

Guidance on Pupils Absconding from Educational Establishments

Context

Getting It Right for Every Child ('GIRFEC') means that all those people who have a responsibility to help children and young people will make sure that they do their best to keep them safe and healthy. All young people have rights and responsibilities. They have the right to feel safe, supported, included and respected. Staff must constantly demonstrate this through their planning and their actions.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the following documents:

- Promoting Positive Relationships in West Lothian Educational Establishments
- Attendance At School: Policy and Operational Procedures
- West Lothian Education Services Child Protection Procedures
- WLC Health and Safety Policy
- Any risk assessments relating specifically to the individual environment or the individual pupil

Definition of absconding:

A pupil is deemed to have absconded where they have deliberately left an educational establishment without permission and/or without notifying a member of staff.

This guidance is designed to support schools in managing situations where a pupil has absconded and one or more staff members are present. Separate guidance relating to Unexplained Absences and Safe Arrivals can be found within the Attendance At School: Policy and Operational Procedures.

Relevant factors to consider when making decisions regarding pupils who have absconded

- Age of pupil and any additional support needs or vulnerabilities relating to the pupil
- The pupil's current demeanour and the nature of any incidents which led to the absconding
- Any previous absconding incidents involving this pupil and the outcomes of these incidents
- The immediate environment of the school, including potential hazards such as major roads, railways, rivers, canals
- Prevailing weather conditions or any other situational factors such as ongoing building/maintenance work

Where a pupil absconds but remains *within* the perimeter of the establishment grounds

- Staff should utilise appropriate de-escalation strategies as set out in the Promoting Positive Relationships in West Lothian Educational Establishments Policy
- Staff should be mindful of any actions which may increase the likelihood of the pupil leaving the establishment grounds

Where a pupil absconds and moves *outside* the perimeter of the establishment grounds

*Where a pupil remains within the immediate vicinity of the establishment grounds:

- Staff should encourage the pupil to initially return back inside the perimeter and thereafter the school building
- If the pupil refuses to return, staff should use the relevant factors listed above to risk assess whether they feel the pupil is at immediate risk of harm
- Where immediate risk of harm is identified, staff should contact the police without delay. The pupil's parents/carers or allocated worker from partner agencies should also be contacted if appropriate

*Where a pupil leaves the immediate vicinity of the establishment grounds:

- Staff should use the relevant factors above to re-assess the level of risk to the pupil
- Where immediate risk of harm is identified, and if not already notified, staff should contact the police without delay
- Staff should follow at a safe distance, allowing them to keep the pupil in sight and maintain communication without causing the pupil to feel the need to run. Staff following pupils must continue to keep the police up to date with the pupil's location and any potential danger the pupil is placing themselves in at that time
- **When following a pupil at a safe distance, the following should be noted:**
 - Staff should be wearing suitable high-visibility clothing and carrying a mobile phone or walkie-talkie to enable communication with police and/or other establishment staff
 - Staff should not place themselves in situations of potential risk or harm e.g. trying to stop fast moving traffic; climbing over fences; entering derelict buildings; walking along or crossing railway lines on foot
 - Physical intervention should only be considered as a last resort where the staff member feels that to not physically intervene would likely result in physical damage or harm to the pupil. This requires to be a balanced decision which takes into consideration that to act may force the pupil to actually cause harm or injury to themselves.
 - An example would be a child threatening to jump from a high position and therefore threatening serious harm or injury to themselves. Staff approaching could cause or force the pupil to actually jump. In circumstances such as this, the police should be allowed to intervene as they have the expertise and training for such situations
 - Staff should not use motor vehicles to search for an absconding pupil as it presents a risk of accident through driving and looking for the pupil at the same time. The use of their own motor vehicle may also result in potential liabilities for the individual and the council if they are not insured for use of the vehicle for work purposes

Reporting and recording of incidents

- The central Education Services team should be notified at the earliest opportunity where police have been called to attend an absconding incident
- All incidents must be reported on Sphera - the Council's Incident Reporting System