



GUIDANCE FOR SHEFFIELD GPs

April 2020

In view of the number of enquiries we received from GPs who had been asked to provide medical evidence regarding children who have been absent from school, either for a prolonged period or repeatedly, agreement was reached with the Local Authority regarding the evidence they required and guidance was issued in 2012.

In February 2018 we met with Local Authority representatives to review the agreement, and to look at increasing School Nurse input in to the process, thus keeping GP involvement to a minimum. The following was agreed:

LOCAL AUTHORITY PROCEDURE

The Local Authority receives referrals from schools regarding children and young people whose attendance levels are causing concern. The process that schools and the Local Authority then work through is as follows:

- Local Authority Attendance and Inclusion Officers (A&IO) within the Commissioning Inclusion and Learning Service (CILS) routinely meet with school staff to discuss children who are persistently absent from school. Persistent Absence is defined as attendance of 90% and below.
- Schools refer to MAST for support to improve school attendance, where the school feels that additional support (which cannot be provided by the school) is required in order to make positive change.
- If there are concerns regarding frequent absences on health grounds, the A&IO or Family Intervention Worker will request that the school does not authorise any absence due to illness, unless evidence is provided (appointment card, prescription etc).
- Where the level of unauthorised absence is significant, the Local Authority may consider taking legal action in order to try and bring about an improvement in attendance levels. This action will only be taken after support has been offered by the school or MAST, advice given, and the parent / guardian has still failed to ensure that attendance has improved.
- Prior to a Penalty Notice (fine) being issued to the parent / guardian, or a decision to take the parent / guardian to court, a final warning letter will be issued. This states that the child must have no unauthorised absence during a 15 school day period in order to avoid further action, and that any absences as a result of illness must be supported by medical evidence.

REQUESTS FOR MEDICAL EVIDENCE

If the parent / guardian states that the unauthorised absence from school was as a result of ill health and has no evidence to support this, schools staff will request that the Local Authority seeks clarification from the GP.

The A&IO will consult with the School Nurse to agree to this course of action. This will ensure that information held by the school nursing team is considered before the need to approach the GP is agreed. With parental / guardian consent the Local Authority will contact the GP via MAST, A&IO or the School Nurse. Contact would be made via a letter to seek the GP's view. This would only occur at the point of issuing a fine or taking a parent / guardian to court and where no evidence to support the illness has been obtained from the parent / guardian.

Whilst it is acknowledged that GPs are not required to provide notes of this type under their NHS contracts, we feel that it is reasonable to view prolonged absence from school as a safeguarding issue. In view of this, and the fact that only brief confirmation is being requested, a fee will not be payable. We would, however, encourage GPs to support the Local Authority in this process.

SUPPORTING LITERATURE

In August 2018 the Local Authority distributed posters and A5 cards to GP practices and schools to remind GPs and staff that the Local Authority / schools do not require parents to obtain a doctor's note. Further copies for displaying in GP practices / handing to patients can be obtained from Tracey Rice, Attendance Specialist, CILS via tracey.rice@sheffield.gov.uk or (0114) 2331189.