

# Children missing from education

The actions taken to prevent children from missing education or becoming 'lost to the system'

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This survey evaluates the effectiveness of actions taken by local authorities in relation to children and young people who are missing from education. It considers whether legislation and guidance effectively support the authorities in protecting them. Children and young people who are not receiving education and whose whereabouts are unknown may be particularly at risk of physical, emotional and psychological harm.

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# Contents

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<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Key findings</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Defining who is ‘missing’</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>‘We don’t know what we don’t know’ – a local authority’s population</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The importance of prevention</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Acting on poor attendance</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Slipping through the gaps</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Missing from the system: tracking and tracing</b>	<b>20</b>
Local authorities’ use of tracking systems	20
The numbers recorded	22
<b>Notes</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Further information</b>	<b>24</b>
Ofsted publications	24
Publications by others	24
<b>Annex A: Extract from statutory guidance for local authorities in England</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Annex B: Local authorities visited for this survey</b>	<b>27</b>

## Executive summary

The aim of this survey was to evaluate the effectiveness of actions taken by local authorities in relation to children and young people who are missing from education or in danger of becoming so. It considers whether legislation and guidance support the local authorities effectively in protecting and educating them. Children and young people who are not being educated quickly become at risk of failing academically and socially. If their whereabouts then become unknown, they may be particularly at risk of physical, emotional and psychological harm.

Legislation requires local authorities to take responsibility for safeguarding all the children living within their boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Between September and December 2009, inspectors visited 15 local authorities of different sizes across England, both urban and rural. All the children's services departments visited had worked with other council departments and other agencies. However, while various agencies had partial knowledge, none of the children's services departments felt confident that it knew about all the children living in its area in order to fulfil its safeguarding duties fully. All the local authorities visited were challenged by the extent to which pupils moved within the authority, as well as in and out of it. One authority officer summed up the position when he said: 'The difficulties are when children are with their families and move around or move out of the borough, and the families don't let anyone know.' While there is no requirement for families to do this, the lack of such information adds to the difficulties that local authorities experience in tracking children.

The focus in the authorities surveyed was on implementing initiatives at a local level. The best authorities visited placed great emphasis on extensive work across different agencies. In five of the local authorities, health professionals were closely and systematically involved in identifying children who were not receiving any education. In these authorities, this had had a positive impact on finding children who had not been previously known to children's services departments and on enabling the children to be placed in schools.

Although the children's services departments had established clear protocols with maintained schools and academies for taking pupils off a school's roll, excluding them or putting part-time timetables in place, young people of secondary school age were potentially vulnerable because some schools did not follow guidelines and procedures. In addition, in all but one of the local authorities surveyed, there was little formal communication between the independent and state sectors about pupils' movements out of independent schools. The recent report by Sir Roger Singleton drew attention to the lack of clarity in the Education (Pupil registration) (England) 2006 regulations about communications between an independent school's proprietor

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<sup>1</sup> Children Act 1989; Education Act 2002; Children Act 2004.

and the local authority and recommended a change to legislation.<sup>2</sup> This change to legislation has not taken place.

For the authorities surveyed, national systems for exchanging information about children moving between areas were not sufficiently effective. Evidence from this survey about the 'School to school' system (run by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families – DCSF), which includes a 'lost pupil' database, showed that schools did not use the database consistently and therefore its effectiveness was reduced. As with all systems, people have to take responsibility for the quality of the data they enter and the way in which they use the system.

All the local authorities visited had a high level of awareness about how young people may become missing for reasons linked to forced marriages. While almost all of the authorities gave anecdotal information about one or more individuals who had stopped attending school for reasons which they suspected were linked to forced marriage, it was not possible for inspectors to gain information on this topic that was sufficiently robust. As a result, they were not able to reach a firm conclusion about the extent to which forced marriages contributed to some children and young people disappearing.

## Key findings

- The work of the local authorities visited consisted of three main strands: preventing poor school attendance and truancy; acting once absence occurred to establish children's safety and try to get them back to school; and taking action to trace children whose whereabouts were not known.
- In the best practice seen, preventing children from becoming 'missing' was a high-level strategic responsibility, often led by the education welfare service. It started with promoting good attendance from the moment children started school through to the end of compulsory education, and involved paying careful attention to key transition points such as the move from primary to secondary school.
- None of the children's services departments in the local authorities visited was confident that it knew of all the children living in its area. All the children's services departments felt hampered by the limitations of national systems for exchanging information about children moving between areas. To try to overcome this, all of them had worked with other council departments and had

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<sup>2</sup> Recommendation 4 of Sir Roger Singleton's report said: 'Children missing from Education: That DCSF, as part of the overhaul of the regulatory framework, should ensure that all independent and non-maintained schools are required to notify the LA when children of compulsory school age leave the roll, and to inform them of the destination where this is known to them.' *Keeping our school safe: review of safeguarding arrangements in independent schools, non-maintained special schools and boarding schools in England* (The Singleton Report), 2009; [www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/familyandcommunity/childprotection/safeguarding](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/familyandcommunity/childprotection/safeguarding).

continued to forge links with other agencies, but the extent and effectiveness of the exchange of information varied from one authority to another.

- In five of the 15 local authorities visited, the systematic involvement of health professionals in identifying children who were not receiving any education had had a positive impact on finding children who were not previously known to the local authorities and enabling them to be placed in school. Eight of the other authorities also involved health services, but to a lesser extent. The use of staff in health services to help identify children who might be missing from education was ineffective in two of the authorities visited.
- All but two of the local authorities had identified groups of children and young people who were perceived to be most at risk of missing education, based on national guidelines and the local area's characteristics. Sophisticated analysis of data in five of the authorities, based on good knowledge of previous patterns of children going missing, was used effectively to drive and reinforce work across different agencies.
- In six of the authorities, the Local Safeguarding Children Board regularly scrutinised the data about children who were missing from education and the actions being taken. In the other authorities, while some positive work was taking place, it was not routinely scrutinised by the Local Safeguarding Children Board.
- Even when the local authorities had clear policies and processes, with a strong emphasis on safeguarding, if schools disregarded them, this could quickly result in children and young people becoming lost to the system. Officers in all the authorities surveyed gave examples of schools which had not followed the agreed procedures for exclusions. The vulnerability of such pupils was significantly increased because they were out of school unofficially and preventative agencies were not aware of their potentially increased exposure to drugs, alcohol misuse, crime, pregnancy or mental health problems.
- The nine local authorities in which there were academies were struggling to establish consistent communication about children who were vulnerable to becoming missing, despite good cooperation from some of the academies.
- The preventative strategy of 'truancy watches'<sup>3</sup> in some authorities built trust and working relationships between local authority officers and the police and encouraged the sharing of information. Truancy watches were effective in identifying schools which had not followed the protocols for removing pupils from their rolls and in locating children who were unknown to the authority.
- Overall, there was little formal communication between the independent and state sectors about pupils' movements out of independent schools. Only one of

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<sup>3</sup> During truancy watches, education welfare officers and police officers patrol a local area, stopping any young people who appear to be of school age, finding out why they are not at school and, if appropriate, returning them to school.

the 15 local authorities visited systematically and regularly involved the independent sector.

- Schools in the authorities visited did not always follow the legislation on attendance which requires them to keep Traveller children on the roll of their 'base school'. The result was that if the school was full, Traveller children were unable to be readmitted when they returned to the school. If the family was reluctant for the child to attend another school, this led to absence.
- Legislation allows schools to take pupils off roll when they have not attended for 20 continuous school days, subject to certain conditions. However, this legislation applies to all children and young people, including those who may be vulnerable.<sup>4</sup> Pupils who take extended holidays in term time, young carers who fail to respond to enquiries about their whereabouts and those returning from custodial sentences are therefore among those liable to lose their school place.<sup>5</sup> Local authorities, however, have few powers to stop this happening.

## Recommendations

The Department for Education should:

- consider what national systems are required to enable vulnerable children to be tracked effectively through their compulsory education
- work with other government departments to clarify and agree the roles and responsibilities for each part of local government in identifying children who live in a local authority, and to ensure that there are clear expectations and protocols for sharing information
- ensure that all academies communicate clearly with the local authority in which they are situated on matters related to absence, exclusions and taking children off roll
- ensure that independent schools understand and comply with the requirement to inform the local authority in which they are situated when they take a child off roll or when a child's whereabouts are unknown
- strengthen the role of the local authority in deciding which children are removed from a school's roll and when, in order to safeguard those who are potentially vulnerable
- challenge unsafe or inappropriate practices from academies with regard to taking children off roll.

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<sup>4</sup> The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006. This does not apply to Travellers in some situations (see Section 9 of the Regulations). <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2006/20061751.htm>

<sup>5</sup> See also: *Transition through detention and custody: arrangements for learning and skills for young people in custodial or secure settings* (090115), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090115](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090115)

Local authorities should:

- ensure that all maintained schools communicate clearly and cooperate fully with them on matters related to absence, exclusions and taking children off roll, and challenge unsafe or inappropriate practices
- ensure that their guidance and protocols draw to the attention of all headteachers that advising pupils to stay at home without this being considered as an official exclusion is unlawful and places the pupils at risk
- work closely with primary care trusts to ensure that they capitalise on the knowledge of health professionals in ensuring that children do not go missing from the education and care systems
- ensure that schools keep pupils from Traveller families on roll as required by the regulations.

Schools, including academies and non-maintained and independent schools, should:

- follow consistently the legal requirements and the agreed local authority protocols for taking children off roll and for reporting to the relevant authority when they are missing
- keep Traveller children on roll during periods of planned absence, as required by the regulations
- ensure that their safeguarding policies and processes give due weight to non-attendance and children being out of school.

## Defining who is 'missing'

1. All local authorities are required to make arrangements to enable them to establish, as far as it is possible to do so, the identities of children living in their area who are not receiving a suitable education. 'Suitable education' is defined as 'efficient full-time education suitable to her/his age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs the child may have.'<sup>6</sup> Children who are not receiving a suitable education either through school, alternative provision or home education are often referred to as children who are 'missing education'.
2. The 15 local authorities surveyed approached this area of their work actively. Rather than focusing solely on children who were already missing education, they helped to prevent poor school attendance and truancy. The authorities acted swiftly once absence occurred to ensure those at risk of missing education were supported effectively, as well as acting to trace children whose whereabouts were unknown. This report evaluates these aspects of the local authorities' work.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Suitable' education is defined in the *Statutory guidance (revised) for local authorities in England to identify children not receiving a suitable education*, DCSF, 2009; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00202/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00202/).



## **'We don't know what we don't know' – a local authority's population**

3. In order to identify children who are not receiving a suitable education, a local authority has to know which children live in its area. None of the children's services departments in the local authorities visited was confident that it was aware of all the children living in its area. Officers in the authorities visited consistently said, 'We don't know what we don't know.'
4. While each of the local authorities surveyed had records of children born in the area, this by no means provided a complete record of a population.
5. Families constantly move into and out of areas. Current national systems for sharing information as children move between schools are limited in their efficiency. There is no obligation for families who choose to educate their children at home to register this intention with the local authority. Moreover, no national system for tracking children from birth onwards is fully in operation. As a result, local authorities are hampered in fulfilling their duties to safeguard children and young people.
6. The incomplete nature of the information held by children's services departments was illustrated in one of the local authorities visited which had a shortfall of 50 places in its Reception classes in the year preceding the survey, despite its careful planning based on the numbers of pre-school-aged children of which it was aware.
7. The number of children recorded by the local authorities as being missing from education and those who were 'lost' to an authority in one year varied considerably. One small authority reported that it had six children whose whereabouts were unknown. Another much larger rural authority had received 1,113 'Children Missing Education' forms in the spring term of 2009. By the time of the survey in October 2009, it had traced more than half of these pupils, but still had 438 active cases. A third authority, of a similar size and type to the second, had had 440 cases since the start of 2009, of which it had traced 317 by the time of the survey, leaving the destinations of 123 still unknown.
8. To tackle the pressing issue of finding out which children lived in an area, children's services departments in all the local authorities visited worked with other council departments. In all but two of the authorities, communication between departments on this issue was largely at an early stage of development. There was no consistency across the authorities about which departments worked with which to gain a full picture of the authority's child population. While some children's services teams sought information from the housing department, others were trying to forge links with the benefits team, or emphasised the establishment of close working relationships with health services colleagues in the local area. All the authorities had had difficulties in establishing practices for sharing information across council departments and

key partners. There was considerable variation in different departments' interpretation of the concept of sharing information. As one local authority officer noted: 'It all seems to come down to individual contacts and how much they are willing to share.'

9. The exchange of information between local authorities about families moving in and out of areas was not systematic enough. All the authorities seen provided examples of children who had moved into their area of whom they had not initially been aware. In one case, a family was moved into the area as part of a witness protection programme. The family's existence became known to the local authority only when a child from the family committed a crime. At this point it was discovered that there were also two more children in the family and none was receiving education. Another authority expressed concern about women and their children being moved into refuges in the area without the authority being told.
10. For nine of the 15 local authorities visited, the challenge of knowing the nature of their highly mobile and complex populations was immense. For example, an incident in a block of flats led one authority to discover families who were not listed as residents, and children who were being privately fostered but were not officially registered as such. The authorities saw their greatest difficulty as keeping track of children in transient families who stayed in the authority for only a short period of time, often in low-cost private rented housing. This was illustrated by the local authority officer who told inspectors:

The unaccompanied children who are dropped off on the motorway on a Sunday night and picked up by the police – they are the easy ones to pick up and trace. The difficulties are when children are with their families and move around or move out of the borough, and the families don't let anyone know.

To a lesser extent, these problems were also challenging the smaller or less complex local authorities.

11. Four of the local authorities had regular contact with the UK Border Agency, while for others such contact was sporadic.<sup>7</sup> However, through other sources such as health visitors, almost all the children's services departments in the authorities visited had discovered children living in their area who were international new arrivals and were not attending school. One authority received good information from the UK Border Agency when children arrived in the authority but found that, when the children were removed to be deported, they were not informed promptly enough. In one example given to inspectors, officers spent three days trying to trace a vulnerable child who had gone

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<sup>7</sup> The UK Border Agency is responsible for securing the United Kingdom's borders and controlling migration into the country. For further information, see: [www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/](http://www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/).

missing before they were informed that the child had been removed from the authority before being deported.

12. All the local authorities visited were aware of the wealth of information held by health professionals about the number and whereabouts of children living in an area. While all but two of the children's services departments had positive working relationships with colleagues in health services, only five of them systematically involved them in identifying children who were not known to the education system. In the weakest practice, the authority did not identify health services as a way of identifying children who were missing from education. The most effective practice, seen in two of the authorities, involved placing health professionals at the centre of the strategy for ensuring that children were known to the system, as illustrated below.

A local authority had created the post of specialist public health nurse for vulnerable children and young people. This had had a considerable impact, enabling the authority to discover children who were not previously known to it. At the heart of the work was a simple but effective system of exchanging information. The public health nurse agreed with the local hospital's accident and emergency department that each time a family attended, the nurses would ask the name of the child's school. If none was given or they were unconvinced by the answer, a standard form was submitted to the public health nurse, who followed this up.

A further safeguard was the health check when a child reached the age of three and a half. Health visitors asked which nursery or Sure Start centre the child attended. If, at that point, the child did not attend any provision, the health visitor notified the local authority, which logged the child's name to ensure that the family received a form when the child was due to start school. If this brought no response, this was followed up. Strong informal networks and contacts supplemented these formal systems. As a result of this work, over the course of a year, over 60 children had been 'found' who were not in school or known to the local authority. Around 25 of them were newly resident in the UK. One case involved seven children in one family, none of whom was in school and about whom the authority had serious safeguarding concerns.

## The importance of prevention

13. Preventing poor attendance from starting is key to ensuring that children do not eventually become missing from the education system altogether. The best practice observed during the survey involved a careful analysis by senior local authority officers of the institutional barriers to children's attendance and a focus on solutions, as illustrated here.

Two authorities concluded that many parents who had often had poor experiences of school themselves did not fully appreciate the importance

of good attendance. They therefore focused on working with parents from the beginning to communicate expectations that their children should attend school regularly. This began in all of the children's centres when a member of staff telephoned parents on the first morning of their child's absence to reinforce, from the beginning, the message that good attendance mattered. As a result, attendance at primary schools in these authorities had increased considerably.

One authority's data showed it had gradually reduced absence in its primary schools, yet absence remained stubbornly high in many of the secondary schools. Its analysis showed that attendance in Year 7 started reasonably well but steadily dropped over the course of the secondary phase. Authority staff held discussions with pupils and concluded that they sometimes found it hard to adapt to the less active style of the lessons in their secondary schools. Following discussions with schools and pupils, it experimented by deploying primary-trained advanced skills teachers into the secondary schools to help the schools to reorganise the curriculum, broaden teaching methods and improve the ethos to smooth the transition. This intervention was already having a positive effect on reducing absence because pupils were enjoying their lessons more as a result of an improved curriculum and teaching.

14. Another local authority identified that a key reason for pupils' attendance rates falling when they transferred to secondary school was fear of each other and of being bullied; these feelings, however, often derived from incidents which had taken place after school. Individual pupils' involvement in crime was also a factor leading to poor attendance. The authority responded by setting up an innovative 'street engagement' programme.

The youth offending team's 'street engagement' programme included after school patrols, working in conjunction with secondary school staff and the police. The aim of the patrols was to ensure that students left school safely and that they felt safe. The patrols also provided an opportunity for the team to develop a rapport with the young people and encourage them to participate in organised activities in the evenings, such as boxing classes. The visibility of these patrols reassured young people, local schools and communities in areas where disturbances tended to occur. The programme also promoted the safety of vulnerable or disaffected children and young people who were unsupervised on the streets and in the parks in the evening. The schools reported that this work had made a significant contribution to improving attendance and reducing truancy, and the team also noted a reduction in juvenile crime.

15. Understanding children and young people's reasons for starting to miss school was important in reducing absence. One alternative provision centre held a

discussion with young people of secondary school age about their reasons for not attending. This uncovered their perceptions about the way they were treated at school and about the relationships between pupils and teachers. Having encouraged them to express their views openly, the centre's staff were able to plan strategies to support schools to work more effectively with the young people. The staff were able to suggest to the schools some alternative curriculum provision and ensured that the young people were able to talk to a trusted adult about their difficulties. Importantly, the centre also put a strong emphasis on helping the young people to change some of their attitudes and deal confidently with challenges. The centre's data showed that, while almost all of the young people still struggled, to some extent, to cope when they returned to school, they showed noticeably positive changes in their behaviour, attitudes and attendance.

16. Analysis of 'at risk' groups put the local authorities in a stronger position to take preventative action. Guidance from the former DCSF identifies 25 different groups of children and young people who are particularly at risk of not receiving a suitable education, including children who are looked after, on the child protection register, bullied or privately fostered, and those who are teenage parents.<sup>8</sup> All but two of the authorities had identified and listed for themselves particular groups of children and young people who were at risk of going missing from education.<sup>9</sup> While all were based on the former DCSF's guidance, the best practice made this fit the local context.

A particularly extensive analysis in one local authority visited included 17 different 'at risk' groups, based on the former DCSF's guidance but adapted to the local circumstances. For example, its analysis included:

- unaccompanied asylum seeking children
- children leaving secure accommodation
- those who had been unsuccessful in their appeal for a place at a particular school
- children who had moved into the area seeking refuge from domestic violence.

For each group, the authority had identified:

- which professionals led the strategy for that group

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<sup>8</sup> *Statutory guidance (revised) for local authorities in England to identify children not receiving a suitable education*, DCSF, 2009; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00202/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00202/). Annex A provides further details.

<sup>9</sup> See also Ofsted's report, *Reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training: what works and why* (090236), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090236](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090236).

- how the children would be identified
- what action would be taken
- the links which would need to be made with other professionals.

The strategy had led to an increasingly sophisticated and effective response to the problem of children missing education and becoming 'lost' to the system.

17. Gypsy/Roma and Travellers of Irish heritage have by far the highest rate of absence from school and the highest exclusion rates of any ethnic group.<sup>10</sup> In all the local authorities visited, staff working with Traveller families were highly aware of their needs and were working effectively with schools and with other local authority staff to improve the provision and outcomes for the children and young people. The authorities were also effective in keeping track of the whereabouts of these families as they moved around the country.
18. The schools, however, did not always keep pupils on roll during periods of planned seasonal travel as they are required to do. One authority quoted the example of a school which had taken Traveller children and young people off its roll while they were travelling. When they returned, no place was available at their previous school and they were unwilling to attend another. At the time of the survey, the case was continuing as no mutually acceptable solution had been found. In the meantime, the children were not attending school.
19. Children who spend time in refuges for victims of domestic violence comprise a second group in particular danger of going missing. Because they are frequently outside their home area, the children cannot attend their own school. In the areas where the local authority's links with the refuges were weak, the children were not always registered with schools. Practice in three of the authorities visited, however, was particularly effective in ensuring that children living in refuges stayed in education.

One of the authorities had worked with the staff in all its refuges so the staff helped the residents of the refuges to register their children in school as soon as they arrived.

Another local authority had employed nursery workers in refuges to work with the younger children.

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<sup>10</sup> See *Pupil absence in schools in England, including pupil characteristics, 2007/08*, DCSF, 2008; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000832/index.shtml](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000832/index.shtml). *Permanent and fixed period exclusions from schools and exclusion appeals in England 2007/08*, DCSF, 2009; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000860/index.shtml](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000860/index.shtml).

In a third authority, social care workers linked to the refuge liaised closely with the education welfare officer. This ensured that children were quickly found a school place and given any help they needed to attend.

## Acting on poor attendance

20. Casual truancy can be the start of a pattern of poor attendance. This can lead to children missing education altogether, as well as placing children and young people in situations that are unsafe. In 14 of the local authorities visited, partnerships between education welfare services and the police were a key part of the work to reduce truancy. Twelve of the authorities ran regular truancy patrols where education welfare officers and police officers worked together, and one of the others ran periodic truancy sweeps. These were valuable in finding children and young people who were potentially vulnerable. In one authority, a series of truancy sweeps over two months stopped around 200 children and young people. Of these, four were not on any school roll. Another local authority, with high levels of persistent absence and a vulnerable population, extended the truancy watch further than most. One of the officers focused on Year 10 pupils who were persistently late: having identified absentees by looking at a school's register, he went immediately to the home to challenge the young person and the family and escort the individual to school. Schools reported that these 'doorstep visits' had improved attendance and punctuality and kept pupils engaged in school.
21. Three particularly simple but highly effective systems to reduce truancy are described in the following examples.

Local police in one of the authorities had established a highly effective initiative to reduce truancy through which they maintained radio contact with schools and local businesses that chose to belong to the scheme. This allowed for immediate checking if the police met a young person who was out of school during the school day or if shopkeepers saw young people out of school. This not only helped to tackle non-attendance but was also proving useful in picking up pupils who truanted once they had registered at school.

An authority had issued all its secondary school students who spent any time officially off site, such as at college, work experience or on a part-time timetable, with a pass. Police, community support officers and shopkeepers were encouraged to ask young people for these passes and to alert the schools of any young people without a pass.

A local authority had designed a simple but ingenious system to reduce truancy. A sheet showing the uniform badge of each secondary school, in full colour, with a phone number, was given to all police, shopkeepers,

station employees and other public employees such as park attendants. This enabled them to contact schools as soon as any concerns arose about children being out of school.

22. Ineffective or inconsistently used electronic recording systems limited the ability of some of the local authorities to receive attendance information from schools quickly and efficiently. In one authority visited, the electronic registration system was used well to alert the attendance service to changes in attendance and long-term absence, but this was undermined by the 12 schools which did not use the same electronic system as the other schools and the authority. In contrast, one local authority's education welfare officer could interrogate the data as soon as they were entered so that he knew which children who were of concern were absent from school. The information gave the authority's education welfare service 'a critical picture of every child we particularly need to know about so we can make some timely home visits'. This system complemented the schools' own responses and was seen as an additional layer of safeguarding. Although the other authorities visited used electronic systems to some extent, these were not developed fully.
23. Local authorities which analysed their schools' data closely were able to direct their resources where they were most needed and intervene before poor attendance became embedded. Such analysis also enabled them to observe patterns of absence across the authority which might not have come to light in one or two schools only. One authority discovered that some newly arrived Eastern European families tended to keep their children away from school for longer than average when they were ill. This enabled the authority to produce information for parents to encourage better attendance.
24. Families who took holidays in term time were a significant concern for the headteachers who spoke to inspectors as part of this survey. Headteachers, often backed or led by governors, took action to discourage such holidays, because they led to a lack of continuity in pupils' learning and promoted the idea that attendance at school was not important. Nevertheless, they still sometimes struggled to convince parents that taking holidays in term time was not acceptable.
25. The local authorities had a range of strategies to re-engage pupils who were persistently absent or who had withdrawn themselves from school altogether. A team in one authority, known as the 'pupil engagement team', aimed to re-engage young people of secondary school age who had had more than 20 days of continuous absence.

Each person in the team had responsibility for a group of young people. A key part of the role was to work with the family, analysing the barriers to the pupil's attendance or success and engaging the parents in supporting their child because, as one team member commented, 'It's never just



about not going to school.’ The work often involved securing support for the parents themselves.

This was a short-term intervention: the aim was to re-engage the young person in mainstream education within a term. This was made clear to the parents and students at the start. Young people attended a centre for two mornings a week during which they did basic work on literacy and numeracy, and studied social skills, and personal, social and health education. The team commissioned other placements for the young person according to her or his needs and interests, such as a placement to study hairdressing or work at a garage.

Success rates were high, with many of the young people returning to school or going to college within the allotted term. One young person attributed his success to the good relationships the staff had built up with him and with his family: ‘School didn’t listen – they listen to you here. They respect you and they don’t keep phoning up your home for bad things – they phone up for good things instead.’

The team leader expressed concern about a few schools removing children from their roll, which meant that once they were ready to return there was no place for them: ‘While some are cooperative and keep the place open, others will remove them from roll very quickly, and it’s hard to get them into somewhere else. They quickly lose their confidence then, and we’re back to square one.’

## Slipping through the gaps

26. Even where the local authorities’ policies and processes were clear, with an appropriately strong emphasis on safeguarding, if schools chose to disregard them this could quickly result in children and young people becoming lost to the system. Officers in all the authorities surveyed gave examples of schools which had not followed the agreed procedures for excluding children, putting them on part-time timetables or taking them off roll. This disregard for procedures and legal requirements put the child at risk. Half the authorities surveyed were particularly concerned about the risks posed by unofficial exclusions. These are illegal. One local authority officer called these ‘back door exclusions – the “Don’t come back until we tell you” types’. He went on to say: ‘Some young people and their parents take this instruction literally and the young person is at home for weeks before this is then picked up as non-attendance.’
27. Officers in one local authority reported that two schools had attempted to persuade parents to educate their children at home rather than having them

excluded.<sup>11</sup> When the parents approached the local authority to register the children as being educated at home, the authority found that the parents were not doing this by choice and challenged the schools. While the local authorities were well aware of the serious concerns about safeguarding posed by such practices and the authority's responsibility to challenge them, they were frustrated that they were not always aware of the incidents when they occurred.

28. Poor communication between schools and parents was another factor which risked pupils becoming lost to the system. In one case, a parent whose child had been experiencing difficulties wrote to the secondary school to say that she was 'considering taking him off roll'. The school removed him from the roll at once. The combination of the pupil's disaffection, the parent's unhappiness and the misunderstanding meant that the young person was out of school for over a year. Staff in a centre which worked with long-term absentees expressed concern to inspectors that sometimes parents' reading skills were not sufficient for them to understand communications from the school or they were not confident enough to challenge the schools. To avoid misunderstandings, the centre's staff often accompanied parents to meetings to smooth relationships and support effective communication.
29. Two of the local authorities had discontinued 'managed moves'<sup>12</sup> of pupils between schools as their initial trials led them to believe that the moves were open to abuse by schools and could lead to pupils becoming lost to the system. At the time of the survey, the authorities were insisting that, where necessary, the schools excluded the pupils permanently. This meant that they were then known to the local authority officers and part of a centrally administered local authority system.
30. In one of the authorities visited, a young person was picked up during a truancy sweep at which the inspector was present. The young person said that he had been out of school on an exclusion for four weeks. The education welfare officer followed this up as there was no record from the school of the exclusion having taken place. Inspectors came across similar cases in other authorities during the survey.
31. Children and young people who were removed from the rolls of independent schools also caused concern to the authorities visited. With the exception of one authority which had strong protocols with its independent schools, all the authorities were concerned about safeguarding children and young people because of the risks posed by the lack of shared information. The two cases

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<sup>11</sup> This is also discussed in *Local authorities and home education (090267)*, Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090267](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090267).

<sup>12</sup> Managed moves provide an alternative to excluding a pupil. The headteacher of a school may ask the headteacher of another to admit the pupil so that she or he might have a fresh start.

described here indicate how easily pupils can go missing when local authorities are not notified.

A pupil referral unit admitted a pupil from a maintained school who had been permanently excluded. Noticing a year-long gap in his attendance record, the leader of the pupil referral unit made enquiries and discovered that the pupil had left an independent school but his parents had not enrolled him in another school for a year, during which time he had been unknown to the local authority.

A child attended an independent school for a period of time, left, but no one in the local authority was informed. He was missing from education for several months. He was identified by chance when he was referred to an education officer by a health visitor.

32. In contrast to the two cases described above, one of the local authorities visited had developed good practice in this area.

The authority ran an education safeguarding forum which was open to all the schools in the borough. It was highly valued by independent schools. The forum met every half term for about an hour and a half and focused on particular topics, including electronic communication, cyber-bullying, serious case reviews, and the role of the local authority's designated officer for safeguarding. Good practice was shared and the forum provided an effective opportunity for exchanging information.

The local authority also emailed the schools regularly to remind them to inform the authority if they were taking a child off their roll. This had resulted in a much-improved exchange of information between the maintained and independent sectors.

33. As noted earlier, current legislation allows schools to take pupils off the school roll when they have not attended for 20 continuous school days, subject to certain conditions. This may deter some parents from taking their children on long holidays. However, taking pupils off roll may also put potentially vulnerable children at risk. Although a school is obliged to inform the local authority if it removes a pupil from the roll, she or he is still entitled to a school place and the authority is still under a duty to provide it. If pupils retain their school place, then problems of absence can be tackled where the pupils are already known.
34. Ofsted's report on the transition of children and young people through detention and custody also drew attention to the difficulties of returning children and young people to mainstream provision.<sup>13</sup> Children and young

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<sup>13</sup> *Transition through detention and custody* (090115), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090115](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090115)

people who had been in secure training centres and who had been attending a mainstream school at the time they committed an offence were more likely to be accepted back into school. However, it was far more difficult to find a place for those who had been attending a pupil referral unit or some form of part-time education at the time of the offence.

35. All the local authorities visited had a high level of awareness about how young people may become missing for reasons linked to forced marriages. One local authority had a policy to encourage schools to check that pupils had return tickets when they were leaving for an extended holiday and to notify the authority if the school had any concerns. Another placed great emphasis on their links with other education welfare services, which allowed them to gain information quickly when needed. This authority gave the example of a young woman who was living in their area with relatives and requested an extended holiday in order for her to visit her parents in another part of England. Because the authority had concerns about the possibility of a forced marriage, officers alerted the education welfare service in that area, who discovered she was not where she was meant to be. They reported that she was eventually traced, was back at school and achieving well.
36. Almost all the authorities expressed concern, anecdotally, about the well-being of one or more individuals, usually young women, who had stopped attending school, sometimes apparently to be educated at home. However, little secure evidence was given to inspectors to enable them to make a firm judgement on the extent to which forced marriages were the reasons for some children and young people going missing.

## **Missing from the system: tracking and tracing**

### **Local authorities' use of tracking systems**

37. The local authorities placed great importance on having clear systems to track pupils' whereabouts as soon as a move of school was likely. One of the authorities visited required its own schools to submit a weekly return, noting each child who had been added to or removed from the roll. Schools were expected to submit a 'nil return' if they had nothing to note, and this was stringently adhered to by all the state schools. However, academies and independent schools did not take part, so the picture was incomplete.
38. All the local authorities visited had developed appropriate relationships with other authorities, but there was still the potential for pupils attending schools in neighbouring authorities to become lost to the system. One small local authority bordering a large conurbation found that 25% of its school places were taken by children who lived in the neighbouring city. This made it more difficult to track them if they ceased to attend because they had to rely on systems and staff other than their own to provide them with the information they needed.

39. All the local authorities visited reported that the schools used the former DCSF's School to School system to transfer information about pupils who had left and also to log those who had left without their parents having informed the school of their destination.<sup>14</sup> Generally, the authorities found that because schools did not use the School to School system consistently, its effectiveness was limited. One local authority officer summed up a common view when he commented:

The system itself is OK but not all authorities use it and others just abuse it – they send out blanket e-mails about pupils, which isn't the point at all – so in the end it doesn't really work.

Children whose whereabouts could not be traced were also placed on the national Lost Pupil Database section of the School to School system, intended to allow authorities to alert each other should a child on this database appear in their area.

40. In addition to the national systems, all the local authorities had their own systems for tracking and tracing children whose whereabouts were uncertain or unknown. The best authorities visited placed great emphasis on extensive work across different agencies.

In one of the authorities, a Children Missing Education group consisted of local authority officers, data managers, case managers and a specialist public health nurse. The group had developed a comprehensive system to try to prevent children from going missing and to work with those who were long-term absentees.

The work began with a weekly tracking of children who were added to and taken off school rolls. As soon as a child was taken off roll, the common transfer form had to be sent to the receiving school. The education welfare officer was involved promptly if this did not happen or if the child did not arrive at the next school. Electronic recording systems, both national and local, were used extensively to keep track of children. The authority had set up its own web exchange for its schools where data about pupils were cross-referenced with the annual school census data.

The tracking group designed a way of recording all children in danger of becoming missing from education and each action taken with each child. All the 30 staff, including local authority officers, who were involved in individual casework had access to the log. This prevented duplication and ensured accountability because each action was dated and the next steps

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<sup>14</sup> The former DCSF's 'School to school' (s2s) is a secure website for transferring data. It is available to schools and local authorities in England and Wales and was designed to enable Common Transfer Format files to be sent from, and to, any maintained school. It can also be used by independent schools. For further information, see: [www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/ims/datatransfers/s2s/](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/ims/datatransfers/s2s/).

to be taken were clearly recorded. The system was extensive and there was a clear record for each of the children who fell into this category.

## The numbers recorded

41. Of the 15 local authorities visited, 13 were able to tell inspectors the number of children who had become 'lost' in the authority over a defined period, that is, that a child had left a school, the school did not know where the child had moved to and the local authority had been unable to trace the child's whereabouts. Data in two of the authorities were not sufficiently clear for the authorities to know the number of children who had been lost and found during the course of a year.
42. The variation in the numbers recorded (see paragraph 7) appeared to be related to the size of the authority, the complexity and mobility of its population, and the extent of its knowledge about this group of children. One local authority, for example, had found that the number of missing children it recorded had increased as its systems for tracking and tracing them had improved. However, the figures highlight the significant extent of the problem, particularly in larger or more complex authorities.
43. Local authorities are required to make a 'reasonable enquiry' to trace the whereabouts of children who are missing, a requirement which may be interpreted in different ways.<sup>15</sup> Three of the local authorities reported the considerable efforts they had made, over and above those required, to trace the whereabouts of children who had moved to other countries. One had traced a child to a school in India, another to a school in Ghana and another to America.
44. The joint Chief Inspectors' report, *Safeguarding children*,<sup>16</sup> noted considerable variation across Local Safeguarding Children Boards in the extent to which they monitored incidents of children going missing. Six of the local authorities in this survey gave a high profile at Local Safeguarding Children Board meetings to children who were missing education and those lost to the system. In these six authorities, data were presented to the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the actions taken by a range of agencies were discussed and analysed.
45. The best practice helped to hold different partners to account. In one authority, for example, the headteacher of an independent school was a member of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. This had proved to be successful in raising the profile of procedures for tracking children in the independent sector. In the

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<sup>15</sup> As referred to in Regulation 8(1)(f)(iii) and (h)(iii) of the Education (Pupil Registration) Regulations 2006; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/schoolattendance/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/schoolattendance/).

<sup>16</sup> *Safeguarding children: the third joint chief inspectors' report on arrangements to safeguard children* (080062), Ofsted (on behalf of eight inspectorates), 2008; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080062](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080062).

other authorities, however, while some positive work was taking place, it was not routinely scrutinised by the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

## Notes

Inspectors visited 15 local authorities across England of different sizes, both urban and rural.

Inspectors held discussions with directors of children's services, school improvement officers, education welfare officers and their teams; health professionals; officers in charge of Traveller education, the achievement of minority ethnic groups, and behaviour support services; youth offending teams, police officers, support workers and leaders of various projects. Inspectors scrutinised a range of data and documents the local authorities held about children who were missing, the authorities' processes for monitoring truancy and absence, and initiatives which were taking place.

Inspectors also joined a truancy watch and a street project run by a youth offending team, visited a health centre, a Travellers' site and centres for pupils who were not attending school. These inspection activities helped to illustrate the work of the authorities in which they were taking place. Inspectors took opportunities to talk to young people about their experiences and also met headteachers from both independent and state schools.

## Further information

### Ofsted publications

*Day six of exclusion: the extent and quality of provision for pupils* (080255), Ofsted, 2009; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080255](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080255).

*Reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training: what works and why* (090236), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090236](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090236).

*Transition through detention and custody: Arrangements for learning and skills for young people in custodial or secure settings* (090115), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090115](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090115).

*Local authorities and home education* (090267), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090267](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090267).

*Safeguarding children: the third joint chief inspectors' report on arrangements to safeguard children* (080062), Ofsted (on behalf of eight inspectorates), 2008; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080062](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080062)

*Admission and discharge from secure accommodation* (090228), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090228](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090228).

### Publications by others

*Keeping our school safe: review of safeguarding arrangements in independent schools, non-maintained special schools and boarding schools in England* (The Singleton Report), 2009; [www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/familyandcommunity/childprotection/safeguarding](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/familyandcommunity/childprotection/safeguarding).

Statutory guidance (revised) for local authorities in England to identify children not receiving a suitable education, DCSF, 2009; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00202/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00202/).

*Pupil absence in schools in England, including pupil characteristics, 2007/08*, DCSF, 2008; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000832/index.shtml](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000832/index.shtml).

*Permanent and fixed period exclusions from schools and exclusion appeals in England 2007/08*, DCSF, 2009; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000860/index.shtml](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000860/index.shtml)



## Annex A: Extract from statutory guidance for local authorities in England

The former DCSF's revised statutory guidance for local authorities in England to identify children not receiving a suitable education says (paragraph 31):

'Some children living in certain circumstances face more obstacles to achieving the five ECM [Every Child Matters] Outcomes and this can include not receiving a suitable education. Amongst these are (this list is not exclusive):

- children and young people under the supervision of the youth justice system
- children from families fleeing domestic violence
- children of homeless families, perhaps living in temporary accommodation, house of multiple occupancy or bed and breakfast
- young runaways
- children in families involved in anti-social behaviour
- children who are on the child protection register
- children affected by substance and/or alcohol misuse
- unaccompanied asylum seekers; children of refugees and asylum seeking families
- children in new immigrant families, who are not yet established in the UK and may not have fixed addresses
- children of migrant worker families (who may not be familiar with the education system)
- children of families who can be highly mobile, e.g. parents in the armed forces, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families
- children who do not receive a suitable education whilst being educated at home
- children who have been bullied
- children who have suffered discrimination on the grounds of race, faith, gender, disability or sexuality
- children at risk of sexual exploitation, including children who have been trafficked to, or within the UK
- children at risk of 'honour'-based violence including forced marriage or female genital mutilation
- looked after children/children in care; children who go missing from care
- children who are privately fostered
- young carers

- teenage parents
- children who are permanently excluded from school, particularly those excluded unlawfully e.g. for problematic behaviour or offending children whose parents take them abroad for a prolonged period
- children who were registered with a school that has closed, and have not made the transition to another school
- children of parents with mental health problems
- children of parents with learning difficulties
- children with long term medical or emotional problems.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Statutory guidance (revised) for local authorities in England to identify children not receiving a suitable education, DCSF, 2009; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00202/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00202/).

## **Annex B: Local authorities visited for this survey**

Bury

Derbyshire

Herefordshire

Leicester

London Borough of Barnet

London Borough of Southwark

Norfolk

North Tyneside

Poole

Sandwell

Shropshire

Solihull

Southend

Sunderland

Worcestershire