



Governance, Accountability & Ofsted Readiness

Turning attendance practice into strategic assurance

CLARITY

SCRUTINY

CONFIDENCE

Why This Module Matters

Attendance is not merely an operational issue

It represents a convergence of critical leadership priorities that demand strategic attention and robust oversight. Effective schools recognise that attendance sits at the intersection of safeguarding, educational outcomes, and institutional accountability.

It is fundamentally:

- A **safeguarding priority** — absence patterns often signal vulnerability
- A **leadership responsibility** — requiring clear vision and consistent action
- A **governance concern** — demanding strategic oversight and challenge
- An **inspection focus** — central to Ofsted's 2025 framework judgements

The Consequences of Weak Governance

When attendance lacks strategic ownership, predictable patterns emerge that undermine school effectiveness and create inspection vulnerability:

- **Drift** — gradual deterioration without intervention
- **Inconsistency** — variable approaches across staff and cohorts
- **Reactive leadership** — crisis management rather than prevention
- **Inspection vulnerability** — inability to evidence impact or articulate strategy

📌 **Key message:** Strong attendance outcomes invariably follow strong accountability structures. Without governance clarity, even the most dedicated practitioners struggle to sustain improvement.

Attendance as a Strategic Risk

Effective governance treats attendance with the same rigour and strategic attention afforded to safeguarding, financial stewardship, and academic standards. This is not administrative box-ticking; it represents fundamental risk management that protects both pupils and the institution.

Persistent Absence Trends

Understanding not just current rates, but trajectory, distribution across cohorts, and the effectiveness of intervention strategies in reversing concerning patterns.

Severe Absence Cohorts

Identifying pupils at critical risk (below 50% attendance), understanding the barriers they face, and ensuring multi-agency responses are coordinated and timely.

SEND & Disadvantaged Gaps

Monitoring whether vulnerable groups experience disproportionate absence, and challenging whether support is enabling attendance or inadvertently lowering expectations.

EBSA Patterns

Scrutinising whether emotionally-based school avoidance is being addressed through time-limited, evidence-based interventions rather than permanent adjustments.

Delayed Escalation

Ensuring that statutory powers and partnership working are deployed promptly when school-based interventions have been exhausted, not delayed by misplaced optimism.

📌 **Governance principle:** Attendance is a strategic risk indicator, not merely a data point. Weak attendance governance creates vulnerability across safeguarding, outcomes, and inspection readiness.

The Role of Governance

Strategic Oversight, Not Operational Delivery

Effective governors and trustees understand that their role is not to undertake attendance work themselves, but to provide intelligent challenge and assurance that systems are functioning effectively.

Governance is about creating the conditions for professional courage and timely action, not micromanaging interventions or second-guessing operational decisions.

This requires a sophisticated understanding of both the strategic landscape and the practical realities facing attendance teams.

Core Governance Functions

High-performing governing bodies consistently demonstrate these capabilities:

- **Ask the right questions** — probing impact, not just activity
- **Understand thresholds** — recognising what constitutes concerning absence and when escalation is required
- **Scrutinise impact, not activity** — focusing on outcomes achieved rather than processes followed
- **Challenge drift early** — identifying stagnation before it becomes entrenched
- **Support leaders to escalate** — enabling timely use of statutory powers without fear of criticism

📌 **Remember:** Governance is not about doing attendance work — it's about assuring its effectiveness and creating accountability without blame.

What Governors Should Expect to See

Effective attendance governance depends upon receiving information that enables meaningful scrutiny. Governors cannot provide assurance without clarity about strategy, thresholds, impact, and safeguarding alignment. If the information presented is unclear, convoluted, or focused on activity rather than outcomes, then assurance itself is fundamentally weak.



Clear Attendance Strategy

Articulated priorities, defined cohorts of concern, and explicit links to school improvement planning and safeguarding frameworks.



Defined Thresholds & Escalation Routes

Transparent criteria for concern, intervention, and statutory action, with clear timescales and accountabilities at each stage.



Regular, Intelligible Reporting

Accessible trend data focused on movement, risk, and impact rather than overwhelming raw figures that obscure strategic insight.



Evidence of Intervention Impact

Clear demonstration of what is working, what isn't, and how resources are being redirected based on evidence rather than habit.



Safeguarding Alignment

Explicit connections between attendance monitoring, DSL oversight, early help pathways, and multi-agency escalation procedures.

Reporting That Supports Scrutiny



Characteristics of Effective Reporting

Good attendance reports consistently demonstrate these qualities:

- **Avoid raw data dumps** — presenting curated insights rather than unfiltered statistics
- **Focus on trends and movement** — showing direction of travel, not just snapshots
- **Highlight risk and action** — surfacing concerns and explaining responses
- **Show impact over time** — evidencing whether interventions are working

Critical Questions Effective Reports Answer

1. **What's improving?** Which cohorts or interventions are showing positive trajectory?
2. **What's not?** Where is the school struggling despite effort and resource?
3. **What worries leaders?** Which risks keep attendance teams awake at night?
4. **What's being done about it?** How are concerns translating into action and escalation?

If governors cannot answer these questions after receiving an attendance report, the reporting format requires urgent review.

The Problem with Data Dumps

Many governing bodies receive attendance reports that are simultaneously data-rich and insight-poor. Pages of percentages, lists of pupils, and historical comparisons can overwhelm rather than illuminate.

Effective reporting transforms raw data into strategic intelligence that enables governors to discharge their assurance responsibilities with confidence.

Bandings as a Governance Tool

Attendance bandings provide governors with an accessible framework for understanding risk distribution and tracking improvement across cohorts. Rather than becoming lost in aggregate percentages, bandings reveal patterns, highlight vulnerabilities, and enable meaningful challenge about strategic priorities.

Understand Risk Quickly

Visual representation of how many pupils fall into concerning absence categories, enabling immediate pattern recognition without statistical expertise.

See Cohort Patterns

Identification of whether absence is concentrated in particular year groups, demographics, or need categories, informing targeted intervention.

Track Improvement

Monitoring movement between bands over time, which provides far richer insight than headline attendance percentages alone.

Challenge Stagnation

Spotting where cohorts remain static despite intervention, prompting questions about strategy effectiveness and escalation timeliness.

 **Key insight:** Band movement is significantly more meaningful than headline percentages. A school might maintain 94% attendance whilst experiencing concerning growth in persistent absence — bandings make this visible.

Accountability Without Blame

Creating Conditions for Professional Courage

The most effective accountability cultures enable staff to surface concerns early, escalate promptly, and deploy statutory powers without fear of criticism or blame. When accountability becomes punitive, attendance teams delay difficult decisions, hoping circumstances will improve spontaneously.

This is precisely when drift becomes entrenched and safeguarding risks intensify.

"Blame culture leads to delay. Clarity culture leads to action."

Characteristics of Strong Accountability

- **Calm, not punitive** — focused on understanding and improvement rather than fault-finding and sanctions
- **System-focused, not individual** — examining whether processes enable success rather than scrutinising personal performance
- **Supports professional courage** — explicitly valuing timely escalation and difficult conversations
- **Enables timely escalation** — removing barriers to using statutory powers when school-based interventions have been exhausted

Governors set the tone for this culture. If leaders feel unsafe acknowledging what isn't working, assurance becomes theatrical rather than authentic, and opportunities for early intervention are lost.

Attendance & Ofsted

Under the 2025 Ofsted framework, attendance sits within the **Behaviour and Attitudes** judgement, meaning it directly influences overall effectiveness grades. Inspectors bring sophisticated understanding of attendance management and will probe whether rhetoric matches reality.



Clear Attendance Strategy

Articulated priorities that connect to context, with explicit rationale for threshold decisions and intervention sequencing. Strategy should be known and owned by staff, not trapped in policy documents.



Early Identification of Risk

Systems that surface absence concerns swiftly, before patterns become entrenched, with evidence of prompt first-day contact and pattern monitoring.



Lawful Use of Statutory Routes

Timely deployment of formal processes where school-based strategies have been exhausted, demonstrating confidence in using available powers appropriately.



Consistent Staff Understanding

When inspectors speak with teachers, support staff, and pastoral teams, they expect to hear consistent language about thresholds, escalation, and expectations.



Graduated Response

Evidence of proportionate intervention that intensifies appropriately, rather than leaping prematurely to punitive measures or remaining stuck in ineffective support.



Impact, Not Intent

Evidence that interventions are evaluated and adjusted based on effectiveness, not delivered indefinitely because they feel compassionate or represent established practice.

 **Critical understanding:** Ofsted is less interested in policy — more interested in what actually happens. Schools must evidence their approach through lived practice, case studies, and demonstrable impact, not through presentation of comprehensive documentation.

Telling the Attendance Story

During inspection, leaders will be expected to articulate their attendance narrative with confidence, clarity, and evidence. This is not about defensive justification or data performance; it's about demonstrating sophisticated understanding of context, strategic thinking, and honest self-evaluation.

Our Attendance Context

What makes our school's attendance landscape distinctive? What local, demographic, or historical factors influence patterns? How do we compare to statistical neighbours rather than national averages?

Our Key Risks

Which cohorts cause greatest concern? What types of absence dominate? Where are we most vulnerable? Being honest about weaknesses demonstrates strategic awareness.

Our Strategic Priorities

Given our context and risks, where are we focusing effort? What trade-offs have we made? How do attendance priorities connect to broader school improvement planning?

How Decisions Are Made

Who is involved in escalation decisions? What thresholds trigger concern? How do we balance support with challenge? What evidence informs our approach?

What's Working & What Isn't

Where are we seeing impact? What interventions have disappointed? How are we adapting practice based on evidence? This honesty builds credibility.

"A confident narrative beats perfect data. Inspectors value honesty, strategic thinking, and evidence-based adaptation over polished statistics that mask uncomfortable truths."

Attendance, SEND & Inclusion: The Governance Lens



Essential Governance Questions

Effective governors ask probing questions that surface whether inclusion means support *and* expectation, or inadvertent lowering of standards:

- **Are SEND pupils supported *and* expected to attend?** Does support enable attendance or replace it?
- **Are EBSA plans time-limited?** Do they include clear success criteria and review points, or have they become permanent adjustments?
- **Are adjustments reviewed?** Is there evidence of fading support as pupils build capacity, or do accommodations persist indefinitely?
- **Are expectations consistent?** Would we accept the same attendance patterns from pupils without SEND?

📌 **Governance principle:** Lowered expectations are a governance issue. Governors must challenge whether compassion has become an excuse for accepting absence that damages educational and safeguarding outcomes.

The Governance Challenge

SEND attendance represents one of the most complex challenges facing governing bodies. The tension between compassionate support and maintaining high expectations requires sophisticated governance that challenges lowered expectations whilst ensuring genuine barriers are addressed.

Too often, schools inadvertently create parallel systems where SEND pupils experience fundamentally different attendance expectations, justified through wellbeing language but resulting in poor outcomes and reduced life chances.

Safeguarding Assurance

Attendance and safeguarding are inseparable. Absence patterns often represent the earliest warning sign of vulnerability, neglect, exploitation, or deteriorating family circumstances. Effective governance ensures that attendance systems connect seamlessly to safeguarding structures, with clear escalation pathways that prevent drift and delay.



DSL Oversight

Designated Safeguarding Leads must have systematic oversight of attendance patterns, with mechanisms to flag concerning absence for immediate review and potential multi-agency referral.



Escalation Pathways

Clear, well-understood routes from attendance concern to safeguarding investigation, early help, or statutory intervention, with defined timescales preventing dangerous delay.



Multi-Agency Working

Evidence of effective partnership with social care, health, and voluntary sector services, with attendance intelligence shared appropriately to inform holistic support.



Evidence Quality

Robust recording that would withstand scrutiny in child protection processes, demonstrating the school's attempts to engage families and rationale for escalation.

 **Governance question:** If attendance doesn't improve despite school-based intervention, governors should ask why escalation to statutory services hasn't happened. Delay in escalation can constitute a safeguarding failure.

The Executive Role

In multi-academy trusts, executive leaders carry unique responsibility for ensuring coherent attendance strategy across schools whilst respecting contextual differences. Trust-wide inconsistency creates risk, confusion, and undermines collective improvement efforts.

Consistency Across Schools

Establishing core principles and minimum expectations that apply trust-wide, creating baseline standards below which no school should fall, whilst allowing contextual adaptation.

Shared Thresholds

Agreeing what constitutes concerning, serious, and severe absence across the trust, enabling meaningful performance comparison and resource allocation decisions.

Aligned Language

Developing common terminology and reporting frameworks so that trustees receive intelligible information from all schools without needing bespoke interpretation.

Clear Accountability

Defining where accountability sits for different aspects of attendance work, from first-day contact through to legal panel recommendations, preventing gaps and duplication.

"Trust-wide inconsistency weakens assurance. When each school operates entirely different systems with different thresholds, executive leaders cannot provide trustees with meaningful assurance about attendance effectiveness across the trust."

What Good Looks Like

High-performing schools and trusts demonstrate recognisable patterns in how they approach attendance. These characteristics create sustainable improvement rather than temporary gains, and build cultures where attendance is everyone's business, not the attendance officer's problem.

Attendance is routinely discussed

It features in staff briefings, leadership meetings, and governor scrutiny as standard practice, not crisis response. Everyone understands current priorities and concerning cohorts.

Risk is surfaced early

Systems flag emerging patterns before they become entrenched, and staff feel confident raising concerns without needing absolute certainty. Early worry is valued, not dismissed.

Escalation is timely

When school-based interventions have been exhausted, statutory powers are deployed promptly. There is no cultural reluctance to "give it one more chance" when evidence suggests intensive support isn't working.

Governors are confident

They understand thresholds, recognise risks, and can articulate the school's attendance story. Assurance comes from understanding impact, not from being reassured everything is fine.

Staff feel supported to act

Teachers and pastoral staff know escalation pathways, feel empowered to challenge absence, and trust that difficult decisions will be backed by leadership. Accountability enables rather than constrains.

📌 **Outcome:** In these settings, attendance improvement is predictable rather than reactive. Progress follows logically from strategic clarity, consistent action, and intelligent use of data. Crises become rare because early intervention prevents escalation.

Strategic Reflection: Governance Focus

This module concludes with an invitation to honest institutional reflection. These questions are designed to surface areas of strength and vulnerability in your attendance governance arrangements. They represent opportunities for development rather than criticism, and should prompt strategic conversation rather than defensive justification.

1

Do we understand our biggest attendance risks?

Could governors name the cohorts causing greatest concern? Do we know whether risks are growing or diminishing? Is our understanding based on recent, reliable data or outdated assumptions?

2

Could we explain our thresholds confidently?

If inspectors asked what attendance percentage triggers concern, escalation, or statutory action, would our answers be consistent across the staff team? Do our thresholds connect to evidence or feel arbitrary?

3

Are we assured by impact, not activity?

Do our attendance reports demonstrate outcomes achieved, or simply list interventions delivered? Could we evidence what's working and what isn't? Do we adjust practice based on impact data?

4

Where might we be drifting?

Are there cohorts whose absence has gradually worsened without prompting strategic response? Have any pupils remained on "support plans" for extended periods without improvement or escalation?

These questions should generate professional discussion about governance effectiveness, reporting quality, and strategic clarity. Where answers reveal uncertainty or inconsistency, they identify priorities for development rather than failures requiring sanction.

Closing Message

The Conditions for Sustainable Improvement

Attendance improves predictably when certain conditions exist simultaneously. These are not optional extras or aspirational ideals; they represent the minimum foundation for effective attendance work.

Schools that sustain strong attendance — even in challenging contexts — consistently demonstrate all of these characteristics. Where improvement proves elusive, the explanation typically lies in weakness in one or more of these areas.

- **Leadership is clear**

Strategy, thresholds, and expectations are articulated explicitly and understood consistently across the staff team and wider community.

- **Governance is confident**

Assurance comes from understanding impact and risk, not from being told everything is satisfactory. Challenge is intelligent and informed.

- **Scrutiny is meaningful**

Reporting focuses on trends, risk, and impact. Governors ask questions that test effectiveness, not simply receive reassurance.

- **Safeguarding is prioritised**

Attendance concerns connect seamlessly to safeguarding oversight, with timely escalation when patterns indicate vulnerability.

"Strong governance doesn't make attendance harder — it makes it safer."

Understanding the New Framework Context

Under Ofsted's 2025 framework, attendance forms a critical component of the **Behaviour and Attitudes** judgement, representing a significant shift in how attendance evidence contributes to overall effectiveness grades. This integration reflects recognition that attendance patterns both influence and reflect broader school culture, safeguarding effectiveness, and pupils' engagement with education.

Behaviour and Attendance Integration

The framework explicitly connects attendance to behaviour because:

- Both reflect pupils' attitudes towards education and sense of safety
- Effective behaviour systems depend upon pupils being present
- Absence patterns often indicate disengagement before behaviour deteriorates
- Schools' responses to both absence and behaviour reveal cultural priorities

Inspectors will evaluate whether schools understand these connections and respond with coherent, integrated strategies rather than treating attendance and behaviour as separate operational workstreams.

The Evidence Requirement

To meet the **expected standard** within Behaviour and Attitudes, schools must provide robust evidence that:

- Attendance strategies are clearly defined and consistently implemented
- Staff understand and apply thresholds uniformly
- Interventions are evaluated and adapted based on impact data
- Escalation pathways are timely and effective
- Attendance connects explicitly to safeguarding procedures
- Vulnerable groups experience targeted support alongside maintained expectations

 **Critical understanding:** Evidence is essential to meet expected standard. Schools cannot rely on policy documentation alone; they must demonstrate impact through case studies, trend analysis, and staff consistency in conversations with inspectors.

What Inspectors Will Look For: Evidence Standards

The 2025 framework's emphasis on evidence represents a fundamental shift from policy review to practice evaluation. Inspectors will triangulate multiple evidence sources to assess whether rhetoric matches reality, and whether attendance strategies translate into measurable impact on pupils' experiences and outcomes.

Staff Consistency

When inspectors speak with teachers, teaching assistants, and pastoral staff, they expect to hear consistent understanding of thresholds, escalation routes, and current priorities. Inconsistency suggests strategy exists on paper but not in practice.

Case Study Evidence

Schools should be able to present detailed case studies showing the journey from concern identification through intervention to outcome, demonstrating both successful improvement and honest acknowledgement where approaches haven't worked.

Trend Analysis

Evidence of how cohort attendance patterns have changed over time, with clear explanation of which interventions correlate with improvement and how resources have been redirected based on impact evaluation.

Partnership Impact

Demonstration of effective multi-agency working where school-based strategies have been exhausted, with evidence that external referrals are timely, appropriate, and result in coordinated support rather than fragmented responses.

Building Inspection Readiness: Practical Next Steps

Inspection readiness is not achieved through last-minute preparation; it requires systematic development of evidence, refinement of systems, and building of staff confidence over time. These practical steps enable schools and trusts to strengthen governance assurance whilst simultaneously improving outcomes for pupils.



Audit Current Evidence

Review what evidence currently exists to demonstrate attendance strategy, impact, and escalation effectiveness. Identify gaps that would prevent confident responses to inspector questions. Prioritise evidence development in weak areas.



Test Staff Consistency

Conduct informal conversations with diverse staff to assess whether understanding of thresholds and procedures is consistent. Where variation exists, provide additional training and create accessible reference materials.



Develop Case Study Library

Document 5-10 detailed case studies representing different absence types, intervention pathways, and outcomes (including cases where initial approaches were unsuccessful). These provide powerful evidence of reflective practice.



Refine Governor Reporting

Revise attendance reports to focus on trends, risk cohorts, and impact evidence rather than raw data. Ensure reports enable governors to discharge assurance responsibilities confidently and ask intelligent questions.



Practice the Narrative

Develop and rehearse the school's attendance story with senior and middle leaders. Ensure multiple staff members can articulate context, strategy, challenges, and impact confidently without defensive justification.

Final Reflection: From Compliance to Confidence

Moving Beyond Inspection Fear

The most effective attendance governance transforms inspection readiness from anxious compliance to genuine confidence. When systems work well, when evidence is robust, and when staff understand both strategy and impact, inspection becomes an opportunity to showcase expertise rather than an ordeal to survive.

This module has explored how governance structures create the conditions for sustainable attendance improvement. The principles apply equally whether inspection is imminent or distant — strong governance serves pupils, not just Ofsted.

Core Commitments for Effective Governance

- Treat attendance as the **strategic risk** it represents, not merely operational data
- Ensure **reporting enables scrutiny** through focus on trends, risks, and impact
- Build **accountability cultures** that enable professional courage and timely escalation
- Maintain **high expectations** for all pupils, including those with SEND, alongside appropriate support
- Integrate **attendance and safeguarding** systems seamlessly with clear escalation pathways
- Develop **robust evidence** that demonstrates impact, not just activity, to meet the expected standard under Ofsted 2025

"When leadership is clear, governance is confident, scrutiny is meaningful, and safeguarding is prioritised, attendance improves predictably. Strong governance doesn't make attendance harder — it makes it safer, more effective, and inspection-ready."