

Report to the Schools, Children & Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

12 October 2016

Children missing from education (CME)

Purpose of the Report : To update Members on the issues and actions put in place to address concerns highlighted in Ofsted's letter to Peter Hay received on 28 June 2016 notably that:

Significant numbers of children are missing from education. Delays in establishing the whereabouts of children mean that staff are not complying with the council's own procedures and risks of children falling beneath the council's radar may increase. Links with partner agencies such as health are poor. Staff are unclear about what they need to do and the timeframes within which they must complete their work. Additionally, management oversight is not robust and staff are not held to account for deficits in practice. (page 2).

Staff are too slow in checking the whereabouts of children missing from education and this means opportunities to trace them in a timely way are missed. Children who remain missing are removed from the Council's records once checks have been completed. From September 2015 to January 2016, the council removed 253 children from their list of missing children without locating their whereabouts. (page 4).

Recommendation

That Members note the information contained in this report.

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Background

The Legal and City context

Education Act 1996

All children regardless of their circumstances are entitled to a full time education which is suitable to their age, ability, aptitude and any special educational needs they may have. Children missing from education (CME) are at significant risk of underachieving, being victims of abuse and becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) later in life.

All local authorities have a statutory duty, under section 436A of the Education Act 1996 to ensure there are arrangements in place to establish the identities of children in their area who are not registered at a school or receiving suitable education otherwise. Local authorities should have procedures in place to prevent children becoming CME.

Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006 (as amended 2016).

Under regulation 8(f and h) of the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006, schools can delete a pupil from the admission register when a pupil *has been continuously absent from the school for a period of not less than twenty school days and*

- (i) *at no time was his absence during that period authorised by the proprietor in accordance with regulation 6(2);*
- (ii) *the proprietor does not have reasonable grounds to believe that the pupil is unable to attend the school by reason of sickness or any unavoidable cause; and*
- (ii) *both the proprietor of the school and the local education authority have failed, after carrying out a joint reasonable enquiry, to ascertain where the pupil is.*

Birmingham Local Authority

The Children Missing from Education (CME) team, within the School Admissions and Pupil Placements Service, is responsible for receiving referrals from schools and academies in respect of pupils who are absent from school without trace.

This is different to children missing or absent from home or care. Referrals for these children are made to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) via the Childrens Advice and Support service (CASS) or directly to the Police. Process and procedures for children missing from home and care are included within the “**Missing from Home or Care – Practice Guidance for Children’s Service January 2016**”.

Children missing education that is any child known to the Council's education services not to be on a school roll or not in receipt of suitable education otherwise than at school, are now registered and are closely monitored via weekly reports uploaded into a single Children Not Educated in School (CNES) register. (Appendix 3)

Birmingham City Council is aware, along with all local authorities, that from time to time a pupil (and their family) may leave their school without explanation. This can be for a number of reasons:-

- a) The family move within the city but the parents fail to inform the school of the house move/transfer to a new school.
- b) The family move out of the city and relocate to a new area within the UK but parents fail to inform the school.
- c) The family relocate abroad and fail to confirm their relocation with the school. .
- d) The family is displaced as a result of 'crisis' e.g. domestic violence, homelessness.
- e) Parent/school disagreement and parents withdraw the child from school.
- f) Due to family separation

This report aims to advise Members about the process and procedures in place to ensure the Council is notified and that prompt action is taken to confirm the child is receiving a suitable education.

- At any given time between 100 and 200 children are reported missing from school with their families from Birmingham schools and academies. During September 2016, schools and the BCC CME team were engaged in trying to establish the whereabouts of 109 children missing from school with their families. This represents approximately 0.044% of the City's total pupil population. (This figure fluctuates as missing pupils are traced and new referrals are received on a daily basis).
- Most of these children are traced quickly by their schools and BCC CME staff.
- All Birmingham schools and academies have been reminded of their duties in relation to pupils missing from school via an advice and guidance note posted on the September 2016 edition of the BCC School's Notice Board. (Appendix 1.)
- CME staff are very clear about the urgency of their role, what they need to do and the timeframes within which they need to do it. They are particularly conscious of their individual and corporate safeguarding responsibility to Birmingham children. Their performance and caseload is monitored and reviewed on a monthly basis by their direct line manager.
- Management oversight of children missing education has been reviewed and

reporting lines, procedure and the escalation process for cases of significant concern have all been reconfirmed with relevant CME staff.

- CME reports are received for appropriate challenge and support at the Alternative Provision and Independent Education Service's fortnightly leadership team meetings. (The CME team is a part of this service).
- Immediately following the receipt of a missing pupil referral, CME workers carry out a rigorous risk assessment of the child's circumstances based on referral and background information from the school, relevant data and reports held on the child/family's record on the Council's 'Impulse' pupil database, the Children's Social Care 'CareFirst' database and through direct contact with teachers, social workers, health workers or any other professionals who may be involved with the child and family.
- Any safeguarding concerns that emerge at any point during our involvement in trying to locate the child and family are immediately referred to the CASS and/or the Police for further, appropriate action to be taken to safeguard the child.
- Schools and the Council have a statutory duty to jointly carry out a 'reasonable enquiry' to ascertain a missing pupil's whereabouts. This enquiry includes the following prompt actions:-
 1. A first day call by the school to the parents/guardians of any child absent from school without prior authorisation to ascertain the reason for the child's absence and confirmation of their whereabouts.
 2. Subsequent contact with all family telephone numbers held on the pupil's file if the child's whereabouts cannot be established via first day calls.
 3. School contact with Children's Social Care or Family Support services in respect of sharing relevant information in respect of the child's safety and whereabouts.
 4. Questioning all staff who may have contact with the pupil, as well as classmates and any known relatives of the pupil.
 5. Schools arranging and conducting a timely home visit to the child's known address within the first five days of the absence.
 6. Schools must refer all missing pupils to the BCC CME Team within the first five days of the child's absence from school.
 7. Interrogation of Birmingham City Council Audit's Data Warehouse which validates new addresses based on council tax liability or housing benefit applications.
 8. Maintaining excellent data sharing relationships with partner agencies, such as Health and General Practitioners, which allows our officers direct and immediate access to their relevant data systems via 'card readers'.
 9. Maintaining our sound and enhanced data sharing agreement with the Home Office Intelligence unit and UK Borders Agency in relation to children and families with asylum or UK residency issues who may have moved abroad.
 10. Maintaining our close relationship and information sharing links with equivalent CME teams from our bordering local authorities.
 11. Interrogation of the national DfE School to School, 'Lost Pupil' and 'Key to Success' databases for information relating to a child's current whereabouts.

12. Using social media such as Facebook which may provide information in relation to a child's new location.

- In collaboration with school colleagues, CME staff seek to confirm a missing pupil's location as quickly as possible.
- However, there always remains a residue of children who we are unable to locate within the context of the actions highlighted above. Our data shows that most of these children are believed to have moved abroad with their families but we are not able to ascertain their exact location.
- These children are *not* removed from the Council's records. Their records are maintained on the 'Impulse' pupil database as 'cases pending further enquiries' and Birmingham Audit have agreed to upload their information into the Data Warehouse to alert all system users, including the Police, to notify our CME staff if they have any relevant intelligence on the child's current location.
- Similarly, the details of all children not located by schools and BCC CME staff are routinely uploaded to the national school to School (s2s) missing pupil database in case they relocate within another English local authority.
- Any safeguarding concerns which emerge in relation to these children are immediately referred to the CASS and/or the Police.
- A clear audit trail and record of actions exists for all referrals.

Key Issues

- As of 14 September 2016, 109 children are missing from education i.e. absent from school, whereabouts unknown.
- Significant actions, including the development of the CNES database, have been taken to address this to ensure that our data and intelligence on all these children is appropriate, updated on a weekly basis, and that timely plans and actions are made and taken to ensure that all vulnerable children are receiving an appropriate education.
- The process for establishing the whereabouts of children is very clear and staff are fully compliant with BCC procedure. Systems and procedures are robust and ensure that *no* Birmingham child known to our services: “fall beneath the council’s radar”.
- The CME Team, responsible with schools for trying to trace the whereabouts of missing pupils, maintains excellent information sharing and collaborative relationships with key partners and key staff in all of our neighbouring local authorities.
- Children are not removed from Council records once checks have been completed.

The governance of children missing from school is incorporated within the Directorate’s Missing Children Strategy/Procedure via the Missing (children) Operational Group which, in turn, reports to the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board.

In conclusion

Since July 2016 significant work has been undertaken to raise the profile and strengthen the actions to identify children who are missing from education. Once the children have been referred, investigative work is undertaken, by education officers, in partnership with external partners to find the child’s whereabouts.

The improvements have been achieved through a new management structure, amended Children Missing from Education policy, a quality dataset, improved practice informed by data analysis and multi-agency working. It is now possible to provide an accurate overview of the numbers of Children Missing from Education and the systems undertaken to identify their whereabouts.

List of Appendices

Appendix 1

Children missing education: Statutory guidance for local authorities
September 2016

Available for download at: www.gov.uk/dfes

Appendix 2.

Schools Advice and Guidance, September 2016.



September 2016.

TO: Head teachers, designated school attendance staff and designated school admissions staff of all Birmingham primary, secondary, special schools, academies, free schools and Independent Schools.

RE: Procedure for safeguarding pupils who have 20 continuous days unauthorised absence whose whereabouts are unknown (pupils who leave school without trace).

CHILDREN MISSING EDUCATION (CME)

As from 1st September 2016 the new statutory guidance on CME came into effect. The actual document, 'Children missing education, Statutory guidance for local authorities', which highlights the CME responsibilities of local authorities and schools, is available for download at www.gov.uk/dfes

In respect of pupils absent from school without authorisation whose whereabouts are unknown, the new guidance clarifies that the local authority must carry out reasonable enquiries into the pupil's whereabouts **jointly** with schools. It is vital, therefore, that you refer any pupil whose whereabouts is unknown promptly, and no later than five days from the first day of absence, to the Children Missing from Education (CME) Team at cme@birmingham.gcsx.gov.uk so that we can carry out our enquiry in tandem with yours.

REASONABLE ENQUIRIES

As part of your school's reasonable enquiry, please ensure that the following actions are taken:

- A first day call to the parents/guardians of any child absent from school without prior authorisation.
- If the child's whereabouts cannot be established via first day calls to the parents/guardians please contact all family telephone numbers held on the pupil's file.
- If the pupil is known to any other service such as Children's Social Care or Family Support, please contact them for any relevant information.

- Ask all school staff who may have contact with the pupil as well as classmates and any known relatives of the pupil.
- Please conduct a timely home visit to the pupil's known address no later than within the first five days of absence.

In tandem the CME team will:-

- Consult the local authority's Childrens Social Care 'CareFirst' database to see if there have been any significant events which may explain the pupil's absence. (Please inform the Left School No Trace team if you are aware that Childrens Social Care or family Support are involved with the pupil).
- Interrogate Birmingham City Council's Data Warehouse for any information relating to the family's residency in Birmingham.
- Contact BCC Housing department for any up to date information on the pupil's current address.
- Contact any known family relations for information in relation to the pupil's whereabouts.
- Check Health and GP databases for up to date address/GP information.
- Consult with Home Office Intelligence/UK Borders Agency if the pupil/family are seeking asylum or are known to have any immigration issues.
- Check on social media sites for any posted information relating to the pupil's whereabouts.

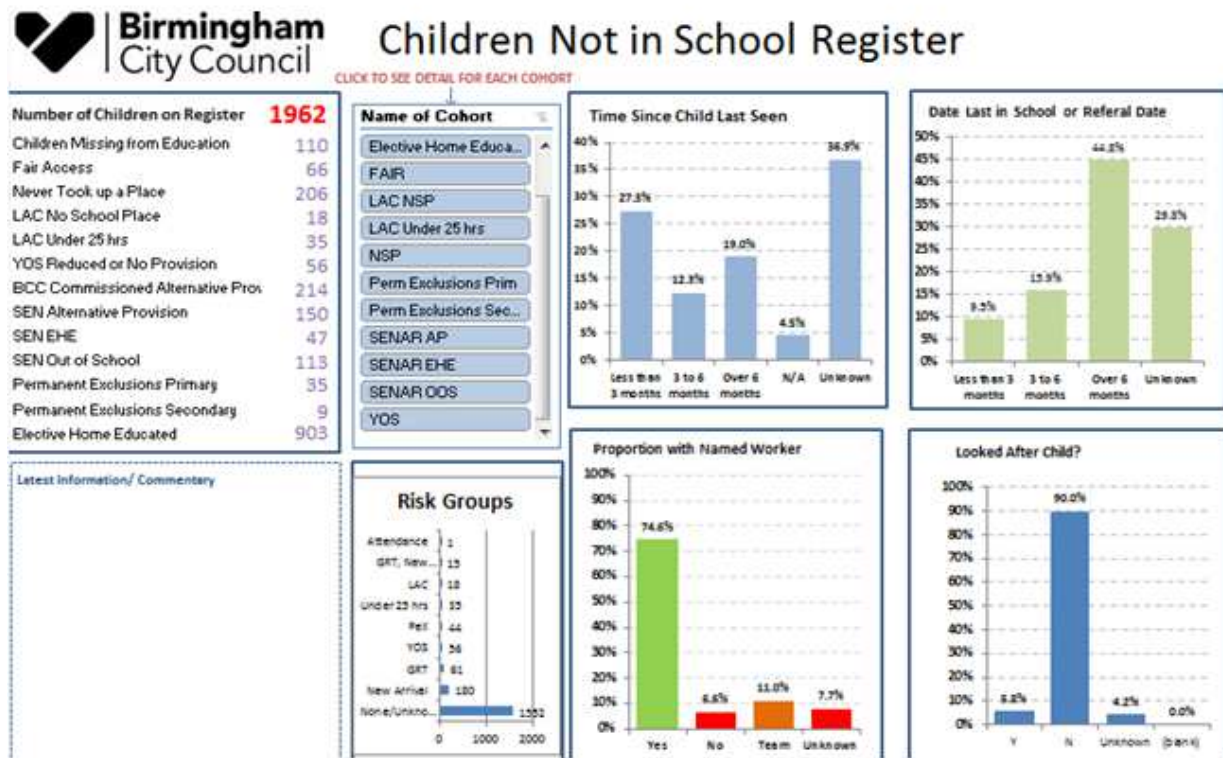
On completion of the joint enquiry, which all should endeavour to conclude as quickly as possible, and in the event of the pupil not being located, the CME Team will contact your school to discuss roll removal and any further actions that might be necessary.

May I remind you that you must refer any pupils for whom you have significant safeguarding concerns immediately to the CASS on 0121 303 1888 or email secure.CASS@birmingham.gcsx.gov.uk , and to the Police if it is felt that a crime may be committed against the pupil concerned.

Thank you for your continuing support in this matter, and please do contact the Left School No Trace Team on 0121 303 4983 if you have any further queries.

Appendix 3

Weekly CNES Report



This is a snapshot of our data and an example of how we monitor and track children who are not currently educated in school. The data seen on the document was from the week beginning 5 September 2016.