



The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP
Secretary of State for Education

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/contactus/dfes

19 July 2023

Dear Chief Executives,

LETTER TO LAs: CALL TO SUPPORT STRONG ATTENDANCE FROM THE FIRST DAY OF TERM.

I am writing to thank you for your hard work and dedication over the past school year in supporting school attendance, and to ask for your continued support in ensuring strong attendance from day one of the new academic year.

Together, we have begun to turn the tide on one of the biggest challenges that COVID-19 has posed to children and young people, their academic and wider development and safety. Over 350,000 fewer pupils were persistently absent in Spring 2023 compared to Summer 2022 and this is due to the collective efforts of the public services that support children and families. Councils up and down the country have responded with purpose to [new school attendance guidance](#) which sets out how schools and local authorities should work together to tackle absence, focusing on a 'support first' approach.

However, as I said at the [LGA conference](#) earlier this month, there is more to do, with absence rates still well above pre-Covid levels, and the most vulnerable children more likely to be absent. Improving attendance is a critical priority for me and the Department, for the Levelling Up agenda, and I know for local authorities as well. We know attendance has long term impacts on a child's life chances, including attainment, employment prospects and future earnings. We need to work together on this issue. To that end, I have written to schools to recognise their efforts and ask them to prepare for the warmest possible welcome for all children and families this September - including those who may have struggled with attendance in the past. We know that those first days back in school really matter. Evidence from a [recent Children's Commissioner report](#) showed that children who miss days 2, 3 and 4 of the new term for unauthorised reasons had a predicted overall absence of almost 45%, or 31 days across the term, compared to children who missed days near the end of term, with a predicted overall absence of 20-30%.

To make the most of the new start that September represents, local authorities have an important role to play in ensuring that as many children as possible are attending from day one of the new academic year.

Firstly, I ask that your school attendance support team takes forward the most ambitious possible preparations for September. In line with the attendance guidance, good practice here involves rigorous analysis of absence data to identify the pupils, cohorts and schools that need the most support, ensuring join-up and data-sharing is established with relevant agencies such as children's social care and SEND, and communicating the area-wide school attendance strategy across the council.

Secondly, over the summer I urge you to mobilise your wider services and staff who have contact with parents and children to help to communicate the importance of a strong return to school. I believe we have a real opportunity to reset the system, if we can ensure that trusted voices are giving the same messages.

Some great examples I have seen across the country include:

- social workers and early help workers ensuring that that every conversation with a pupil and family involves school attendance and addressing any barriers
- school nurses identifying and working with pupils who are anxious about returning to school
- family hubs giving out information to parents on [illness and absence](#) and sharing our attendance [guidance for parents](#)

Thirdly, it is essential that services are ready in those early weeks of the new Term, working in partnership with schools, to intervene early where problems emerge, and particularly for children and families with more complex circumstances. A joined-up local effort will be critical.

Thank you once again for your commitment to reducing pupil absence and helping to lead the local response. I look forward to continuing to work with you, schools, trusts and partners in health and beyond, so every child and young person starts the next academic year as strongly as possible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gillian Keegan', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

**The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP
Secretary of State for Education**