

Scottish Government Guidelines For Local Authorities to Ensure Children Missing Education are Safe and Well

Children and young people may disappear from view of schools and education authorities for many reasons. These are outlined in this guide, and in other sections of **Safe and Well**.

However, children have a right to education and local authorities have a duty to provide education for all children in their area, and to plan and provide support for vulnerable children. For vulnerable children and families, it is essential that education and other services try to maintain contact with them and to trace them when they disappear from view. Action must be taken at school and education authority level to locate families and to try to re-engage them with services.

The Children Missing Education (Scotland) service (CME) has been established to support education authorities and schools to exchange information across Scotland and with other parts of the UK. This national activity will support action at local level.

Definition

Children 'missing from education' are children and young people of compulsory school age who are not on a school roll and are not being educated otherwise (at home, privately or in an alternative provision). They have usually not attended school for a substantial period of time (usually agreed as 4 weeks, or considerably less for vulnerable children).

The Children Missing Education (Scotland) service (CME) is a small team of staff who will liaise with local authorities and will:

- promote the use of systematic procedures in schools and education authorities and enhance practice in transfer of records
- develop good practice when responding to a child or young person becoming missing from an education service
- promote consistent practice in local areas to locate and engage children
- enable effective inter-authority and cross-border location and transfer of information

It will assist with:

- transferring information
- tracing and locating families
- tracking information where children arrive in a new location with limited or false information, to assist authorities to provide support effectively

To prevent and reduce the numbers of children missing from education, the cooperation of all local authorities across Scotland will be needed. Additionally, close links with other agencies and independent schools will be required in order that a child's whereabouts is known.

CME (Scotland) suggest:

- local authorities have in place written procedures for children transferring school, absence management and for situations when children become missing from education
- a multi-disciplinary approach is taken to risk assess vulnerable, missing or relocated children to determine (and where possible deliver) the relevant course of action required, and the nature of any child protection concerns
- when children are missing and whenever necessary, the local authority's child protection guidelines are followed
- when a child is missing, the local authority carries out a search across their area prior to a referral to CME (Scotland) who will then co-ordinate searches across Scotland (and beyond where appropriate)
- a named person in the local authority co-ordinates the progress of local searches and is the contact for CME (Scotland) to give and receive information
- children who are missing from education are recognised as being vulnerable and in need of support

The education authority should provide a named contact for liaison with CME Scotland to assist national searches. The named CME contact may be the same person as the designated child protection officer. If it is a different person, all staff should be clear of this, and their respective roles.

Transfer of information when children move schools

Children and young people may transfer school for a variety of reasons such as families moving house, parental choice, etc.

Schools are likely to be aware of families who have a history of regular school / house / area moves. Proactive approaches may involve identifying families likely to move regularly and where necessary, putting in place support strategies to avoid them disappearing from view. Actions to provide this support might include:

- monitoring of attendance
- ensuring that any arising issues are resolved as a priority
- arranging the involvement of other agencies sensitively
- regular or specific contact with the parent / carer, for example using a home-school link worker.

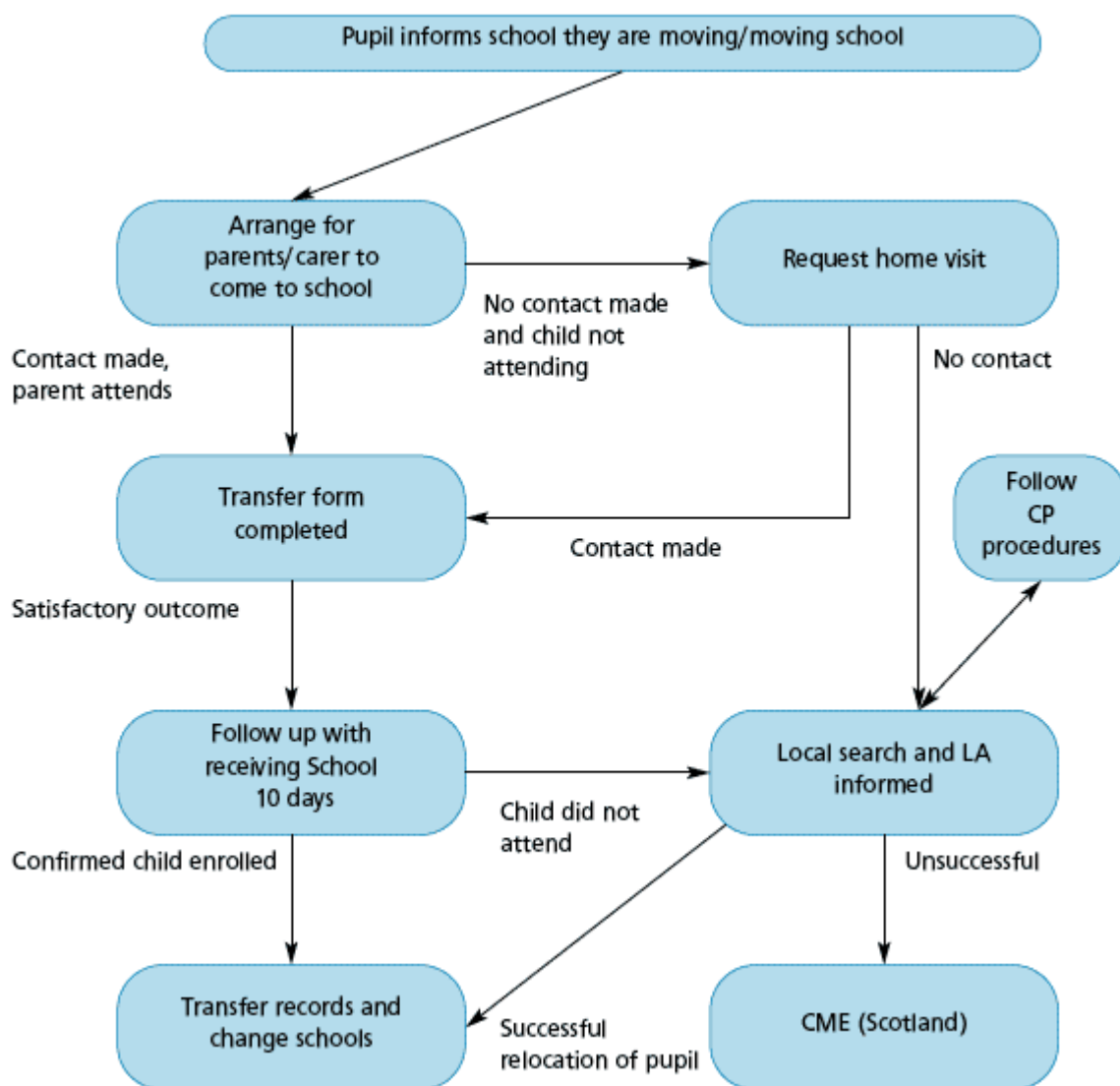
Take us seriously, involve us, respect our privacy.

For most families, moves and changes of school are planned events and information could be gathered regarding the proposed change to help track school pupils who are transferring school. Schools/local authorities may choose to record information on a form such as the example in [Annex A](#).

Currently, electronic procedures are being developed to enhance the transfer of pupil records. The school-to-school (S2S) transfer system will be able to identify those children who leave a school and do not enrol elsewhere. CME (Scotland) aims to support authorities to provide the human follow-up services for unmatched cases.

Transfer and storage of information/records will follow the principles of the Data Protection Act (1998).

Fig 1: Transfer of Information When Children Move Schools



Children arriving with incomplete information

There may be many reasons why a family does not provide a school with correct information when they arrive to enrol. They may be fleeing circumstances they believe put their family at risk.

Schools and other services will wish to ensure they enable every child to make the best possible new start at school. Information from previous assessments and attainment help schools to plan their support. However, if a family does not provide information, schools should make efforts to track previous schools or services named by the family, and meanwhile, consider making their own assessment of the child's needs as soon as possible.

Often, children and young people will share information about their background and previous schools in discussion with support staff, teachers or peers, as they begin to settle into the new school. Staff should be aware of the importance of sharing this information in order to piece together information which helps the school to understand the child's background and needs. However, staff should be cautious about attempting to question or interview children, as fear of providing information may cause families to withdraw from school again.

Similarly, confidential information must be shared with caution, to avoid unwitting disclosure about a family that may put them at risk. Discussion with the parent/carer is important when involving other services, as they may mistrust professional intervention.

If a school is unable to trace information on the child, then the designated officer for child protection and children missing from education may be asked to consider referring to CME (Scotland), (using the form in Annex B) using known information on the child, to see if the information matches referrals made by other authorities on missing children.

Children and young people can be missing from education services for a variety of reasons.

- **Families who simply move and do not tell anyone**

Some families have little contact with their child's school and do not see the need to inform the school of a proposed move.

Some families encounter unexpected personal situations or complications requiring them to change their location, e.g. where students / employees suddenly return home when visas expire.

Some families intend to enrol their children into a school in their new area but on arrival discover there are no places available or they change their minds and approach a different school.

- **Exclusion from school.**

Children and young people who are in a cycle of continual exclusion can experience difficulties in re-engaging with school. They themselves can become disillusioned and unwilling / unable to return. For some families these and related problems can seem insurmountable causing them to choose to relocate without trace or to move their child / young person to a friend or relative for a fresh start.

- **Long-term truants/Young offenders**

Where children and young people refuse to attend school, parents may feel daunted by professionals and systems dealing with the truancy or offences. This can cause families to relocate without trace.

- **Families involved in fraud or other social difficulty**

When families receive unwanted involvement with systems, or unwelcome contact with authority figures, they may relocate to avoid this.

- **Families who do not return from holiday**

Some families may discover that the place they visited on holiday has more to offer than their current home life. They may choose to relocate with minimal arrangements.

- **Long-term illness**

Parents may inform school that their child is unwell. For some children returning to school after a period of illness may be daunting. Parents and carers may require support in returning family life to normal or they may be reluctant to add stress to their child's life if they have endured a traumatic illness or accident. Contact with the child or family may be lost, where schools understand other professionals are 'leading on the case' and communication/contact between services is not maintained.

- **Looked After Children**

Looked After Children may be required to relocate school. This can involve a number of false starts and require continual support. Social and family complications may result in contact with the original school being broken.

- **Child Runaways**

Children may encounter difficulties at home or in the community, causing them to run away. Looked After Children may abscond from their care placement.

- **Families fleeing from domestic violence/abuse**

Parents may choose to leave a partner taking their children with them leaving no contact details. They may choose to live with another family member or a friend. Alternatively they may move to a refuge.

- **Families involved in witness protection**

Some families may be required to relocate without explanation or trace.

- **Children whose families have become homeless**

In cases of eviction, local authorities will have information of names of those evicted and if re-housed in the local authority, the whereabouts of the family. A priority for re-housing is usually given to families with children under 16 years of age.

- **Cultural**

Traveller children are encouraged to attend school. This is not always successful or possible. In some cases for cultural reasons children do not attend school. Other issues may include bullying, difficulties in the enrolment procedure, difficulties associated with attending school for only part of the academic year.

Returning to a country of origin for children from overseas may result in a child suddenly disappearing from view. Whilst the reasons for families returning are varied, there is the possibility of forced marriage (see *Safe and Well A-Z*).

Asylum seeking families may disappear from view if their accommodation is not allocated in their preferred location. This can result in families leaving their allocated place of accommodation to go to a place of their choice. Where asylum has not been granted the family may move location without trace to avoid returning to their place of origin.

- **Children of Migrant Workers**

Families may arrive in Scotland from overseas and be unaware of services (including education) or how to access services in their local area. They may

not be clear of the legal duties of parents in Scotland regarding the education of their children particularly where this differs in their country of origin.

- **Children who move to a specialist provision but do not turn up or become excluded from there**

Local authorities have in place systems to place children and young people in specialist provisions to meet their additional support needs. These may be within or outwith the local authority. A start date is usually agreed and the child's name transferred role. In some situations, particularly where the child or young person is experiencing social, emotional or behavioural difficulties, there may be further complications affecting the success of the placement. In such cases the child may lose contact with educational establishments.

- **Education at home**

Parents may choose to educate their child at home. If the child has never been enrolled into a school there is no legal reason for the local authority to be informed. Some parents may choose to withdraw their children from school for home education for a variety of reasons and in such circumstances the local authority must be informed.

In some situations, for whatever reason, relationships between services and families can breakdown. Where it reaches the point of being unrecoverable, contact and trust may be lost. The re-establishment of positive and supportive relationships requires skill and care of the professionals involved.

Local searches for children missing from education

Education authorities and schools should follow local procedures to re-establish contact with children missing from school and to gather information regarding the pupil moving or transferring school.

Effective local procedures will ensure:

- Consistent record keeping in schools to support transfer of information when this is required; and to enable the records of siblings to be easily gathered
- Clear steps for school staff to follow when:
 - absence monitoring identifies cause for concern
 - the school is aware through friends or other family members of circumstances which may cause / have caused a sudden relocation
- Shared understanding of the purpose of information sharing, local procedures, local authority services (e.g. education; social work; housing) and other agencies (e.g. health; police) to support exchange of information and local searches
- Shared approaches to risk assessment

Risk Assessment

Effective risk assessment can take place where an identified, named professional, takes a lead role with a case; and high risk / protective factors are identified through multi-agency collaboration.

Education authorities and their partner agencies should develop proactive practices to assess the level of risk of families disappearing from view. This will involve:

- identifying the likelihood of the child/family disappearing from educational view and circumstances which will increase or reduce this likelihood
- identifying the seriousness of impact this would have on the child
- identifying strategies to minimise the harm and therefore protecting the child
- putting into practice protective factors

Additionally where a child has become missing from education, those professionals who know the child and family will be asked to risk assess the case in terms of:

- identifying the likely harm that may come to the child
- identifying the effect of that harm
- identifying what strategies would be most effective in terms of protecting the child or minimising the effect of that harm.

Children missing from education and "in need" (Children (Scotland) Act 1995) may be considered as those children most requiring protection.

Local Searches

Schools should:

- follow local procedures to monitor attendance and make contact with parents or carers at an early stage of unexplained absence
- make appropriate referrals to staff responsible for home visits, such as home-link staff. Request feedback on any contact made or failure to make contact.

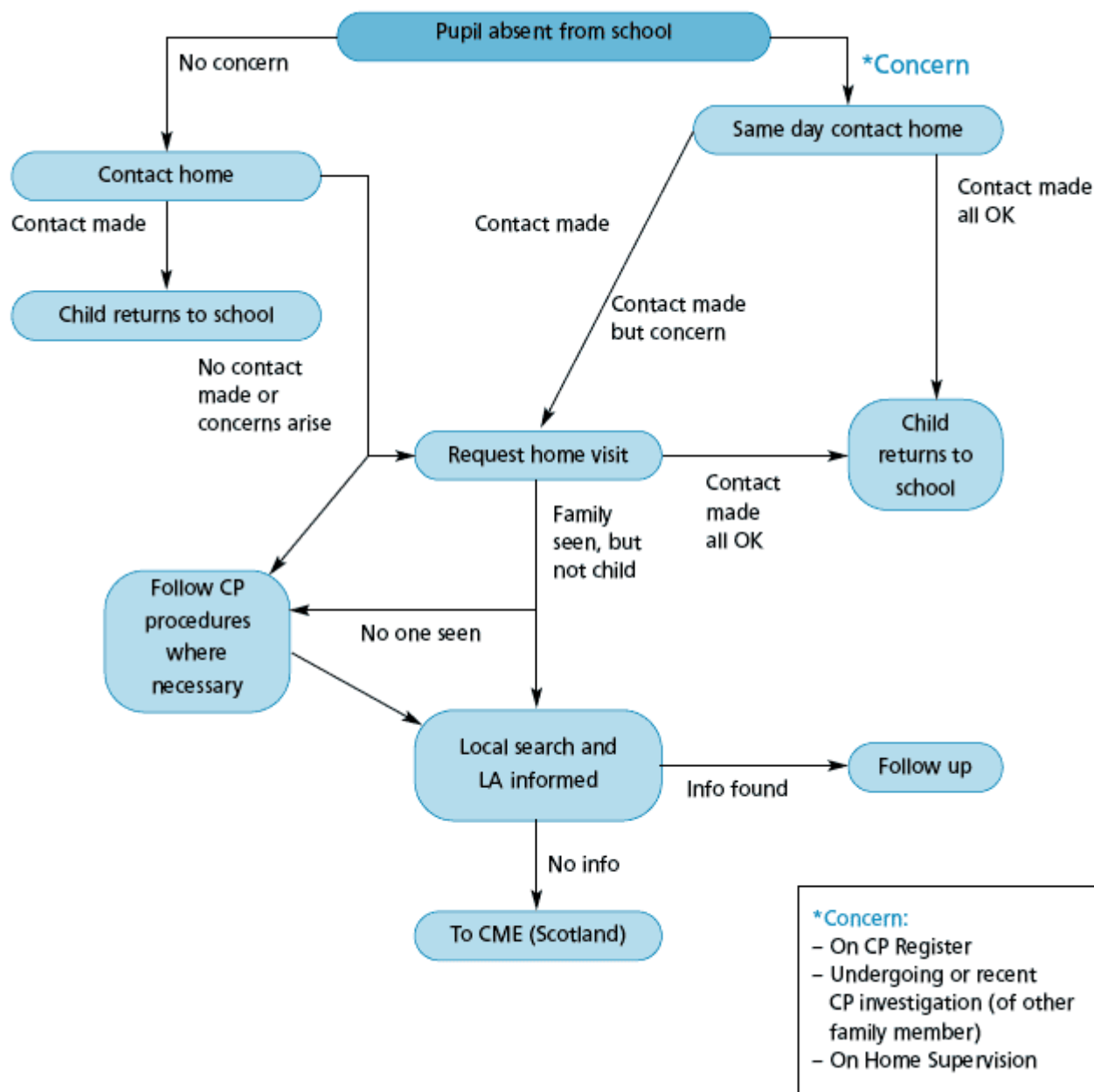
The school Child Protection Co-ordinator should be informed when a child is missing from education (and in any case when absence is erratic, as this may indicate concern). Information on the child should be gathered from staff, and any services associated with the school providing for the child. The child's school records should be reviewed to ensure they are up-to-date. The school (i.e. the Child Protection Co-ordinator) should contact the designated officer for child protection and children missing from education within the education authority.

Within the education authority, the designated CME contact should seek to establish if the child has enrolled in another local school, independent school or alternative provision; if other family members are also missing; if other service providers (e.g. housing department, social work, health services) in the local authority area are in touch with the child or family or have information on their whereabouts; or if other service providers have concerns about the safety and wellbeing of the child or family.

An agreed plan of action can be formulated to carry out a local search, within a required timescale, with appropriate follow up actions (including a referral to CME (Scotland)) if a child is not found within the authority area.

An example checklist and record to support local search procedures is provided in Annex C. Education authorities should ensure that an audit trail can illustrate all recording and communication in relation to locating children.

Fig 2: Children Missing Education - ensuring they are safe and well



National Searches - the role of Children Missing Education (Scotland)

After local searches, the designated officer for child protection and children missing from education within the education authority will consider making a referral to CME (Scotland). Timescales will vary according to each case and will depend on:

- the level of risk and protective actions required
- previous and current actions taken

To support effective practice, local authorities are requested to provide CME (Scotland) with a named contact person. This may be the education

authority's senior manager with designated responsibility for child protection issues (CPEM).

Referring a case to CME

The referral form in [Annex D](#) should be completed using the guidelines in [Annex E](#).

CME (Scotland) will receive referrals where local searches have proved unsuccessful.

Following a referral the CME (Scotland) will:

- send an acknowledgement to the referrer
- request further information as required from school, the school-to-school (S2S) warehouse (Scotxed data transfer) and any other relevant agencies
- search the School to School Warehouse database for a match
- make contact with relevant other local authorities (including those in other UK countries)
- maintain contact with the referrer regarding appropriate next steps (such as involving the police or others) and feedback on progress
- initiate multi agency collaboration across Scotland
- maintain records of cases
- initiate communication between the services in receiving areas and area left (education, social work, health, etc) to allow the transfer of information

Searching for a child

The safety and wellbeing of children is a shared responsibility of all services and the CME (Scotland) team will request that local authorities carry out searches across their own area. CME (Scotland) will coordinate wider searches across the range of local authorities and outside Scotland.

The named contact in the education authority will be asked by CME to confirm that local searches have been undertaken in conjunction with other local services.

Locating a child

After locating a child, relevant information will be provided by CME (Scotland) to the named CME contact in the local authority so that the child/ young person and their family can be supported to re-engage with education (and other services if necessary).

Gathering further information

When a child arrives in a school and information provided by the family is felt to be false or incomplete, CME (Scotland) will trace information and pass it to the named CME contact in the receiving local authority.

Transfer of information between education authorities and CME

CME (Scotland) will require sufficient information to enable the other authorities it contacts to locate a child.

The method of transferring information and the content will depend on the circumstances of the case and the need for confidentiality in specific cases (

i.e. where the child and family are at risk of serious harm if their whereabouts are known to an abuser).

Courses of action may include:

- contacting all the local authorities involved and requesting that they transfer information
- receiving records centrally and making files anonymous prior to transfer. In such cases, the child / young person and/or their parents or carers may be involved in the process to approve information which is transferred

Think carefully when you use information about us.

When a child is located - follow-up procedures

Once a child/young person is located, local authorities must then arrange to support the child's return to school using local arrangements. The success of re-engaging children and families with services is dependent on the building of trusting relationships with staff who can assist. Staff who carry out this role may be Education Welfare or Liaison Officers, Home Link teachers, Family Support Workers, etc.

Follow-up work with authorities may include:

- home visits
- making available to the parent / carer a placing request or other relevant enrolment form and information
- assisting in the completion of required forms and supporting school visits
- discussing and supporting practical arrangements such as clothing / school uniform, school transport, school meal entitlement, child care / after school care, etc
- liaising with relevant other children's services and ensuring that the family is aware of / in touch with services to meet their basic needs for accommodation, welfare benefits, health and dental care, etc
- following up with the school and family for a period of time (depending on circumstances) to support ongoing attendance to school

Feedback

The CME team will request feedback of progress on support arrangements and re-engagement of located children and young people, to allow closure of records and to develop a national picture of children missing from education.

The information required will be:

- name of school enrolled into
- start date
- any other services involved