about.
- Work with each identified pupil and their parents to understand and address the reasons for absence, including any in-school barriers to attendance, as set out in the Department's Working Together to Improve School Attendance statutory guidance.
- The school and local authority will undertake joint reasonable enquiries to locate a child believed to be missing. This collaborative effort will begin as soon as a child's whereabouts are unknown, and will continue after a CME referral has been made.
- Make a referral to the child's home local authority CME team as soon as possible if enquiries lead them to reasonably believe that the child will no longer be attending the school and the parent has not provided the school with written notice that the child will be attending another school or that education provision otherwise than at a school will be provided.
- Continue to play a role in conducting joint reasonable enquiries even after they have submitted a CME referral to the local authority.

Pupil Deletion from the Register

- Where a pupil has not returned to school for ten consecutive school days following an authorised leave of absence, or has been absent without authorisation for 20 consecutive school days, their name may be removed from the admission register. This is only permissible when the school and the local authority have jointly made reasonable enquiries and have agreed that there are no reasonable grounds to believe the pupil will attend the school again, and no further steps can be taken to secure their attendance.
- Provide the local authority with all of the information detailed in the School Attendance (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2024 when making a deletion return. This deletion must align with the specific grounds outlined in the regulations, such as being registered at another school, a parent providing written notice of home education, or after a joint reasonable enquiry confirms the child is no longer attending and their whereabouts are unknown.

Children identified as CME

- Work collaboratively with their local authority to support CME in their local area into education. This might also involve working with a child's home local authority if this is different.
- Work with the local authority to provide a school place for CME at the earliest opportunity to ensure time a child spends out of education is kept to an absolute minimum.
- Where schools manage their own in-year admissions, set out on their website by 31 August how in-year applications will be handled. This must include how parents can apply for a school place and provide a suitable application form to complete.
- Offer appropriate support to successfully integrate children into their school, including having efficient decision-making processes for admissions in place to prevent delays and following the Working Together to Improve School Attendance to reduce barriers to attendance.

Cohorts of children who may be at greater risk of becoming CME

Pupils at risk of harm or neglect
Children may be missing education due to abuse, neglect and exploitation. Where this is suspected, schools should follow local child protection procedures. If a child is in immediate danger or at risk of harm, an immediate referral should be made to children's social care, and the police should also be contacted if appropriate.

Where harm or neglect is suspected in relation to a CME, local authority officers responsible for CME should check that a referral has been made, and if not, they should alert children's social care. The Department's statutory guidance on working together to safeguard children provides further safeguarding advice.

Children of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families
Although many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) families are settled, some move regularly, and their children can be at increased risk of becoming CME. For GRT families who want their children to attend school, effective communication between local authorities and schools is essential to minimise this risk.

Local authority and school engagement with GRT families should include appropriate assessment of the cultural background of each of these communities to ensure communication is tailored to address the individual needs of GRT families.

Traveller Education Services, or a named CME officer within the local authority, can advise schools on the best strategies to reduce disruption to GRT pupils' education, for example agreeing to dual registration arrangements when parents enrol their child at another school, or electronic or distance learning packages if these are available.

Schools should also inform the local authority when a GRT pupil leaves without identifying a new destination school, especially during transitions between primary and secondary school, to help maintain educational continuity. For GRT families who want to electively home educate their children, effective communication between the family and the local authority's EHE team is essential to minimise the risk of CME.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and children of new migrant families
Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) are likely to have faced significant difficulties and will need to be cared for while in the UK. Local authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in need, ensuring that there are enough schools available for their areas and offering additional support for looked after migrant children and UASC. There can be additional challenges and complex barriers for local authorities to overcome to carry out their CME duty, which can include unsettled, often temporary housing situations, unreported arrivals or sudden moves between authorities' areas. Looked after migrant children, including UASC who need to be offered support, will be accommodated by the local authority.

Local authorities should work with the housing providers of temporary accommodation to strengthen information sharing that can bolster support for children of new migrant families and UASC.

Children who go missing from home or care
Children who go missing or run away from home or care are vulnerable to serious dangers and harm outside the home, including sexual and criminal exploitation and abduction, as well as missing education. Multi-agency working is essential for assessing cases of children missing from home or care, and for analysing data for patterns that indicate concerns and risks. Authorities should consider whether CME may also be unreported missing children.

Local authorities and the police should take proactive steps to support these children, particularly in communities where underreporting is more likely due to mistrust of statutory services. Local authorities should refer to the statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care for more information and support on prevention and protection of this vulnerable cohort of children.

Children with SEND whose needs are not being adequately supported
Where parents are not satisfied that the needs of a pupil with SEND are being met adequately in school, this may lead to lower attendance and ultimately parents taking their child out of school. Schools should work closely with the pupil and their parents to put appropriate support in place and to keep this under regular review. If a child with an EHC plan has significant levels of unmet need, the school should also liaise with the local authority about whether an early review of the plan is needed.

Children who are excluded from school
It is important for schools to help minimise the disruption that a suspension or permanent exclusion can cause to a pupil's education. All maintained schools, academy schools (including free schools), alternative provision academies (including alternative provision free schools), and pupil referral units must inform a local authority when a pupil has been suspended or permanently excluded regardless of length, without delay.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to arrange suitable full-time education starting from the sixth day (or earlier) of a permanent exclusion. Informal or unofficial suspensions and permanent exclusions are unlawful, regardless of whether they occur with the agreement of parents or carers. This is also defined by Ofsted as a form of off rolling. Department guidance on school suspensions and permanent exclusions details the legal responsibilities for those who suspend (fixed period exclusion) and permanently exclude pupils.

Children and young people supervised by the youth justice system
Children who have offended or are at risk of doing so are also at risk of disengaging from education. Youth offending teams (YOTs) are responsible for supervising those young people (aged 10 to 18) and should work with the local authority CME officer and schools to ensure that children are receiving, or return to, appropriate full-time education.

Working together to improve school attendance sets out how schools and local authorities should work together with YOTs with regard to the relevant regulations.

Children of service personnel
Families of service personnel are likely to move frequently, both in the UK and overseas, and often at short notice. Schools and local authorities should contact the Ministry of Defence (MoD) Children's Education Advisory Service (CEAS) by email RC-DCS-HQ-CEAS@mod.gov.uk for advice on making arrangements to ensure continuity of education for service children when their family moves, including guidance and support relating to service children with a SEND.

Children attending unregistered independent schools
There are a number of settings operating unlawfully outside the regulatory regime as unregistered independent educational institutions. Those conducting these settings are committing a criminal offence and may be putting children at risk of harm, denying them a suitable education and limiting their life chances. Children attending unregistered educational institutions should be treated in a similar way to CME. As outlined in the Department's unregistered independent schools and out of school settings advice document, local authorities can play an important role in identifying unsafe and unlawful education settings, while also supporting and protecting children and families using them. Additionally, to protect children that attend these unlawful settings, anybody can make a referral to Ofsted.

Children who cease to attend a school
There are many reasons why a child stops attending a school. It could be because the parent chooses to educate their child at home or that a child can no longer attend because of physical or mental health needs that cannot be met by the school, and instead, support from wider services or alternative provision needs to be provided.

There are many reasons a child may stop attending school, such as a family move or a parent's decision to home educate. When the reason for a child's non-attendance is known and legally permissible, the school will follow the correct legal procedure for removing them from the register. If the reason for non-attendance is not known, the

school and local authority will immediately initiate the joint reasonable enquiry process to investigate the child's circumstances and whereabouts.

Home educated children who are not receiving suitable full-time education
Parents have a right to educate their children at home, and the government wants the many parents who do it well to be supported. Educating children at home works well when it is a positive, informed and dedicated choice. However, home educated children who are not receiving a suitable, full-time education are CME.

Local authorities have a duty under section 436A of the 1996 Education Act to make arrangements to identify as far as possible children not registered at school in their areas who are not receiving a suitable education other than at school (CME). Home educated children who are not known to the local authority, or whose parents have not responded to the local authority's enquiries about the education being provided to the child, could be at risk of being CME. If the local authority is unable to gather enough information on a home educated child's education to judge that the education being received by the child is suitable, then this requires action under education law as outlined in the Department's elective home education guidance for local authorities.

Recognition and Response

Immediate Actions for Unexplained Absence
From the first day that a child does not attend school and there is no explanation or authorisation of the absence, the following steps must be taken:

1. Telephone/text/email in order the list of contacts we hold on school records until we have established the whereabouts of the child.
2. If the child is not seen and contact has not been established with any of the named contacts held on records the DSL will be notified who will then contact the local authority and work with them to establish whereabouts.

In the following circumstances a referral to children's social care and /or the police should always be made promptly:

- The child may be the victim of a crime;
- The child is subject of a Child Protection plan;
- The child is subject of Section 47 enquiries;
- The child is looked after;
- There is a known person posing a risk to children in the household or in contact with the household;
- There is a history of the family moving frequently;
- There are serious issues with attendance.

Safeguarding Assessment

- In which age range is the child?
- Is this very sudden and unexpected behaviour?
- Have there been any past concerns about the child associating with significantly older young people or adults?
- Was there any significant incident prior to the child's unexplained absence?
- Has the child been a victim of bullying?
- Are there health reasons to believe that the child is at risk? e.g.
- Does the child need essential medication or health care?
- Was the child noted to be depressed prior to the child's unexplained absence?
- Are there religious or cultural reasons to believe that the child is at risk? e.g.
- Rites of passage or forced marriage planned for the child?
- Has the child got a disability and/or special educational needs?
- Have there been past concerns about this child and family which together with the sudden disappearance are worrying? e.g.
    - Is there any known history of drug or alcohol dependency within the family?
    - Is there any known history of domestic violence?
    - Is there concern about the parent/carer's ability to protect the child from harm?

School-level Reasonable Enquiries

If there is no reason to believe that the child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm, then the school may delay making a referral. The process of 'reasonable enquiry' has not been identified in regulations, however this includes school staff checking with all members of staff whom the child may have had contact with, and with the pupil's friends and their parents, siblings and known relatives at this school and others.

Collaborative Enquiry
A child's prolonged absence from school is a significant risk factor. A referral to the police and/or children's social care will be made immediately on day one if there are any safeguarding concerns. If no immediate concerns are identified, but a child's whereabouts remain unknown after school-level reasonable enquiries have been exhausted, the school will escalate the case to the local authority CME team. The school and local authority will jointly review the child's vulnerability regularly, in consultation with children's social care and the police, as appropriate. This escalation should not be based on a fixed timeline but on the level of concern for the child's safety.

The local authority should then make enquiries by visiting the child's home and asking for information from the family's neighbours and their local community - as appropriate. The local authority CME team should also check databases within the local authority, use agreed protocols to check local databases, e.g. LA housing, health and the police; check with agencies known to be involved with the family, with the local authority the child moved from originally, and with any local authority to which the child may have moved.

The child's circumstances and vulnerability should be reviewed and reassessed regularly jointly by the school's DSL and the CME Officer in consultation with children's social care and the police as appropriate.

No Changes from the CME Policy 2025