



SCHOOL ABSENCE REQUESTS FOR MEDICAL CONFIRMATION

Guidance for Sheffield GPs

In view of the number of enquiries the LMC 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, guidance was issued, last updated in April 2012.

The LMC recently 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.

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 Multi Agency Support Teams (MAST) routinely meet with school staff to discuss children who are persistently absent from school. Persistent Absence is defined as attendance below 90%.
- 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, the LMC feels 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. The LMC would, however, encourage GPs to support the Local Authority in this process.